

Brexit: Armageddon on hold

Monday 26 March 2018

I wonder if there could be anything more dispiriting than watching Andrew Marr interview David Davis on his show – other than having to go back and read [the transcript](#) afterwards.

Between the soft questions and stupid answers, you end up no further forward and, at the end of the programme, just an hour longer. As far as the Irish border question goes, for instance, Davis is still prattling about Authorised Economic Operators and the use of technology to avoid a hard border, and even calls in aid the European Parliament report produced by Lars Karlsson, the former head of the World Customs Organisation.

By coincidence, this was picked up by Booker [in his column](#) yesterday (no paywall) when he noted that "our more reckless Brexiteers" have since last November waxed lyrical about the report.

To them, it seemed to offer a miraculous solution to an intractable problem, more so as its author was able to claim impeccable credentials. In one fell swoop, he presented the answer to the Irish riddle, arguing that it lay in a version of the system that allows goods to flow pretty freely between Norway and his native Sweden.

Helpfully, to a wider audience, Booker recorded how, last Wednesday, Dr Karlsson had been attentively received by the Commons Brexit committee, to lay out his plan for a "smart border" between the two parts

of Ireland, which could resolve the *impasse* that for months has threatened to derail Brexit talks.

The only snag, he tells his readers, was that, as a customs man, Dr Karlsson focused entirely on "customs controls", completely failing to address those other "border controls" which are by far the more serious part of the problem.

Nothing he said would do anything to avoid the need for Border Inspection Posts, where, under EU rules, all live animals and "products of animal origin", from milk to fish, will require inspections by officials wholly unconnected with customs.

The same applies to the Designated Points of Entry required to inspect all plant and vegetable products (right down to the wooden pallets used in transporting them).

All these items, Booker says, "form a very significant part of the currently "frictionless" cross-border trade between the two parts of Ireland, worth billions of pounds a year. But leaving the EU will make a "hard border inevitable".

The terrifying thing, though, was that not a single MP seemed to realise that what Dr Karlsson was offering would solve nothing at all; any more than they grasped that the reason why goods can flow so freely between Norway and Sweden is that they are both in the European Economic Area, which Theresa May is determined we shall leave.

Thus, we ended up with another example of Brexit wishful thinking: the blind again leading the blind.

If it were not for Booker, though, this little episode would have got even less publicity than it did, reflecting the gradual withdrawal of the media from reporting the technical details of Brexit.

This is almost a re-run of the 1970-72 accession negotiations where Con O'Neil reported in his book that, "towards the end of the negotiations, journalists in Brussels had become so thoroughly bored with the multiplicity of highly technical subjects still under discussion and were ready to be content with fairly superficial information".

Some 46 or so years later, the media haven't even got to the halfway mark before giving up the ghost. Thus, while the newspapers this weekend should have been devoted to an analysis of Mrs May's "surrender", the main preoccupation was the *Observer* story on the machinations of Vote Leave.

Yet, in some instances, it's perhaps just as well that the media is taking no notice of proceedings, not least the day following Dr Karlsson's evidence when the Brexit Committee had **David Bannerman** in to talk about his "**Super Canada trade model**".

This, presumably, is a re-worked version of his earlier **EEA-lite plan** from four years ago, calculated to capitalise on the latest fashionable nostrums.

Reading it, we suffer some of the same sense of depression that we get when confronting the outpourings of David Davis – yet another pompous, elderly white man who really doesn't know what he's talking about, and insists on taking every possible opportunity to demonstrate that fact.

From his evidence, what especially rings the alarm bells is his casual discussion about conformity with standards, where he expresses preference for "mutual recognition" as against equivalence, as if the former was actually on offer – or even attainable – from the European Union. But once again, we get the MPs sucking up the misinformation, in this case with the questioning eagerly led by Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Behind the scenes, EUReferendum.com readers, with a far better grasp of the issues, are talking to their own MPs, but it is an uphill struggle. Against the legions of false prophets and the indifference of the media, the task of informing our representatives is almost beyond the scope of mere mortals. As I've observed before, the tragedy is that these people will have to learn the hard way.

Nevertheless, although we will be watching with interest today, so see what Mrs May reports to the House of her Brussels adventure, it looks as if we must start getting used to the idea that the "vassal state" transition will go ahead – in all probability, virtually unchanged.

The implications of this will take a while to sink in, but the most important thing it does is turn Brexit day on 29 March 2019 (or the day after) into a non-event. For all practical purposes, we will still be in the EU. As the *status quo* option, it will ensure that the traffic runs freely through Dover to the continent. There will be no queues, no shortages in the shops and no great drama.

No doubt, there will be those who will see in this the opportunity to dismiss our fears as "scaremongering", but if all Mrs May has got in the locker to take over when the transition period ends is a Canada-style free trade area, then she has only kicked the cannery down the road. The cliff-

edge will still be there, looming on the horizon.

In many respects, though, it will be a slow-motion disaster, with Brexit **casting a long shadow**. The prospect of quitting the EU, says Reuters, "has hurt sentiment in Britain's finance industry for longer than the global financial crisis that plunged economies into recession and destroyed some of the world's biggest banks".

There seems to me, though, no point in expecting either media or politicians to recognise the danger (those that might want to prevent it) – not until it's too late. Their institutions have long since shown their inability to cope with the detail required, and I can't see things improving on their own.

Yet, with Armageddon on hold, the media is free to play its shallow games and, for the next week or so we may have to tolerate still more coverage on the Cambridge Analytica / Vote Leave drama that the *Guardian* group is working so hard on.

There may even be useful spin-offs from this, especially if it weakens Mrs May's loathsome foreign secretary, and damages some of the figures behind Vote Leave. Even then, it is a distraction we could do without, even if we have a year or more to think about what to do when the cliff edge approaches once again.

Oddly enough, despite those who were so keen to predict its demise, *Flexcit* is even more relevant, as it still points the way to a workable departure. And never more has The Harrogate Agenda been necessary, if for no other reason than to escape the **political tribalism** about which Sam Hooper writes so eloquently.

In the early autumn, we've been thinking in terms of holding a conference in London, under the EUReferendum.com and/or THA banner. It would be helpful to have readers' observations on the utility of this, and how we might proceed. This might be a better option than simply counting down the days to disaster.

Richard North 26/03/2018 [132 Comments](#)

