

Brexit: the time cometh

Richard North, 03/08/2018

In a remarkably robust but timely press release, the **Road Haulage Association** has delivered a broadside to our masters. "It is time", they say, "for UK and EU politicians and officials to grow up and start to realise that the current progress (or lack of) on Brexit arrangements is a sad embarrassment for all those involved".

Without equivocation, they add: "The current political gaming is unacceptable. The UK and the EU is facing a serious emergency. Brexit should not be a political game that is played out in support of petty political principals (sic) – the people of the UK and the EU have their lives and livelihoods on the line".

The point, of course, is that – contrary to the idiocy of Allister Heath (if that's what it is) - there is no way any government can prepare for a "no deal" scenario. Any which way, it will be a disaster. The only variables are how long it will take to clean up the mess, how much damage is caused and what the cost will be.

As far as the RHA is concerned, we need "pragmatic approaches" to the practical issues arising from Brexit. And, as it stands, a "no deal" applying from the 29 March next year will result in every shipment moving by road vehicle between the UK and the EU requiring customs clearance. Millions of lorries, with hundreds of millions of shipments move this way every year.

Each shipment will require both an export clearance for departure and an import clearance for arrival regardless of the direction of travel.

There is only a small volume of non-EU traffic moving through the ferry ports and Channel Tunnel now that requires clearance on arrival and departure from the UK. Processing time for each lorry varies considerable – but on average stops, the lorry is held at the clearance point for around 45 minutes. (Each lorry 90 minutes total for import/export process).

Crucially, the RHA adds, no ferry port (or the tunnel) has facilities to accommodate this extra customs work – in the UK or the EU. There is no processing point that can handle the volume of business. There are not enough customs agents to handle the business, nor enough customs officers. With the lack of knowledge and skills massive numbers of processing mistakes will be made in respect of duties and VAT – therefore current processing times will not be achievable.

Very much echoing what I've been writing for some time, the arrival side, where import clearances will happen, will be main cause of delays.

The reason is that processing inbound lorries to complete customs and transit formalities will result in lorries being stopped on arrival. They will quickly back up resulting, preventing further unloading as there will be nowhere for them to wait. The point is that you cannot load in the other directions until unloading is complete.

Thus, even if one side (say the UK) decided to wave the lorries through on arrival, the delays will still occur as the other side of the border will be the bottleneck. Lorries awaiting unloading will back-up, probably within hours, preventing the ferries and trains from returning.

With that, the RHA doesn't mince its words. Without decisive action, it believes that Kent and the area around Calais will become the world's largest lorry park within two days. And they "cannot conceive of any solution at this time that is workable for the UK/Irish border in compliance with the requirement for customs clearance".

There is, of course, a way. I've covered this several times. Basically, UK exports must be restricted to keep the way clear for vital imports. This, in the longer term will have a devastating effect on our trade deficit and severely damage our economy, but in the short term it will keep the supermarket shelves full and the "food shortages" narrative out of the headlines.

The RHA, however, has wider ambitions. It is calling on the politicians of the UK and EU to conclude an agreement that will allow goods to move between and through EU and UK territory without the need for customs and other controls at borders.

If this is impossible – which indeed it is, short of Mrs May changing her mind on the EEA - it calls on the politicians to agree that new arrangements will be subject to the already agreed "implementation" period to the 31st December 2020.

And this is where they depart from reality. Without a formal Withdrawal Agreement, signed and ratified in good time, "no deal" really does mean no deal. Come 11 pm on 29 March 2019, the UK drops out of the European Union and becomes a third country. And there is nothing the RHA can do about that.

The key, therefore, is to avoid – at all costs – the "no deal" scenario. Once we cross the Rubicon, the UK government will be forced into making a series of emergency measures, and looking for a patchwork of temporary fixes.

One can see FCO officials and Ministers camped out almost permanently on the doorstep of the Commission in Brussels, with representatives lobbying the Council for immediate action to get things moving.

What then happens is impossible to predict. We are truly in uncharted waters. One assumes that the show will be kept on the road but it won't be pretty or easy. We will, quite literally, have to take it day-by-day, with no clear direction and no certainty as to the outcomes.

And at this point, we need to take stock. Those who are openly advocating a "no deal" scenario are seeking to open the gates of Hell, from which there is no return.

What the RHA have done, therefore, is put down a marker. But it is not enough. The politicians are still playing their games and the government is still trying its inept tactics of **engineering a split** between Member States and the Commission. It falsely believes that it can somehow get a better deal by going direct to Berlin and Paris than it can in Brussels.

What we need therefore, is more of the same – more trade associations and other bodies to point out the consequences of a "no deal". But we need to go beyond that. What Allister Heath did in the *Telegraph* the other day was the political equivalent of shouting "fire" in a crowded auditorium.

This is a man with considerable influence who is abusing his position to promote a false position which, if it came to pass, would cause inestimable damage to the UK. This is the exercise of power without responsibility, making Mr Heath the harlot of Fleet Street.

This is where the rest of the media could and should take a hand. For instance, instead of its interminable navel-gazing and its attempts to rerun the referendum, the *Guardian* needs to address the misstatements put out by the likes of Heath, confronting them directly and specifically.

There is something of an unwritten convention in the media that "dog doesn't eat dog" – no one newspaper should attack another. But where the *Telegraph*, the *Express* and the *Mail* have largely abandoned their roles of purveyors of news, and have become active participants in the politics of Brexit, it seems perverse that they should be immune from criticism from the rest of the media.

Perhaps other newspapers feel they have too much to lose by going to war against other titles, but it is something of a cop-out not to contradict prominent political players, just because they work for the media. Equally, it is ironic to hear parliament rail against "fake news" from the social media and other sources when, in volume terms and reach, the major progenitors are the legacy media.

In what, therefore, are extraordinary times, extraordinary measures are needed. We cannot have a situation where this country slips and slides into a "no deal" Brexit simply because the media has not had the courage or integrity to challenge those who are spreading lies and misinformation, merely because of their job titles.

The thing is that, if the editor of *The Sunday Telegraph* tells lies, he is a liar. But senior journalists who wilfully misinform their readers are worse than that. They are abusing their power and betraying trust.

This cannot be allowed to pass without comment – not when the fate of the nation is at stake.

Thanks Dr R North