

## **Confusion, contradiction and ignorance driving UK towards no deal Brexit, argues senior Conservative MEP**

Written by Charles Tannock on 29 August 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

UK hard Brexiteers' nostalgic dream of replacing the EU with the so-called Anglosphere has been shown to be a fantasy, says Charles Tannock.



*Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

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A recent Sky Data poll on 20th August revealed that 69 per cent of respondents believe the British government will secure a bad Brexit deal, sharply up from 37 per cent last March, so British Brexit opinion is now changing fast.

This was followed on the 23rd August by a letter to the Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, Nicky Morgan, from the strongest British Cabinet Remainer, Chancellor Phillip Hammond, suggesting that, following Treasury Analysis done in January, an £80bn hole in the UK public finance in the event of no

deal would ensue.

In contrast the hard Brexiteer and new Brexit Negotiations Minister, Dominic Raab, seeking to play down the consequences of a no deal, issued a series of papers a few hours later describing how the government will prepare for a no deal and how in his view no scenario post-Brexit could be worse than staying in the EU.

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Thus, two key UK Ministers are in direct contradiction with one another and the agreed Cabinet collective responsibility which had previously so characterised the negotiations under David Davis and Boris Johnson seems to be back again.

Once again serious Cabinet splits are becoming more apparent as the 29th March 2019 Brexit day gets closer and the long drawn out negative consequences and confusion and frank ignorance on the workings of the EU over Brexit are being daily exposed as disastrous such as the no deal WTO only trading fallback.

All predictions to date had been that the 18th October European Council was the deadline for a political agreement to the Withdrawal Agreement under Article 50. This is meant to cover the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU, as well as the UK to EU financial settlement and the controversial backstop for Northern Ireland with an annexed political declaration on the future framework long term trade relationship between the EU and the UK post Brexit.

The latter to be concluded only in the 21 month transition period between April 1st 2019 and December 31st 2020. It now appears that the October date might be pushed to early November or even December according to another Government Cabinet Office Minister David Lidington, leaving precious little time for the UK and EU Parliaments to scrutinise and ratify the Withdrawal Agreement.

Cynics might say the UK government prefers a very tight timetable to prevent Tory Remain rebels and the Labour opposition from mounting a challenge in Parliament to direct the government to a renegotiation if there is no Withdrawal Agreement deal or a very bad deal.

Thus making the acceptance of even a bad deal more likely as there would be no time to renegotiate anything better and certainly no time to organise a second or final vote Referendum which is becoming moot.

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Raab claims that 80 per cent of the Withdrawal Agreement is already agreed and the government seems to have settled the money it owes the EU and dropped some of its demands for British living in the EU, like onward movement, leaving mainly the issue of delivering on the Joint Report agreement to keep the Northern Ireland Border fully open in the event of no UK wide deal which ensures it.

The government pins its hope on its Chequers Plan detailed in its White Paper which ticks all its Lancaster House Theresa May speech stated red lines; of leaving the EU Single Market and Customs Union, jurisdiction of the ECJ, terminating Freedom of Movement for EEA nationals, or making large EU budgetary contributions.

It now proposes a Facilitated Customs Arrangement to collect on behalf of the EU tariffs on goods destined for the Single Market at UK ports and to remain in the regulatory Union for goods but not services.

The EU' chief Negotiator Michel Barnier has hinted that this will not fly as is it requires too much trust to outsource EU tariff collection to a third country with no ECJ supervision and fragments the EU Internal or Single Market artificially between services and goods.

It now remains to be seen if the UK government can sell this - or a modified version perhaps by staying fully in the Customs Union for at least five years - to the EU 27 and whether the Brextremist bloc of 60 Tory MPs from the European Research Group (ERG) can be defeated perhaps with Labour opposition help to get this post-Brexit future framework economic relations with the EU model through the UK Parliament if it gets EU 27 approval in October or November.

The almost insurmountable issue of the Irish EU border with Northern Ireland remains because the UK legislation has unfortunately already included, thanks to Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) pressure, a clause forbidding any difference in Customs or VAT arrangements between the rest of the UK and Northern Ireland, even though Article 50 of the December 2017 Joint Report expressly allows Stormont to authorise.

However this is complicated by the fact that Stormont is not functioning, so the DUP's 10 MPs call all the shots by their hold over the UK government in a confidence and supply agreement in Westminster.

"Strong pro-EU Conservatives are clearly now in a difficult and isolated position and had the UK government taken up my suggestion of applying to EFTA, signing the EEA treaty and sought a Customs Union deal like Turkey, what I call the Norway+ model, I like many other Remain internationalist Tories would have fallen behind this softest Brexit compromise"

Matters are now further complicated by the rise in public support for another Referendum to endorse the final deal or no deal Brexit or with an option to reject it in favour of staying in the EU.

The Labour Party opposition are giving ambivalent signals on this. For instance Keir Starmer, Shadow Brexit Secretary, has hinted in the event of a no deal Labour MPs will vote for it and I believe anything up to 40 Conservative MPs would also back the opposition vote if there is no deal. Labour are split nevertheless too as the Shadow Trade Secretary, Barry Gardiner, contradicted Starmer on this.

The government, as stated by the Prime Minister Theresa May herself, have categorically ruled out a final say Referendum, as the Brexiteers she relies on to stay in power know that polling now suggests a small but clear Remain majority in the UK. This shift after more than two years since the June 2016 Referendum has occurred if for no other reason, even if no one has changed their minds, that more 16 year olds in 2016 can now vote and more elderly leavers have since passed away.

Undoubtedly the multiple lies and false promises of the Brexiteers, from the huge financial dividend for the NHS to the promise that the Brexit negotiations would be quick and easy as the EU needed the UK more than the other way round, are playing a part as they have now been shown to be clearly false and some soft Leavers are indeed switching as a result to Remain.

In addition, recent immigration statistics have shown an exodus of EU health professionals and a rise of non-EU migration making the Freedom of Movement of EU citizens issue less of a factor for Leave voters. There can be no doubt also the UK government underestimated the resolve of the EU 27 to stay united with a tough Chief Negotiator being given a strict mandate to ensure the UK or any other wavering EU member state would never be better off outside than in the EU club.

Strong pro-EU Conservatives are clearly now in a difficult and isolated position and had the UK government taken up my suggestion of applying to EFTA, signing the EEA treaty and sought a Customs Union deal like Turkey, what I call the Norway+ model, I like many other Remain internationalist Tories would have fallen behind this softest Brexit compromise.

Sadly the government decided to go down a more nationalist and populist route, driven by the ERG MP bloc, a more militant anti-EU activist membership including former UKIP supporters, and the vital DUP support, for the clean break divorce and hard Brexit.

Predictably as time has gone by since June 2016 the impossibility of doing this, without damaging the economy, and making the UK more isolated in the world, has become apparent to all.

The nostalgic dream couched in populist and nationalist rhetoric by the hard Brexiteers of a global Britain replacing the EU with the so-called Anglosphere of the USA, now under a protectionist and unpredictable President, and a bemused Commonwealth who had always seen the UK as the stepping stone into the EU market, and the UK easily decoupling from its immediate neighbours in Europe as our main trading and political allies for 45 years, has now been shown to be a fantasy.

## **About the author**

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