

## UK political players and Brexit: If, when and how will Article 50 be triggered?

If one thing has become clear since Theresa May took over as Prime Minister (PM), it is that 'Brexit means Brexit'. This slogan is an unsurprising and clear commitment to leaving the EU, but it does little to outline a vision for the UK-EU relations beyond this.

In order to determine what May's commitment to see Brexit through actually means, we need to take account of the fundamental tension in the UK's negotiating strategy between single market access and full freedom of movement. Contrary to the wishes of other European leaders, May wants to secure the former without the latter – to have her cake and eat it. Therefore, prior to and during the negotiations, the ambiguity of 'Brexit means Brexit' could be an asset since it will provide May with more negotiating flexibility.



One thing that May will have to keep in mind while negotiating will be the divisiveness of the subject of Europe in the UK. 'Leave' won a narrow victory in the referendum, and the issue is far from settled. The PM will be coming under pressure from two directions.

- On the one hand, the three ministers tasked with overseeing Brexit (Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson; Brexit Minister, David Davis; and International Trade Minister, Liam Fox) all supported 'Leave' during the referendum campaign. Most seem to agree that Johnson is not strongly Eurosceptic, and that his support for 'Leave' was more a case of career opportunism. Furthermore, the creation of the two new Brexit-related departments has reduced the Foreign Office's brief considerably, and as a result the scope for Johnson to influence negotiations will be lessened. Davis and Fox are particularly hard-line Eurosceptics. Davis hopes to eventually create a free trade area with the likes of the US, Australia, China and India, and during his time as Europe Minister in the mid-1990s he earned the nickname 'Monsieur Non' in Brussels. Fox has begun courting the US and Canada for potential post-Brexit trade deals. Several Conservative backbenchers have also begun pressuring May to deliver a 'hard Brexit', taking advantage of the fact that the Conservative majority is only twelve.
- On the other hand, May will have to remember that in a country of 65 million, only 17.5 million of these actually voted to leave the EU. Two of the UK's constituent nations, Scotland and Northern Ireland, voted decisively to stay in the EU. The Scottish First Minister and leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon, has unequivocally committed to keeping Scotland inside the EU. She has emerged as the strongest pro-European advocate in the UK, given the ongoing chaos in the Labour Party. It is expected that Sturgeon could attempt to use the result of the referendum to call for a second Scottish independence referendum. Support for Scottish independence has indeed risen dramatically in the past two months. However, with no direct constitutional process for holding a referendum established, without a majority in the Scottish Parliament, and faced with strong opposition from Westminster, Sturgeon will



nonetheless find it difficult to bring a Scottish referendum onto the agenda. She will therefore be looking to play her cards well to have maximum influence in favour of maintaining single market access.

By putting off a general election and sticking to her ambiguous 'Brexit means Brexit' slogan, May does not have to commit to one side or another until she is ready to do so. However, based on her remarks at a recent cabinet meeting the PM seems to be leaning towards a 'hard Brexit', albeit having firmly rejected the points based immigration system favoured by her 'Leave' campaign colleagues.

If this is the case, May will not only run into problems with pro-Europeans, but will also have to overcome internal problems. These include staffing issues and turf wars between the three Brexit-related departments. So far the staffing issues are most acute in the International Trade Department, where Fox has only recruited one-tenth of the total staff he will need. The Brexit Department, known as 'D-Ex-EU' or 'Deck Shoe' colloquially, is thought to have around half of the staff it will need – in the House of Commons Davis claimed to have 180 staff in London and access to a further 120 in Brussels (UK Representation personnel who report to the FCO). These problems are made worse by the fact that the Foreign Office has barred its staff from joining either of the two other departments and has also turned down a request from Fox to transfer one department across. If these issues persist Brexit will be delayed beyond May's control.

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