
WAR ON ALL FRONTS AS MAY FACES PUZZLE OF BREXIT RUBIK'S CUBE

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Although the EU-UK talks collapsed on Sunday (14 October), Prime Minister Theresa May will probably find out that brokering a final withdrawal deal with the bloc will actually be easier than successfully piloting it through the UK Parliament.

One of the many ironies of Theresa Mays travails is that by trying to keep the Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) onside and preserve her own government, she has imperilled other parts of the Union, as well as her own party.

Several divorce options have emerged in the UK and the dividing lines, as well as parliamentary arithmetic, are becoming increasingly clear □ with the outcome all the more difficult to predict. Any Brexit deal will need the support of at least 325 MPs in the 650-member House of Commons, and the numbers do not look good for Mrs May.

As Dick Roche, the Irish former EU affairs minister has written on this site, the Ulster question has become the core of the Brexit dilemma. But even if the vexed issue of the Irish border backstop is resolved before the end of 2018, it does not mean that an agreement will fly.

So what are the most likely Brexit options, and what chance do they have of securing a majority?

A check on Chequers

Agreement on a version of Chequers □ under which the UK would effectively remain in a single market for goods but not services □ could well be the basis of an EU-UK deal. But as it stands, Chequers simply doesn't have the numbers in the Commons. The leaders of the European Research Group of 60 Conservative MPs say they will vote against Chequers. So, too, do the DUP.

In recent weeks, May has sought to reach out to Labour MPs, particularly those in Leave-supporting constituencies, and that has borne some fruit. In addition to the handful of Leave-supporting Labour MPs, a further ten Labour MPs would be likely to support something close to Chequers.

But that won't be enough. May probably needs 30-40 Labour votes to pass Chequers, or something similar.

A head in the sand approach will not help the Chequers ostrich fly. When the Commons comes to vote it will not be Chequers on the table, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said on Monday.

The arithmetic suggests she is probably correct. Chequers would struggle to get more than 300 MPs on board.

The long road to Canada?

The favoured choice of Tory Brexiteers – a Canada-style free trade agreement – would satisfy the requirements of Tory Brexiteers that the UK does not become a rule-taker from Brussels.

Brexiteers say that European Council President Donald Tusk has repeatedly offered a Canada-style deal. May, for her part, told MPs on Monday that the EU had made it clear it was not on the table.

Tusk slams UK slurs on EU, urges Canada +++ Brexit deal

European Council President Donald Tusk sharply criticised what he called emotional and insulting statements about the EU by British ministers and urged London (on Thursday 9 October) to accept an offer of very close post-Brexit ties.

Were Canada ++ to be on the table, it would command the support of most Tory MPs and the DUP. But its reach beyond that is very limited. With the exception of a handful of Eurosceptics, Labour would oppose Canada ++, as would the SNP, and at least 30-40 Tory MPs.

Like Chequers, it is hard to see Canada ++ obtaining more than 300 votes. In any case, as Simon Usherwood of the UK in a Changing Europe, a London-based thinktank, puts it: its no good having a deal you cant sell, but its also no good trying to sell something that doesnt exist.

Brexit deal is close, May tells fractious MPs

UK Prime Minister Theresa May insisted on Monday (15 October) that a Brexit deal was close to completion, after talks between EU and UK officials broke down over the Irish border question.

Customs union

Parliamentary arithmetic suggests that staying in the EUs single market and/or customs union would be the Brexit option most likely to obtain a majority in Westminster.

On Monday (15 October), Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon set out her stall.

We still believe that membership of the EU would be the best outcome for Scotland and the EU. Failing that, we would want continued membership of the single market and the customs union, she told the Royal Society of the Arts.

That is close to the position of Labour.

The combined support of Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru MPs would deliver just over 300 votes. A further 30-odd Conservative MPs would also be likely to support customs union

membership, taking it just over the 325 threshold.

However, the chances of May being the prime minister who negotiates this are nil since it is almost impossible to see how this could be delivered without the collapse of her government and the implosion of the Conservative party.

No deal on no deal

It is also hard to see Theresa May surviving as prime minister if she brings back a no deal Brexit. There is certainly no chance of MPs endorsing it in the Commons.

So what does that leave?

For the moment, neither Canada + nor customs union membership are on the agenda, and it is hard to escape the same conclusion as Sturgeon: that Chequers is impractical, undesirable and undeliverable.

The fear among Labour and SNP sources is that a blindfold Brexit, where a withdrawal agreement is accompanied by an extremely vague political declaration on future relations has replaced a no deal Brexit.

May will almost certainly try to railroad MPs into voting for a bad deal because no deal would be a catastrophe, said Sturgeon.

Rubiks cube

Tusk described the Irish border question as a Gordian knot on Tuesday, calling on May to present something creative enough to solve this impasse. He should, perhaps, have added that any creative plan must also be sufficiently creative to be approved by UK MPs.

One of the many ironies of Brexit is that the only option with a good chance of obtaining a parliamentary majority is the one that guarantees the end of Mays premiership.

Such is the political Rubiks cube that Theresa May is still trying to puzzle out. If, that is, a solution exists at all.

Kaynak/Source: