
IS A CLEAN BREAK BREXIT POSSIBLE?

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17.09.2019

BBC (16 September 2019)

There's been a lot of talk about a "clean break", allowing the country to sort things out once and for all and move on.

The Brexit Party says leaving the EU with no deal would produce a clean break - and a significant number of Conservatives agree.

Sadly, it's not that simple.

What is a no-deal Brexit?

No deal would mean the UK leaving the EU without any kind of formal agreement on the terms of its withdrawal.

Under Theresa May's leadership, the UK negotiated the current withdrawal agreement and political declaration, but now the government says it wants to make big changes.

And if it can't get them, it says it is prepared to leave without a deal.

How clean a break would that be?

It would certainly be the most abrupt change in circumstances. The government's own internal planning documents set out how much of a shock to the system it could be.

Overnight, all the laws and regulations that have governed the relationship between the UK and the rest of the EU for nearly half a century would disappear.

That wouldn't happen under the current withdrawal agreement because it created a transition period of at least two years when the UK would have left the EU, but the trade and security relationship between the two would have remained more or less the same.

Supporters of such an arrangement say it would give government and businesses more time to prepare for a new relationship and to try to negotiate things like a free trade agreement.

Critics say it would turn the UK into a vassal state - following EU rules without having any say in making them. In other words, not a clean break.

But even if Brexit happened without a deal, possibly in acrimonious circumstances, the two sides would need to start talking again sooner rather than later.

What about mini-deals?

There are those who argue that "no deal" is a misleading term, because a series of mini-deals has already been done.

But that's wrong.

The EU has agreed upon a number of unilateral measures, without consulting the UK, to ensure (among other things) that for a few months certain financial transactions can continue and planes can keep flying.

Everyone will benefit from such arrangements, but they are temporary and limited in nature and will need to be renegotiated rapidly.

The government argues that the EU will be forced to deal with the UK because - in effect - it is too big and too important a partner to ignore.

But again, that means negotiations will - if anything - have to intensify.

New phase

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, speaking this week during a joint-press conference with Boris Johnson, summed up the prevailing view in EU capitals.

"The story of Brexit will not end if the United Kingdom leaves on 31 October or even 31 January," he said.

"There is no such thing as a clean break, no such thing as just getting it done. Rather, we just enter a new phase."

The European Research Group (ERG) of Conservative MPs who advocate leaving with no deal says that new phase should be used to negotiate a free trade agreement.

And they argue that the UK should no longer pay the EU the estimated £33bn financial settlement, or divorce bill, and saving money that could be used in other ways.

But Mr Varadkar repeated a warning made by other EU leaders - that if there were to be no deal, the EU would insist that the first items to be discussed in any subsequent negotiation would be citizens' rights, the Irish border and the financial settlement.

Those are exactly the same items that make up the bulk of the withdrawal agreement that has been rejected three times in the House of Commons.

And before the EU was prepared to discuss a free-trade deal, those issues would still need to be settled.

Just walk away?

So the only way the UK could really have a clean-break Brexit is if it were prepared to walk away, at least for a while, from any kind of stable relationship with the EU, which accounts for roughly half of all UK trade.

That doesn't sound sustainable.

To give a couple of brief examples...

The UK's food supply is intricately connected with the rest of the European Union.

"From the consumer perspective, there is so much uncertainty from not having a robust deal with our biggest trading partner," Andrew Opie, from the British Retail Consortium, told the Brexit Select Committee last week. "There is no getting away from that."

"Eighty per cent of food imports into UK supermarkets come from the EU," he said. "So probably about 25% of everything we sell comes from the EU."

Also, the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic is one of the most sensitive issues in the whole Brexit process - walking away from talking about it is not really an option.

The government's own internal planning document concludes that the effect of a no-deal Brexit on the land border in Ireland could be so damaging that there would be "significant pressure to agree new arrangements which supersede the day-one model within days or weeks".

Karen Wheeler, who was in charge of co-ordinating the UK's border plans after Brexit until she resigned from her post in June, told the Brexit committee that things would come to a head extremely quickly.

"It was clear that both the customs regime and the tariff regime would not be sustainable in the long term. They would both, therefore, only apply for a short period of time."

"So what is the plan after the short period of time to get out of that * It was not clear what the solutions were."

Years of negotiation

There is, of course, plenty of talk about alternative arrangements that might replace the Irish backstop - the guarantee that the border will remain as open as it is now under all circumstances.

But any solution would require prolonged negotiation and goodwill on both sides.

Confused by Brexit jargon? Reality Check unpacks the basics.

A clean break would deliver neither.

For anyone who has had enough of Brexit, the uncomfortable fact is that - whatever the outcome - many years of technical talks and political drama lie ahead.

It looks set to dominate British politics and public life for the foreseeable future.

Kaynak/Source: