

100 Days on Planet Brexit

by Lily McNulty-Bakas



Summer ended for Theresa May's cabinet on 31st August at Chequers, the British Prime Minister's official country retreat. Ministers had been instructed to attend armed with ideas about how Britain's withdrawal from the European Union could be a success in their areas. Following months of domestic patience amidst uncertainty from those on the side of Leave and tens of thousands marching in London against the result on the side of Remain, a slump for the pound, and a loss of Britain's AAA rating, the aim was to provide a positive vision for when Parliament returned.

One month on and over 100 days since the referendum, it has taken the annual Conservative Party Conference for the British public and international community to learn of Britain's next steps. Up until this late point it had been unclear what Britain's withdrawal will entail beyond the now empty cliché that 'Brexit means Brexit'. For many it had become indefensible for ministers to continue avoiding questions about their concrete plans with such equivocation as witnessed in these past weeks. This type of disorientating ambiguity was evident in David Davis' (the Brexit Minister) first progress report to the Commons where he explained that "Brexit means Brexit means Britain leaving the EU" and little else. Also in Theresa May's equally empty statement to the G20; "Brexit means Brexit...precisely because it means it does". At least we have been able to turn to its principle champions, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, for clarity on direction and plan...oh wait. Unfortunately it has been a pattern of late that almost every statement Boris utters about Brexit, No.10 smacks down, so no luck there. And Farage? Well he's been busy drumming up support on stage for Donald Trump in front of an audience who didn't know what Brexit was, let alone who Farage is.

Indeed the response from SNP's Pete Wishart after Davis' blathering to Parliament about 'beacons and round tables', 'challenges' and 'opportunities', was "Is that it?" Emily Thornberry, the Shadow Foreign Secretary and Shadow Brexit Minister, when there will be anything to shadow, highlighted to the dismay of May and her hopes for a positive vision for Brexit, how the only things we had learnt were that there wasn't going to be a points-based immigration system and the NHS won't receive £350m per week, two key Leave promises.

So welcome to Planet Brexit, a place that has been almost silent, at least about progress, for months, except for ministers Davis and Johnson declaring, respectively, that Britain voted "overwhelmingly" and by a "clear majority" to leave the EU. This is because on Planet Brexit a margin of 3.8% is enough to warrant the language of a comprehensive victory.

To recap, on 23rd June 2016, Britain voted to leave the EU by 51.9% to 48.1%. What followed was a flurry of activity whereby the PM, David Cameron, had to cut his term short and resign. The ensuing Tory leadership contest was characterised by cynical moves and a now infamous 'cuckoo nest plot' which ousted the front-runner Johnson. The party rallied around Theresa May's, the Home Secretary, candidacy resulting in her having no opponent. Farage resigned from politics, citing 'wanting his life back' and then reappeared on-stage in America with Donald Trump, and May reshuffled ministers in the Cabinet, i.e sacked and replaced Cameron's cabinet. This radical upheaval was signed off with a speech to position herself as a moderate where she mentioned 'working-class' twice, which is twice as many times as any previous Conservative leader since Sir John Major, and marked a move away from the previous Etonian club, bar Boris of course.

The first opportunity for observers to take clues as to May's leadership style and ideological position, came from examining her Cabinet appointments, a process that can be described as both ruthless and strategic. She included the chief Brexiteers, Boris Johnson (Foreign Sec), Liam Fox (Minister for International Trade), and David Davis (Brexit Minister) and gave roles to 4 more ministers who campaigned to Leave. A savvy move for a PM who was on the side of Remain, albeit somewhat reluctantly, and who wants to eliminate distinctions and push government towards the same objective. Sacking George Osborne, a heavyweight in British politics, has been seen as particularly bold.

As for the ideological position of the new administration we can take the approach that 'actions speak louder than words'. Although pitched as a leader 'for the many', we have witnessed a considerable shift to the right. This has been exemplified by the inclusion of ministers who have opposed gay marriage legislation, used racist dog-whistle tactics to discredit Muslim London Mayor Sadiq Khan, attempted to ban books for prisoners, and supported the death penalty. Finally, much to the dismay of green campaigners, the Department for Energy and Climate Change has been scrapped with the 'Energy' part incorporated into another department. So, no more mention of climate change then. This makes sense as for all May talks of how she understands, as opposed to others in Westminster who don't "realise", how hard life can be for working-class families, she has actively supported the austerity programme which achieved in benefiting the wealthy and powerful at the expense of those working people's lives she's now highlighting.

September brought the G20 summit in Hangzhou, and May's first opportunity to export her government's new optimism and unity onto the international stage. A frosty reception from political and business global leaders however, proved that the honeymoon she was enjoying at home had certainly not been extended abroad. The PM had hoped to position Britain as a global free market leader, however she encountered expressed frustration at the stonewalling tactics outlined above. Patience, both domestically and internationally was waning, and the initial language of Brexit had

exhausted it's use now that it had met the realities of the outside world. Britain is embarking on a process that has political, legal, and economic ramifications for every single leader who was present at the G20 and an unprecedented 15-page report on Japanese concerns over Brexit, half of Japanese investment in the EU comes to the UK, symbolised this.

Another unfortunate fruit of No.10's stonewalling technique is that those with clear objectives have been making their voices heard the loudest and organising into pressure groups e.g. Leave means Leave. Set up to campaign for a quick and total exit from the EU and supported by powerful backbenchers it could cause unrest for May should she not deliver its vision. As predicted by Osborne, who, along with Cameron's allies may also prove a pest for May, Britain risks heading for what's being termed 'hard Brexit', where Britain leaves the single market entirely and then has a relationship initially based on WTO rules, which he argues the British public did not vote for.

What we have learnt from the Conservative Party Conference this week is that Britain will trigger Article 50 by the end of March 2017 with negotiations lasting for 2 years, although it is unclear what relationship Britain will have with the EU when it leaves. What we are waiting to see, is the package Britain wants to negotiate and the two main points of contention are immigration control and access to the single-market. Theresa May delighted Eurosceptics when she it made clear on Sunday that she regarded control of immigration as central, sending the markets into a fright and the pound plummeting to a 31-year low against the dollar as it is believed that this would lead to a less favourable trading relationship with the bloc. Phillip Hammond has been known to want to protect access to the single market at the expense of immigration control and has been trying to soothe businesses, although this flies in the face of the desires of the three prominent Brexiteers and those they represent. Boris Johnson has been quoted saying that it is "baloney" that there is an unbreakable link between the single market and free movement, arguing that Britain can have remain in the single market whilst curbing migration. This was rebuffed by French and German ministers who offered to explain the Lisbon Treaty to him in "good English".

It is unclear what May's exact preferences for Britain without the EU are, beyond highlighting that immigration is key and providing some waffle on trade. Unfortunately for her, although many thought the appointments of the big three Brexiteers was a cunning move as their roles would be nominal but wouldn't affect policy, those renegades are proving hard to control. Up until now they have been outlining unofficial government positions to any news conference that will quote them and have been succeeding in hijacking the agenda pushing for a "hard Brexit". This has pushed May, who up until now has dithered, to start to show her hand. There were worries that the strong and ruthless edge with which she appointed her Cabinet, had dissipated this Autumn with panicked calls from within her own party for her to lead due to fear that Britain's future was being left to "delusional" senior ministers.

The message from Europe is clear; curb immigration and you have no access to the coveted single market, furthermore whilst announcing article 50 May called for preparatory work with the EU but the response is again crystal clear; 'no negotiations without notification'. Domestically, Labour, licking its wounds from a bitter second leadership contest in two years, are unable to provide opposition and May is riding high in public opinion. Although she has a current political landscape in Britain that couldn't be more in her favour, that minority Eurosceptic wing in her party so adept at claiming Tory leader scalps are continuing to prove their formidable force and it has been looking like the second Iron Lady is made of brittle stuff. So it doesn't really matter if you want your Brexit 'hard' or 'soft' as it currently looks like only 'hard' is on the table and that is where Britain is headed.



LILY McNULTY-BAKAS

London, 1990. She studied a BA in Political Science and Sociology at Leeds University (2012) and a Master in Political and Social Theory at Birkbeck College, University of London (2014). She is interested in social and political theory. She is currently working as a market analyst.