

## Step back from the hard brexit brink



This general election campaign was supposed to be about Britain leaving the European Union – Brexit – but was instead dominated by security issues, where Theresa May's Government had a lot of explaining to do. Now Brexit looms large, with the opening negotiations only days away. Yet for all the talk, the issues are not much clearer. What the incoming Government has to do is to state its priorities for the forthcoming negotiations, not present an undifferentiated wish list. What principles should define British interests here?

The first priority has to be the human one. There are several million EU citizens living and working in Britain for whom the referendum threw everything up in the air, and more than a million UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU. It was always wrong to try and bargain the rights of one group against the rights of the other, and the time has come to be unequivocal. Whatever the 27 remaining nations of the EU decide to do about British citizens living under their jurisdiction, there is nothing to stop the British Government giving immediate unilateral guarantees to those EU citizens under its care. And the guarantee has to be that they will be treated no worse, in any respect, than UK citizens are treated already. Legislation to achieve that could be tabled immediately.

Secondly, the interests of Northern Ireland, and of peace in Ireland generally, should take priority over all other remaining issues. The Good Friday Agreement only worked because of the assumption that the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland would remain full members of the EU. Those conditions have to be reproduced as closely as possible. If special arrangements cannot be made, and if the only way to prevent the reappearance of border posts on the frontier between north and south is by remaining in the single market and customs union, then that is what has to happen. And if Britain has to accept the free movement of labour within the single market in return, then so be it.

It may well be that this is also the only way to save the union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Although public opinion in Scotland may not yet be ready to address the independence issue once more, the prospect of Britain leaving the EU and dragging Scotland out with it against its will, could change that. Britain remaining in the single market and customs union, on the other hand, could give the bond between Scotland and the rest of Britain a new lease of life. The alternative, Britain out of the EU and an independent Scotland back inside it, would mean border posts between England and Scotland. That should be unthinkable, as in the Irish case.

The other fundamental reason to prioritise membership of the single market is to protect the economy from its biggest threat, the damage to trading relations with Britain's major trading partner. It is not

just shareholders' profits which are at risk but jobs for ordinary people, and the ability to maintain or even improve public spending on schools, welfare, health services, security and so on. The Tory election campaign line that Britain needs a strong economy to fund the National Health Service may be true, but it is hard to square with leaving the single market on which a strong economy depends.

If British negotiators go into their first negotiations with these priorities in mind, the process of leaving could, after all, be saved from disaster. To gain none of these goals, in order to cut EU immigration into Britain, could be all it takes to bring that disaster on.

### *Donald trump's climate disaster*

After meeting Pope Francis, President Donald Trump postponed for a few days his decision on whether the United States should remain signatories of the Paris Agreement on climate change. Given that the Pope had given the President a bound copy of his encyclical *Laudato Si'* – which strongly recommends international action of the kind Paris envisaged – it may have been that he needed time to read it. Or it may have been that he needed time to placate his daughter, Ivanka, who is located in the White House as a special adviser.

Leaving the Pope aside, Mr Trump does seem rather less interested in what other world leaders have to say, though many of them contacted him beforehand to urge the US to stay in the agreement. His demand that it be renegotiated to better suit American interests – or what he imagined them to be – may have been his concession to Ivanka, who disagrees with him strongly. But there is little prospect of reopening an agreement so painstakingly gained. Nor is there any need to do, as President Trump's grounds for his action are fallacious. America needs Paris as much as anyone. How could anybody think that it is in the interests of the United States to cause serious and irreversible harm to the planet's atmosphere?

His announcement galvanised the international community in response, and brought the European Union and China closer than they have ever been on any major policy issue. The air in many Chinese cities is seriously polluted, and the factors that cause life-threatening pollution are similar to those leading to climate change, so controlling the one controls the other. Not for the first time, therefore, Mr Trump has succeeded in uniting the world against himself. That includes many in his own country. California and New York state have already announced they intend to follow Paris come what may, and offers have poured in to replace the federal funding for climate change projects inside America that Mr Trump intends to terminate.

By provoking this strong reaction, he may even have done the climate a favour – the climate, and those most at risk from changes to it. It is a truism that those most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change are those least able to cope with it: poor people everywhere. Rising sea levels and exceptional atmospheric events like violent hurricanes are both linked to global warming, and both are threats to life. In the long run, the survivability of life on planet Earth itself could even be at stake. The Paris environmental conference was a unique moment when the world united to face those threats – which now have a name on them, and it is Donald J Trump.

