

Article for the Japan Times -September 18th.

So Now What Will Happen ?

By David Howell

It was U.S. President Harry Truman who is alleged to have said ‘Bring me a one-handed economist’. He was just about fed up with endless economic and political analysts saying ‘one the one hand, but on the other hand etc.’

Japanese visitors to Britain enquiring about Brexit must have the same feelings of exasperation, as every question about what happens next over Brexit is met with streams of ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and ‘maybes’, or just honest ‘don’t knows’.

So here for a change is a firm description of what WILL happen – no ifs, no buts.

The new British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and his new government are about to pull off a remarkable victory. There will be no abrupt crash-out without a deal as some fear and others demand. He is about to lead the UK out of the European Union on October 31st, but with a firm Withdrawal Agreement, with an orderly transition period ahead, with the approval of a majority of the British House of Commons, with the way forward over the complex Irish situation resolved, with EU Commission acceptance, and with Mr. Johnson’s own party, the Conservative party, surviving and on the path to unity again.

But wait a minute, surely that is impossible. Has not Boris Johnson lost his Parliamentary majority, with defections on all sides and with twenty-one of his own ‘troops’ actually expelled for disobedience? Has he not been blocked by Parliament itself from taking the UK out of the EU and proceeding without any agreement or deal? Is he not being accused in the highest courts of law of limiting Parliament from creating even further obstacles? Have not the highest EU authorities repeatedly said that the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated with Mr Johnson’s unlucky predecessor, Theresa May, is the only one on offer and cannot be re-opened?

All true, but also, in this age of paradox, all wrong.

His task does indeed look like Mission Impossible because it involves satisfying four different constituencies in a balancing act of fiendish complexity.

First, the Government of Ireland will have to be satisfied that they can continue trading across a completely invisible border, even though the top part of the island will be in the UK but outside the EU, and the rest, the Irish Republic, will be inside the EU.

Second, the EU leaders in Brussels will have to be convinced that this can be achieved, uniquely in an Irish setting, without fatally damaging the integrity, standards and cohesion of the EU itself. Only then will they drop the so-called and much-hated backstop, which would keep the whole UK in the EU until this one issue has been resolved.

Third the suspicious Northern Irish will have to be reassured that all new arrangements, involving free trade across an invisible border, and lots of new forms of cooperation between the two parts, will never become a slide into United Ireland – or not at least unless a majority in Northern Ireland actually votes for it.

Fourth Mr. Johnson will have to bring this new, ‘detoxified’ Agreement, backstop-free, before Parliament and get a majority in favour, all before October 31st.

To do that he will have to a) woo back his expelled troops, b) satisfy his hard-liners (one of which he used to be himself) that Northern Ireland is still solidly part of the UK, and not being subtly separated off, c) bring over at least twenty Labour MP supporters from a party whose leader, Jeremy Corbyn, will be telling them *not* to support him but instead to stay neutral or support another referendum.

The key is indeed in Ireland – a land of charm, mists and endless ambiguity and paradox, where agreements are usually just to disagree, and nothing is as it seems – a state which baffles most European minds.

The actual amount of trade between the two parts is very small, confined to a limited number of ‘trusted’, and recognized large traders. It amounts to one tenth of one percent of EU total trade flows.

One proposal is to have a common all-Ireland regime over livestock and agri-food regulation. Another is to have special freeport zones either side of the border, which thus itself remains (and feels) invisible, even though goods traffic still has to be ‘cleared’, when it physically leaves the freeport zones. A third is to have common border authority cooperation supervising border movements. A fourth is to have some additional checks to those which already exist on livestock movements across the Irish Sea between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

For further physical reassurance to the North there is even talk of a bridge of some 30 miles being built between the two parts of the UK – although over the quite rough Irish sea.

The whole of Ireland and Britain are already in a common travel area (and have been since 1922), and all Ireland has a common electricity market, some common

transport and tourist administration, some common sports teams and a host of other all-island bodies, with staff working both sides. Also, the Irish Republic, like the UK, is outside the Schengen area of intra-EU free movement, and has been all along.

All this – and much more - turns London confrontation with Ireland into cooperation. These are the ‘concrete steps’ to solve the Irish ‘problem’ which the EU keeps calling for.

Even more important is that they bring together a cross-party majority at Westminster for an orderly new Agreement. If some of the diehard Northern Irish Unionists, on whose votes the Conservatives previously relied, cannot now accept it all, well so be it: their votes are no longer so crucial. There will be a majority for a fresh Agreement without them, and plenty of moderate support on the ground in Ulster itself.

Once past October 31st in this way Mr. Johnson will re-unite most of his hard-line critics, including large numbers of followers until now of the demagogic Nigel Farage. This will leave him in a strong position to sort out the many Brexit issues that still lie ahead, as well as to start facing the challenges of a now totally transformed wider world.

Those who never wanted Britain to leave the EU will be disappointed. So will those who wanted to leave regardless. The median, common sense, and dare it be said, democratic approach will prevail. What a relief!
