

EU evangelists stand in way of a fair Brexit; Theresa May's Chequers proposal is a 'no-brainer' solution for both sides, if only the Brussels elites would admit it

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The media clamour in the wake of the Chequers agreement focused solely on British domestic politics: resignations, vested interests' propaganda and opposition criticism. As someone who started teaching European Union politics at university in the 1990s, and who has been studying the subject for more than 25 years, I find this extraordinary.

A week before the Brexit referendum, I tweeted my analysis that, regardless of the outcome, not a lot would change. The UK had already opted out of EU regimes such as the charter of fundamental rights, the Schengen agreement, the area of freedom, security and justice and economic and monetary union. It did not sign up to recent EU treaties on economic governance. The UK has always sought to avoid involvement in the integration necessary for the EU's planned security and defence union, fiscal and banking unions and the harmonisation of private sector regimes such as financial services and in public policy areas such as welfare systems. The 45 years of EU legislation covering economics and trade that were already on the UK's statute books would remain and continue to be updated, subject to parliamentary approval.

A rational Brexit would maintain much of the status quo and avoid entanglement in future EU plans. As I said at the time, the media, government and EU needed to dial down the drama on Brexit.

Another reason for this "keep calm and carry on" message was to reassure public opinion after the mass hysteria among the establishment at the prospect of a Leave result. Brexit, I maintained, was simply the UK getting off the EU train several stops before it arrives at its federalist destination.

Theresa May's Chequers proposal broadly reflects that model of Brexit. Most importantly, it delivers on the result of the Brexit referendum: the UK will leave the European Union.

What is the relationship proposed? The UK is essentially reverting back to the European Free Trade Association arrangements it was involved in before joining the European Economic Community in 1973. Of the "four freedoms" comprising the European single market, the UK would maintain the free movement of goods, but not services, labour and capital. The UK proposes to preserve most of its customs union with the EU, by applying the EU's common external tariff to goods entering the UK destined for other EU member states, eliminating the need for further levies and checks.

The proposal would maintain most of the current EU-UK single market arrangements; for example, the proposed "common rulebook on all goods including agri-food" means maintaining the same rules that govern Irish mushroom growers supplying British markets, while German car manufacturers can continue to export across the EU, including selling into the UK. To the benefit of the EU and the UK, most trade would continue as normal.

The significance of the UK's proposed opt-out from single market rules on the free movement of services should not be overestimated: the level of EU market freedoms in services is low anyway, and the UK already has the lowest levels of goods and services integration into the single market of all member states, relative to its GDP. In other words, the least-integrated state opting out of the least-integrated market does not mean much change. From the British government's perspective, this delivers on one of its key motivations for Brexit: the preservation of the City of London's freedom and dominance in trade in financial services.

Opting out of free movement of workers also delivers on a cornerstone of Brexit: in the three years leading up to the Brexit referendum, more than 300,000 EU workers moved to the UK each year, mainly eastern Europeans. A London School of Economics report suggested "UK wages may be held down by EU immigration, particular in the lower income unskilled sectors", which is no surprise to most of the older, less educated people in the poorest areas of the UK who voted for Brexit. The European parliament has been campaigning for a social justice dimension and active labour market policies to be part of EU economic governance to raise living standards for citizens who benefit the least from membership. Brexit serves as a wake-up call for the EU to address it. All in all, Mrs May's plan for Brexit is a "no-brainer" for all sides: legally and procedurally, it is straightforward to implement given that it maintains the EU-UK arrangements that have been operating since 1966.

The EU should view the Chequers proposal with due respect to the magnitude of Mrs May's achievement: all-out war between the UK and EU can be avoided, albeit at the risk of potential EU-UK skirmishes in the future.

The Irish government has been surprisingly positive in encouraging the EU to accommodate the proposal, saying the EU should be flexible on its "red lines". The EU elites that will refuse to do so will claim that the "four freedoms" are indivisible. This is untrue. In 2004 the EU prohibited the free movement of workers from a number of new eastern European member states, subject to a seven-year time limit. A loophole allowed states to continue the regime.

Listen to the EU elites such as Manfred Weber. The president of the EPP, Fine Gael's grouping in the European parliament, has said: "A country leaving the EU cannot benefit from the same advantages as the EU member states." Guy Verhofstadt, the president of ALDE, Fianna Fáil's political grouping, said the UK could not be "better off out than in". This reveals the ideology behind their resistance to any reasonable Brexit plan; what I call EUvangelism. In a position prioritising absolute gains over relative gains, the EUvangelists will resist any benefit for the UK in the Chequers proposal, even if the EU gains. It is reminiscent of the attitudes of hardline US Republican conservatives over trade with China.

Ironically, if the EU negotiators react to Mrs May's Brexit proposal as Verhofstadt and Weber would have them do, Michel Barnier, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker will probably be remembered as the Donald Trumps of Brexit.

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