

The Barnier Code: diplomacy by patronage reveals a more pragmatic Juncker

Blog post by Adviser Tom White, 21 July 2016

Amid the macho jostling between British politicians to set out ‘red lines’ for negotiating post-Brexit arrangements with the EU, where will British Prime Minister Theresa May turn for guidance? Rather than to her divided and inexperienced cabinet, there are good reasons for her to look at the records of predecessors Thatcher and Brown. Both bluntly but effectively framed pan-European challenges for other leaders in terms that required London-made solutions, whether completing the single market in goods or the financial crisis response. May will certainly want to move on quickly from the more affable but transactional legacy of her immediate predecessor, whose ‘renegotiation’ boiled down British interests to a narrow set of requests.

May’s visits to Berlin and Paris this week show her recognition of this, and of what EU jargon refers to as ‘Chefsache’: strategic questions for leaders that transcend the mandates of individual ministers or institutions. She is clearly aware of the scale of her immediate challenges and wants to frame the big questions correctly before getting bogged-down in zero-sum negotiations over points of detail in Brussels. My own time in council working groups, ‘COREPER’ meetings and ministerial councils showed how much easier it is to say “no” than to say “yes” in these forums, where participants reflect (and must be seen to reflect) the interests of domestic industries and regulators. Impasses are often only resolved when leaders unite to give them specific responsibilities and deadlines to compromise.

Escalation to heads of government is the EU’s only real way to take decisions that reflect the costs of inaction in its decision making - like allowing the UK to leave without any Exit Treaty - and to secure broader national interests through compromise. This has been true of the Eurozone and refugee crises, and agreeing sanctions against Iran and Russia. Criticism of post-summit implementation is valid, but should not downplay the European Council’s unique role in pulling governments back from the brink. In practice this requires leadership from a small group of elected leaders in defining a shared problem, twisting the Commission’s arm to find legal solutions, and forcing opponents to articulate an alternative course of action that can be exposed as insufficient.

If May is to avoid a hard landing after Article 50 expires, she will have to follow this playbook. Only she can persuade her counterparts to put questions of substance and process temporarily to one side, and establish her personal credibility in framing Brexit as a set of problems requiring pan-European solutions. As a former home secretary, she will have spoken with Merkel about the crises in Turkey, Ukraine and (perhaps) the challenges of integrating refugees. She will have compared notes with Hollande about threats of domestic terrorism, and spoken to both about the threat of new far-right constituencies mobilising those frustrated with globalisation. In the months ahead,

she and Chancellor Philip Hammond must also find allies who can help them persuade the European Commission to see ‘trade talks’ as about ensuring reliable access for EU27 corporates to international capital markets and to existing supply chains, in order to compete globally.

All of this means learning from her predecessors’ successes and failures. But May might also keep in mind a less obvious source of advice in Donald Trump’s book *The Art of the Deal*, which highlighted the crucial role of psychology over detail, and of aligning with the big-picture aspirations of your audience.

