



When people don't do what you want

It will be possible to negotiate a new settlement with the EU, including a UK-EU free trade deal, by May 2020. This is mainly because 1) there is already tariff-free trade between the UK and the EU and 2) there is already regulatory equivalence, so the main stumbling blocks to negotiating a trade agreement are absent. It is also in all countries' economic and political interests for there to be a friendly deal that will increase and improve international cooperation.

Thus, the Vote Leave plan for Brexit, published in June 2016 before the Referendum

The fact that it seemed to Leavers to be in both the UK and Europe's interests to get a free trade deal was why Liam Fox said the free trade agreement 'should be one of the easiest in human history.' in 2017; it is why Boris Johnson said "a no-deal outcome is a million to one against", in 2019.

All along there were contrary voices, that said this seemed to neglect that there were many political and emotional reasons for the EU not to be so compliant. But the Hard Brexiteers have ploughed on, assuring the public that agreement was only a matter of time, while compromises like those developed by Theresa May were an affront to British sovereignty etc..

This week, Boris Johnson adjusted his maths:

"There is now a strong possibility that we will have an Australian relationship with the EU (i.e. a 'no deal' exit, on WTO rules)."

Gisela Stuart, Chair of Vote Leave, in an interview yesterday, now puts it like this.

"No Deal is not a preferred option for either side, but the solution is now a political one... We probably need to accept that their commitment to how they define the Single Market is even more fundamental than we had appreciated."

The Vote Leave team, at best, made a terrible miscalculation; many people feel justifiably angry.

But crucially, however angry we feel, we all have to plot a future together: as Rowan Williams noted in an essay on St Benedict:

"A great deal of our politics, our ecclesiastical life, and often our personal life, is dominated by the assumption that everything would be all right if only some people would go away."

Boris Johnson is not going to go away, neither is Emmanuel Macron, or Angela Merkel, or Keir Starmer or whoever is our personal bete noir; & locally, we go on living together, having voted Leave and having voted Remain, and probably still feeling justified in whatever we voted.

And 'deal' or 'no deal', the UK must go on relating to Europeans, and they to us. Can we learn from what has happened to make us better at relating with each other, from here on?

December 11th, 2020 Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, in normal times for people to read on the train.