

First published by the ESRC's UK in a Changing Europe programme
18 January 2017.

Applying principles can be harder than stating them



Theresa May's speech confirms that Brexit means being all out of the EU rather than half-way out. However, the British government is less than half way down the road to that destination, because it has not yet started to specify how it will apply the Prime Minister's principles. Once the government gives formal notice of withdrawal the agenda shifts from stating principles in the abstract to applying them. This is the purpose of the negotiations with Brussels that are scheduled to start in April. But what these principles mean in practice is already the object of internal debate within the Cabinet.

Two major examples of unsettled business are:

First, whether Brexit will happen by transition or in one go. The referendum question left the timetable for exit open. The default position under EU law is that by 1 April 2019 the UK should be a non-member state in all respects. To have everything ready will place an almost impossible burden on the UK. A transition agreement of two years would more than double the

time available to prepare for implementing non-member status. To make it palatable to Conservatives who want Brexit in one go, Downing Street would have to make clear that transition was part of an irreversible process, rather than a back door way of keeping a few toes or even a foot still inside the EU.

Second, what taking back control of immigration means in practice. Since most immigrants come from non-EU countries, to implement this goal would require having policies in place that covered new Commonwealth citizens who now have special claims on moving to the UK. It would also require having special policies in place to deal with old Commonwealth citizens from Australia, Canada and the United States. Any control of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic would be soft and porous because difficult to enforce.

Avoiding placing any numerical target on immigration saves the government from the fate of its predecessors, which fell hundreds of thousands short of hitting their target. However, it also falls far short of the expectations of Brexiteers who believe that the whole point of taking back control is to achieve a large and visible reduction in the annual rate of immigration from all parts of the world and not just from the EU.

Professor Richard Rose FBA Director, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Visiting Professor European University Institute Florence.