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How achievable are the UK's 12 goals for Brexit?



The government's new White Paper on Brexit is optimistically described as meant to achieve a new partnership with the European Union. But before that can happen, the terms of divorce must be negotiated, and that is never easy.

The first goal of the government's Brexit White Paper is to introduce certainty and clarity, subject to the qualification 'wherever we can'. Insofar as a policy is negotiable, the outcome can hardly be certain at the start of negotiations. Limited clarity and certainty allows both hard Brexiteers and the salvage squad of the remain campaign to project their own hopes onto the government's plans for Brexit.

To achieve an agreement, the UK government must be prepared to accept compromises. When a new policy is proposed, a member state in good standing can expect to get about two-thirds of what it wants. EU negotiators have made clear that since the UK has chosen to leave the EU it will be given less than any member state gets.

The likelihood of achieving the government's goals varies from goal to goal. Each can be classified on a simple scale ranging from 0 (impossible); 1 or 2 (achievable with difficulty or only partially); 3, (amenable to bargaining and compromise); and 4 (readily achievable). They rank as follows:

4 Cooperating in the fight against terrorism. When a terrorist threat erupts, security services are always willing to work together to prevent or apprehend terrorists.

4 Securing rights for UK nationals now resident in Europe and EU nationals now resident in the UK. This is a win-win policy for both the UK and the EU since it will confirm the status quo.

4 Protect and enhance existing workers' rights. Repatriating EU laws to Britain will leave existing standards in place. Enhancing rights will be disputed in the British Parliament; foreign voices will hardly matter.

4 End the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union over the UK. This can be achieved by unilateral British action, but at a price. It jeopardizes agreement on trade and finance because the EU wants its Court to adjudicate any disputes arising from an agreement.

3 Controlling the number of European nationals coming to the UK. A law or a ministerial statement can set a numerical limit on EU migration but the Home Office has a long record of failing to meet numerical limits. Brexit will free the Mayor of Calais to put refugees there on a train to Britain without any obligation to accept their return from a non-EU state.

2 Protecting historic ties and the common travel area with the Republic of Ireland. Given the negative impact on security of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, the EU may make concessions to the Republic that the UK could not achieve on its own. The scope for maintaining free trade between England and Ireland is much more limited once the UK becomes a non-member state. Britons flying from London to Dublin or vice versa may have to join long passport queues with foreigners before crossing the sea border between Ireland and Britain.

2 Securing new trade agreements with non-EU countries. Leaving the EU will give the UK the freedom to negotiate agreements with other countries. President Trump shows that major countries can have national leaders that are less keen on trading with the UK than the UK is on trading with them and negotiating details of a trade agreement cannot be done in a flying trip or a phone call.

2 Seeking collaboration with European partners in science and technology. Collaboration could be maintained by agreement with the EU – subject to the British government making a cash contribution to the EU research fund and leaving in EU hands the power to decide which British proposals are funded and which are not. People are required to do research and many research workers in Britain are from EU countries. Because of Brexit, some are preparing to return to the continent and immigration controls will make it more difficult to hire replacements.

1 Securing the freest trade possible between the UK and Europe. Not a lot is possible without the British government making a U-turn, because the EU's requirements for participating in a single European market are unacceptable to the British government's current position. The UK government's hopes of "cherry-picking" existing rights of the City of London are also unacceptable to EU leaders.

1 or 0 Strengthening the Union. The Scottish government's stated goal is to remain an economic and political partner with the EU. Calling and winning another independence referendum is its hoped for means of achieving Scotxit, that is, leaving the Union. If Scottish voters rejected independence, this would preserve the UK as a four-nation Union; whether it would strengthen it is a moot point.

1 or 0 Delivering a smooth, orderly exit with agreement within two years plus a limited transitional period for implementing what Brexit requires. The White Paper recognises the need for an additional period of time to implement a new partnership and avoid a cliff-edge leap from membership to non-membership. To achieve any agreement within a tight deadline will require substantial compromises. Since the impact of Brexit is much greater on the UK than on the 27 states that will remain in the EU after Britain leaves, this increases the risk that the British government will reject the only transition deal on offer as a bad deal and head for the cliff-edge with no deal.

The outcome of negotiations cannot be assigned a numerical mark; it will be graded politically. The Prime Minister can hail whatever is achieved as a great success, whether it is a full loaf, a panini, a few slices of bread or just a biscuit. By contrast, many Conservative MPs will view the results as a curate's egg, good in some parts and bad in others. They will want the red meat alternative of exiting without any deal.

The White Paper leaves this possibility on the menu. In a European political context, EU negotiators see no settlement as preferable to making concessions that would call into question the authority of the EU in relation to its 450 million citizens and 27 member states.

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