

Mrs May and Mrs Merkel

Some in the press and media wish to personalise the negotiation between the UK and the EU into a battle between Mrs May and Mrs Merkel. As always on the UK side there are those who want to portray it as a fight between a weak UK and a powerful Germany. They seem to think Mrs Merkel is in a strong position, whilst they wrongly allege Mrs May is in a weak position.

It starts with EU spin trying to suggest Mrs May is in a weak position owing to the recent election. That is an odd allegation to come from the continent. Mrs May and the Conservatives received 42.4% of the popular vote in June. Mrs Merkel and her party received 41.5% in the last German election. Mrs Merkel's party currently stands on 38% in the polls, and has not been above that for two years and has often been well below it. Mrs Merkel won just 33% of the seats in the German Parliament with her party, Mrs May won 49% of the seats in the Commons. Mrs May need not face another election for five years. Mrs Merkel has to go to the polls in three months time and looks set to do worse than last time. Mrs May can govern as a single party. Mrs Merkel has to govern in coalition partnership with the SPD, the equivalent of Mrs May having to govern with the support of Labour. I would rather be in Mrs May's position than Mrs Merkel's.

The posturing by the EU in response to the UK proposal on reassuring UK and EU citizens resident in each other's territories shows they are misjudging the strength of their position. It looks as if they think delaying and being difficult could lead to the UK giving up and staying in the EU. That would be a bad misreading of the situation, and of the recent election where voters decisively rejected the Lib Dems who offered just that approach.

If the EU wastes too much of their negotiating time on making silly claims for large sums of money, and on pressing for future freedom of movement as well as accepting past free movement, they will run out of time to secure tariff and barrier free access to our market. French dairy farmers, Danish pig farmers, Dutch market gardeners, German car producers and many others who would face tariffs will not be amused if that happens. Maybe Mrs Merkel's forthcoming encounters with the German electors will make her more realistic. It will certainly remind her of how she lost popularity over her migration policy since she last asked the voters to vote for her.

There are signs that business on the continent wants their leaders to get on with it to ensure smooth trade in 20 months time. It would be good news if the UK media started submitting the other EU governments to the barrage of difficult questions over how their businesses will fare in 2019 that they give us daily at the UK end.