

Was the EU really trying to help Mrs May with its change of view?

Yesterday's well briefed stories in pro EU UK papers told us the EU is willing now to admit that the Northern Ireland border issues can of course be resolved by technology and checks away from the borders. Just as the Eurosceptics have always claimed, and as the UK government argued at the beginning of the Brexit process, there is no need for new barriers at the border and long delays whilst goods are checked at a border post. In this electronic age the issues of Excise, VAT and safety of product are already sorted out by electronic manifests and checks where needed away from the border. Most does not need physical inspection, as regulated operators file the necessary information so the authorities can do what they need to do without troubling the lorry driver. The authorities only need to do a few random inspections to keep the system honest, or to inspect where there is evidence of possible fraud, as they do today whilst we are still in the EU.

There was a suggestion this was designed to help Theresa May. I did not quite understand that part of the story. Mrs May has been arguing that it is because there is a problem with the Irish border – a problem many of us say does not in reality exist – that she needs to dream up the elaborate fix of Chequers. The imposition of the EU rule book for goods and the offer to collect EU tariffs for them was designed to remove the need for these things to happen at the Irish border. If the EU now rightly says there is no such problem it is difficult to see why we would need Chequers at all.

If we lift the nonsense that there is a problem with the Irish border, then a Canada plus plus trade deal is easy to do if both sides wish. The EU said they were up for a Canada style deal but wished to exclude Northern Ireland, leaving that in their customs union. That was clearly impossible for the UK. If this is no longer their view, then why not just agree a Free Trade Deal. It is easy to do technically, unlike most FTAs, because we start from a position of having no tariffs and having common standards.

What is strange is the PM is ploughing on with her very unpopular Chequers proposals, just at the point where it seems there is no need for them for the reason originally set out. It may be she knows the stories yesterday were false of course, though they looked well briefed and went to EU friendly papers. The alternative explanation is she wants to keep us in the common market for goods for reasons other than the Irish border. If so we need to know why. I see no good reason to make any such proposal.

Meanwhile the IMF is back with bad forecasts for what might happen if we leave with No Deal. Once again it appears a major forecasting outfit fails to understand the positives from leaving without signing the Withdrawal Agreement. There is that £39bn to spend, and then there is the up to £13bn of tariff revenue on EU imports into the UK that can be given back to business and consumers as tax cuts. Any discounted cashflow calculation of the money shows the UK is clearly better off without signing the Withdrawal Agreement.

Why do they always leave that bit out, and go for silly models showing big falls in trade that are unlikely to happen?