

Theresa May's White Paper offers no plan for post-Brexit Britain

By Robert Stevens
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On Thursday, the Conservative government released its White Paper, supposedly setting out its plans for Britain's exit from the European Union (EU).

The 77-page document was made public one day after parliament—by a large majority—passed a one-line Conservative government bill authorising the triggering of Article 50, the Lisbon Treaty legislation that begins the formal exit process.

The document, “United Kingdom's exit from and new partnership with the European Union White Paper”, is not so much a plan as an empty wish list. It outlines 12 “principles” that read like chapters from a marketing manual, including “Providing certainty and clarity”, “Ensuring free trade with European markets”, “Controlling immigration” and “Delivering a smooth, orderly exit from the EU”.

The *Guardian* criticises the government and its document from the standpoint of that section of the ruling elite favouring EU membership and continued access to the Single Market and Customs Union. That said, the newspaper's cynical conclusion that the White Paper “tells the country nothing and everything about the most important foreign policy decision to face Britain for decades” is certainly to the point.

As is now the established pattern, the government promises the best of all possible futures for British imperialism. After affirming, “We will not be seeking membership of the Single Market” with all that this entails, the paper states that the government “will pursue instead a new strategic partnership with the EU, including an ambitious and comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and a new customs agreement.”

A final agreement, it claims, “may take in elements of current Single Market arrangements in certain areas as it makes no sense to start again from scratch when the UK and the remaining Member States have adhered

to the same rules for so many years.”

In other words, the UK will leave the Single Market while seeking to maintain access to the Single Market!

Nothing concrete is outlined in regard to the position of the City of London. The paper boasts, “The UK's financial services sector is a hub for money, trading and investment from all over the world and is one of only two global, full service financial centres—and the only one in Europe”, before observing that what is being sought is “the freest possible trade in financial services”. But it again offers no explanation as to why the EU states should or would adopt a magnanimous attitude toward their major competitor.

The White Paper goes on to state, “To provide legal certainty over our exit from the EU, we will introduce the Great Repeal Bill to remove the European Communities Act 1972 from the statute book and convert the ‘acquis’—the body of existing EU law—into domestic law”—after previously complaining that EU law was an unwarranted intrusion into British sovereignty.

The bill avoids any concreteness as well on the issue of immigration controls, the central concern of the Tory xenophobes in Westminster and the wider party base. It states only that it is undecided how the UK will “gain control of the numbers of people coming to the UK from the EU”. Instead, in a move designed to make it easier for the Tories Article 50 bill to complete its passage through committee stage hearings in parliament next week, the document indicates, “We expect to bring forward separate bills on immigration and customs.”

The paper declares in addition that “implementing any new immigration arrangements for EU nationals and the support they receive will be complex and Parliament will have an important role in considering

these matters further”. The sole purpose of this vague pledge is to draw the teeth of the opposition parties should they offer a pro forma defence of the rights of EU citizens post-Brexit.

It blames the EU for the question mark placed by Brexit regarding the fate of an estimated 2.8 million EU nationals who currently reside in the UK, asserting, “The government would have liked to resolve this issue ahead of the formal negotiations. And although many EU member states favour such an agreement, this has not proven possible.”

As things stand, the government has little reason to fear amendments being made to its plans for Brexit. Despite more than 150 pages of amendments from Labour, the Scottish National Party and Greens, not a single Tory MP—barring the soon-to-retire pro-EU Kenneth Clarke—is prepared to rebel. In short, the Tories look set to keep to a timetable of triggering Article 50 by the end of March.

The May government is triggering Brexit while boasting, backed by the Bank of England, that the economy is performing well and even headed for a boom. However, what has fuelled the growth spurt of the past few months is consumer spending. This week the *Economist* predicted this was set to end, noting, “There are signs that Britons’ freewheeling ways may not last much longer ...

“People now appear to have decided that with Brexit negotiations about to get under way and the attendant economic uncertainty, they should focus less on borrowing and more on repaying. On January 31st the Bank of England revealed that consumer-credit growth in December fell to £1bn from £1.9bn the month before.”

The absence of any strategic plan in the White Paper is further proof of a growing crisis of rule in Britain. Powerful sections of the ruling elite never considered they might lose the referendum, underestimating the extent of opposition in the population to the EU and the general discontent with the entire political set-up after nearly a decade of savage austerity. No contingency planning was therefore ever considered by then Prime Minister David Cameron in the event of a Brexit vote.

His successor and fellow advocate of remaining in the EU, May, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Brexit Secretary David Davis have no plan either. The Brexit wing of the Tories claimed that leaving the EU

would allow the UK to go “out of Europe and into the world”—by signing new trade deals with the US, China and other major markets—while, conversely, maintaining access to the UK’s most important existing market, the EU.

This was and remains a fantasy.

As for the prospect of a “buccaneering Britain” rampaging merrily across the planet, May’s obsequious performance during her meeting with Donald Trump underscored the reality that the UK, in fact, overwhelmingly relies on securing increased US trade, along with Washington’s backing, so as to pressure the EU into making concessions.

In reality, there is no indication from Trump’s “America First” administration that the UK will get such a favourable deal, which can, in any event, only be negotiated and signed after leaving the EU. Equally, there is no reason to believe that any European leader will be prepared to treat Britain leniently.

Prior to this week’s vote on Article 50, Sir Ivan Rogers, the UK’s former EU ambassador, tellingly noted the negotiations would be held in an “extremely feisty atmosphere” and that EU Commissioners were “openly” insisting that Britain would have to pay up to €60 billion as part of the exit process in a “predictably hard line”.

Moreover, Rogers’ scenario does not factor in the hostile response of Germany and France to being threatened by May’s relationship with Trump. The major European powers, rather than preparing to back down, have concluded from the new US president’s declared intention to seek the breakup of the EU that any concession to May would only allow the UK to function as the Trojan horse for this project.

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