

A Kick up the Backstop! (Richard Forsyth, December 2018)

None of our posturing politicians and pontificating pundits seem to have realized that we are in danger of throwing away the baby instead of (not just along with) the bathwater of Brexit. It appears that parliamentarians are too busy with their short-sighted squabbles to do anything other than kick away a golden opportunity when it tries to drop at their feet.

I refer to the so-called backstop, that unexamined buzzword which is bandied about by the chattering classes like a threat to keep naughty children in order by fear. Theresa May and her dwindling band of supporters have somehow stumbled upon a socio-economic sweet spot which must rank as one of the greatest examples of serendipity since Columbus found the Americas when looking for China. Yes, I'm serious, I do mean the dreaded backstop arrangement, regarded by most right-thinking folk as a state almost too terrible to contemplate.

Yet consider this: the UK gets free trade with the single market without free movement, and we don't have to pay! That includes benefiting from the EU's deals with other countries. Moreover, the ECJ's role is reduced and we leave the sclerotic common agricultural and common fisheries policies; on top of which it gives our politicians a polite excuse -- to our ally across the Atlantic -- not to let US corporations wipe out the NHS. After all, Labour may get into power one day. What's not to like? It's better than Brexit and better than staying in the EU. We'd be insane to turn it down. Let's get in fast and hang in there as long as possible!

If Yanis Varoufakis and Alexis Tsipras had negotiated anything comparably advantageous for Greece they would have been hailed as masters of the deal-maker's art. (More to the point: the Greek population would be in a much happier condition.) Yet May and her team of civil servants are dismissed as a bunch of incompetents. Curiously enough, this almost universally derided backstop bears an uncanny resemblance to what the UK voters thought they were endorsing in the 1975 referendum (by a convincing majority, unlike last time). It could be called Common-Market-plus-plus. It would benefit the whole of the UK, and for Northern Ireland in particular it could usher in a period of unprecedented prosperity. We should admit that Northern Ireland is a special case and has been for at least a century. This half-in half-out position would suit most people there rather well, giving them some welcome economic advantages. But the DUP seems intent on exemplifying the phrase "lions led by donkeys".

In the unlikely event that the UK does enter the backstop, and is later obliged to leave it, will we look back regretfully at that phase as a lost golden age? If, by some miracle, the House of Commons regains its sanity, and the UK does indeed enter the backstop, please remember: you read it here first.