

## Jeremy Hunt damages the UK's negotiating position

I thought Jeremy Hunt was a good Health Secretary. He was very positive about the NHS, but insistent on improved transparency and higher standards. He did much to encourage good outcomes by his approach to reporting "never" events and revealing what had been going wrong in some hospitals in earlier years. He did not make mistakes with what he said.

It was therefore a double disappointment to hear some of Mr Hunt's recent comments as Foreign Secretary. They seemed designed to undermine the UK's negotiations, which require us to prepare thoroughly to leave without a deal if necessary and to show the UK will do just fine with No Deal. Instead Mr Hunt said that leaving without a Withdrawal Agreement and Future Partnership Agreement "would be a mistake.. and would inevitably change British attitudes towards Europe". Some of his language was open to interpretation that he thought there were worrying downsides to just leaving.

Let me have another go at explaining the background to Mr Hunt. The UK has had a very troubled relationship with the EU throughout its membership. Pro EU Prime Ministers have ended up in strong dispute with the body. Margaret Thatcher rightly thought we got a rotten deal on financial contributions, and successfully cut them after a bruising set of encounters. She subsequently realised our membership was a bad idea for the UK and came round the view we should leave. John Major had a particularly punishing exchange with them over the way they damaged our beef industry, which he lost. He also had a running argument with them over the Euro and possible UK membership and only made Maastricht possible by getting us an opt out from its main point, the single currency. Tony Blair sought to reform the Common Agricultural Policy. He made major concessions on our financial contributions, only to be double crossed by the EU who failed to deliver the promised agricultural reform. Gordon Brown reluctantly signed the Lisbon Treaty but denied the press access to the signing ceremony as we were told in Parliament nothing significant had happened! It is difficult from this history to share Mr Hunt's strange belief that we have great relations with the EU that will be irretrievably damaged by a no Deal Brexit.

The UK has a long history of refusing to join major parts of the EU scheme. Originally opted out of the social chapter by a Conservative government, Labour joined that but rightly kept us opted out of the Euro and Schengen, the common borders policy. This reluctant European approach has always caused friction with the EU and has led to policy and legal devices to drag us more under its control despite our refusal to join up to the more obviously centralising policies.

Mr Hunt also seems unaware of the large economic upside we will enjoy if we just leave in March 2019 without the impediment of a Withdrawal Agreement delaying us. The UK economy can receive a major boost from spending the £39bn we would otherwise send to the EU on our public spending priorities and tax

cuts here in the UK. We will also be able to draw up a tariff schedule more suited to UK needs and strengths, and sign trade agreements with many countries around the world. If we insist on just leaving, the EU is very likely to seek tariff free trade with us. It is only because they think the UK will give more ground in this negotiation that they are hanging tough on the trade issue.

Many pro Brexit MPs agree that leaving and trading under WTO arrangements is a good option with plenty of economic upside for the UK. The government still believes there is a better deal available than this. If they want to get such a deal they need to show the EU we are serious about leaving without one, and explain the many benefits of so doing in public. Pro Brexit MPs are not going to vote through the legislation necessary to slow down our exit and pay the EU more money for no good reason.

Future relations with the EU will not be mainly determined by how we leave. They will in the future, as in the past, be determined by the interests of the EU and whether they coincide with the interests of the UK. The interests of the two have rarely coincided all the time we have been in the EU, as the UK has persistently refused to accept the clear direction of travel towards full economic, monetary and political union. Removing this major cause of friction should improve relations once we are out. The longer we stay half in and negotiating, the worse relations will get.