

COMMENT

Free Movement is Not a Problem to be Solved

Anthony Salamone | 21 July 2017



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One of the more remarkable features of the post-referendum Brexit debate has been its punctuation by profound shifts in direction. The immediate aftermath of the vote was characterised by calls for dialogue on the way forward, promises of working to find consensus and indeed demands from some for a second referendum.

The UK government then summarily abandoned that philosophy when the prime minister announced unilaterally in her Lancaster House speech that the UK would leave the EU's single market and customs union. Following the indecisive general election last month, the variables governing the political calculus have been scrambled once again. People have resumed prefacing remarks with 'if Brexit happens'.

These shifts in circumstance illustrate two essential points about Brexit. First, it is not inevitable that the UK leaves the single market. Second, the relentless focus on the economics ignores the influence, connectivity and mutual understanding associated with EU membership which would also be lost. Indeed, the current discussion over the single market and the UK's future relationship with the EU demonstrates the folly of Brexit and its underlying rationale.

The great dilemma, as it has been presented, is the inescapability of the free movement of people as a core component of the single market versus the purported desire for free trade only. According to this logic, a preferred scenario would be for the UK to be part of the single market, but without the free movement of people (or, ideally, registrable budget contributions). The suggestion is that a majority of voters might even have opted to stay in the EU last year, were this on offer.

Various plans to contrive a means of replicating the free movement of goods, services and capital (and also the customs union), while leaving people behind, are being formulated in different

quarters. The implication is that what is required is a practical, functional fix to a vexing quandary. In fact, this myopic perspective misses the point entirely of why the EU exists at all.

Free movement of people is not a problem to be solved. It is the realisation of shared values of openness, opportunity and serendipity. It exemplifies the transformation of a continent over six decades through cooperation and partnership. Moreover, free movement is not ancillary to the single market – it is a constituent element which cannot be separated from its counterparts.

Attempting to bring a transactional approach to a question of values might epitomise how too many British political leaders seem to understand the EU so little. Should the UK genuinely want to exit the single market, that can of course be achieved. If it wishes instead to seek a normal free trade agreement, the EU will work to agree one – with normal levels of European market access.

The EU has stood firm on the indivisibility of the four freedoms, and so it should. Compromise on its core principles would be detrimental to the Union. Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of the referendum would be a conclusion that the UK no longer shares those values and principles. For the narrow Leave result and all the discussion since, it remains far from clear that is actually the case.

In the meantime, politicians and public figures should cease pretending that the UK can obtain a bespoke arrangement with the EU which circumvents the free movement of people and approximates the rest to an indiscernible degree. They must instead communicate the reality – that the best possible access to the single market comes from being part of it (indeed, as an EU member). All other options, of which there are only a small number, will be necessarily inferior.

For all the complexities of Brexit, that contrast is rather straightforward. If UK decision makers, on the basis of the facts, are content to break with those shared values, perhaps little will stop them. However, given the innumerable challenges that would result, they should first convince themselves that giving up on free movement, along with the multifaceted impoverishment such a decision would bring to current and future generations, is a price worth paying.