

FORUM

EDITED BY RACHEL CUNLIFFE



Invest in rail and road links before we jump the EU ship

BRITAIN is an island nation, and for centuries it has looked to the sea for prosperity and partnership. Today, the maritime sector contributes £40bn to the UK's GDP and supports one million jobs.

Some 95 per cent of all our imports and exports, totalling £500bn, move by sea.

But trade doesn't start and end at our ports. An efficient trade network requires a highly developed web of roads and railways that connect those ports to each other and to the main markets throughout the rest of the country.

An independent commission found in February 2017 that our road and rail links were "outdated" in many parts of the country, and that this had implications for growth, jobs, and travel. It noted that the north of England in particular was losing billions of pounds in potential income.

What was clear was that, if trade is to thrive in post-Brexit Britain, we need better domestic connectivity and infrastructure to make "Global Britain" a reality.

Amid a row in the cabinet over the approach to Brexit, David Davis said last month that the UK will be able to negotiate trade deals as soon as it leaves the EU.

All sides agree that, as we sever ties to the EU, we must establish new ones with our historic trading partners: the countries of the Commonwealth, for example, and the exciting, emerging markets of Asia and South America.

We all know that trade is pivotal to a successful British future, but

the maritime sector's uniquely crucial role in this vision is often overlooked.

To start with, Brexit brings uncertainty over our ports. Our biggest concerns are Dover and Holyhead. There will be new customs requirements that could cause particular challenges for roll-on roll-off ferry ports which handle tens of thousands of HGVs travelling between the UK and the EU each day.

So perhaps free ports – free trade zones around port areas – could be explored. Whether they are possible or not depends upon the final deal. But we should properly explore the proposal as part of prudent preparation for either scenario – if we have no deal, we'll be encouraged to think more innovatively, and free ports are one such innovative idea. But there is a wider problem, which stems from the lack of recognition of the importance of our ports and the areas around them in the planning system.

Ports are vital hubs of economic activity and major centres of employment. Many of them are in deprived, post-industrial areas. A wider understanding of their significance and a commitment to government protection would have far-reaching benefits, not least the wholesale transformation of entire regions.

You only need to look at the importance of the Humberside ports to the regeneration of Hull, Immingham, Goole, and Grimsby – all of which have historically been blighted by high unemployment and poverty – to see this in action.

Even if the economic benefits of ports themselves are recognised,

David Dingle



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once you leave the port gate, you find right away that connectivity to the main markets, and to the other ports, is poor: there is not enough capacity on our rail network, too few lanes, roads and bypasses on our motorway network, and difficult junctions in key bottleneck areas to allow for the smooth transfer of goods.

On major roads there are near-constant delays that choke the supply chain. This needs to improve everywhere, not least so that our hauliers can drop off cargo and immediately take on a second load for the return

stretch of their journey.

We need better domestic connectivity all around the country – for example, investing in strategic connectivity from the Midlands to the cities of the south so that we can increase our automotive exports.

At present, it takes an hour and a half to travel to Portsmouth from Southampton by rail, despite their relative proximity. In the north of the country, similar regional cities such as Manchester and Liverpool or Newcastle and Sunderland are far better connected.

Our existing road and rail connections to our ports are long overdue for improvement, and, with the export supply chain in mind, their development should be considered as important – if not more so – as the other major transport infrastructure operations underway in the UK at the moment, such as CrossRail and the expansion of London's airports.

We need to not only place our focus on new projects, such as the so-called four Hs (HS2, HS3, Hinckley Point, and Heathrow), but also on existing projects, and on how we might improve their efficiency.

Investment in infrastructure is an intelligent economic move and one that needs to be made to safeguard Britain's future as an outward-looking trading hub in the wake of Brexit. By facilitating trade, we will attract inward investment at our ports and breathe new life into our deprived coastal economies. In doing this, global Britain will be a success.

David Dingle is chairman of Maritime UK, the shipping industry coalition.

All fluff and no facts: The reticent cabinet risks losing control of the Brexit narrative

FOREIGN secretary Boris Johnson has a flair for performance and a passion for philosophy. This might explain why he took to the stage on Wednesday at an event hosted by Policy Exchange to paint the "big picture" for Brexit Britain – particularly to Remainers, at whom the speech was specifically aimed.

Johnson's remarks struck an optimistic cord, as he called on the nation to "unite about what we all believe in" – an "outward-looking, confident" Britain, implying strongly his support for a liberal Brexit.

While I myself am heartened by Johnson's vision for a more global Britain, it is not obvious at all that a liberal Brexit is something everyone believes in; nor did the speech live up to claims it would lay out parts of the map on the "road to Brexit".

Critics have lambasted Johnson's remarks as all fluff and no facts. They have a point.

Johnson provided little in the way of negotiation updates or the govern-

ment's official position on Brexit, and while perhaps that's not the foreign secretary's role, it is fair to ask why, in a time of such political uncertainty and instability, the government would put weight behind a Brexit speech that did not even include reference to critical pending issues, such as the Irish border.

It's no surprise, then, that the speech has seemingly failed to win over hearts and minds, despite Johnson's considerate effort to extend good will to Remain voters. Having a grand vision for a post-Brexit future is an asset leading up to a referendum, but 19 months post-result, it is the policies to achieve these aims that matter.

Of course, even if Johnson had such details at hand (given his history of avoiding specifics, it's hard to know), he would not be at liberty to discuss them in such an open forum. The UK and the EU are in the midst of a very intense negotiating process, and it would be poor form and bad sense to make such details

Kate Andrews



known before deals are made.

Under different circumstances, ministers could just keep quiet until there was confirmed news to share. But the precarious state of the government makes the vow of silence a luxury they can't currently afford.

The Brexit black hole that has consumed UK politics, thanks in part to Theresa May's lack of leadership, will continue to produce front-page headlines, with or without input from the government.

And while the negotiators play their cards close to their chest, backbenchers and pundits are writing the story of Brexit, skewing the news agenda towards their desired

outcome – ranging from an ultra-hard Brexit, to thwarting the mandate to leave altogether.

Yes, there are many in public life who are productively contributing to the Brexit debate, but for every briefing paper released to lay out an Efta arrangement or to highlight the benefits of unilateral free trade, there are countless more headlines dedicated to far uglier and unhelpful topics, such as the petty squabbles within the Tory party and personal attacks on ministers – like Johnson.

If the cabinet is going to continue on with its series of Brexit vision speeches, ministers will need to produce more thought-provoking content than questions about personal red lines and resignations.

If they don't, they will find the story of Brexit written subjectively and divisively by the pundits and hecklers, until they have lost control of the narrative completely.

Kate Andrews is news editor at the Institute of Economic Affairs.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

Year of the Dog

The City of London Corporation I represent has long recognised the importance of building relations with China. After all, the "Middle Kingdom" is poised to become the largest economy in the world in 2032 by some estimates, and is committed to developing its international business and further opening up its domestic financial markets to support long-term economic growth. Last November saw a crucial step in this process, when the Chinese Finance Ministry announced that it will be relaxing rules in the country's financial sector, allowing foreign firms to own a controlling stake in ventures for the first time. There's also the much talked about Belt and Road Initiative – a development strategy initiated by the Chinese government to build new links between east and west. Though still in its early stages, this mammoth project could be worth billions of pounds to the UK economy, in terms of infrastructure financing, consulting, and legal services, to name but a few sectors that stand to benefit. There's also the long-anticipated London-Shanghai Bond Connect to look forward to, which is reportedly in its final stage of preparations. As we celebrate Chinese New Year today and enter the Year of the Dog, I look forward to another golden year of relations between our two countries, particularly in terms of financial services. Xin nian kuai le!

Catherine McGuinness, policy chairman, City of London Corporation



BEST OF TWITTER

Don't know why anyone is surprised by @TheSun headline. In his foreword to "Imperialism" (2011), @jeremycorbyn praises the Soviet Union's "huge influence" in countering American capitalism/imperialism. The only problem, he writes, is that this influence was "tempered by an inadequate industrial base in comparison to the US and the ruinously expensive arms race that hastened its decline". Yes. That was the issue with Soviet Communism. Its inadequate industrial base. @rcolvile

More Tory MPs now support votes for 16yr olds. By my count, Govn now doesn't have a majority to stop it. Choice: lose in Commons, 16yr olds get vote & Tories lose even more support of young people; or back votes at 16 & get some credit for major social reform. Hmmm. Tough one. @George_Osborne

The Party should introduce a bill which extends the suffrage, BUT also includes lowering the age for smoking and removing all of the other nannying the opposition is in favour of. Then let it fail. @Mr_John_Oxley

Are we really at the stage where we're condemning politicians for a Facebook group they joined? I'm sure I'm still a member of all kinds of things I joined in 2007 for a laugh – and seem to get added to a fair few against my will. @KateMaltby

The #EU's own auditors again call for greater transparency in EU finances @DianeJamesMEP