

How to read the Brexit White Paper

Today's White Paper on "The United Kingdom's exit from and new partnership with the European Union" fulfils a government commitment to provide Parliament with its considered opinion about how to manage the process of Brexit.

Quite aside from the timing issue – coming as it does a day after the second reading of the EU(NOW) Bill – the White Paper is important as it lays down something of a benchmark for the government that it cannot move away from too easily.

However, unlike the vast majority of such documents, this relates to a negotiation, with the EU, its 27 other member states and its own parliament.

Thus matters, because it means that the government is not in a position to deliver whatever it feels like saying, but instead can only offer its hope for that negotiation.

The upshot of this is that the White Paper makes minimal advances on Theresa May's speech two weeks ago: it's structured on the same 12 principles, it uses much of the same wording and – most importantly – it offers as few concrete positions as it is possible to imagine.

Beyond reaffirming the desire to stop free movement of people, and accepting that this means the other freedoms must also be halted, there is still no established plan or approach. Indeed, the majority of the White Paper should be read as a list of the points that the UK government believes need to be covered in Article 50 negotiations, rather than as what particular outcome on each individual point should be.

In short, the White Paper is a roadmap, rather than a set of directions. With the latter, you are heading somewhere in particular; while with the former, you're just aware of what might be here and hereabouts.

Actually, the White Paper doesn't even really do this. The most glaring omissions relate to the financial aspects: there is passing reference to the budget and liabilities, but nothing at all on how big these might be or how the government wishes to tackle them.

On the generous interpretation, Theresa May is trying to keep her options open as much as possible, rather than making promises she can't keep in a negotiation in which the UK has only limited power to secure its aims.

However, even in this view one has to wonder whether 'keeping options open' is just cover for 'we still don't know what we want to achieve'. For the sake of all sides in the coming negotiations, we should hope that this isn't the case, because there is nothing more difficult than trying to reach an agreement with someone who doesn't know what they're aiming for. The clock continues to countdown to March.

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