



Judge, A. and Connolly, J. (2018) 'No Deal' Brexit: the need for effective public leadership. *Public Sector Focus* (18), pp. 26-27.

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Deposited on: 4 December 2018

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# **‘No Deal’ Brexit: The Need for Effective Public Leadership**

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For publication in Public Sector Focus. 871 words.

Planning across government for a ‘no deal’ Brexit is not just prudent, but has become a necessity. The negotiations for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU have reached a critical stage, and it is increasingly likely that we are heading for a ‘no deal scenario’. In such a situation, EU law would no longer apply to the UK and there will be no alternative regulatory arrangements in place to manage UK-EU relations across any area of policy as of 2300 GMT on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2019. The good news is that if this is the outcome it should be known by the end of this calendar year, giving the Government some time to take any measures necessary to prevent some of the negative consequences that have been well rehearsed in the media in the last few months. The bad news is that it isn’t clear that the Government has done the necessary groundwork to allow for a coordinated and effective response, and without this a ‘no deal scenario’ could develop into a political and economic crisis beyond that seen during the financial crisis and, arguably, at any point since World War II. In reality, it is those at the sharp end in public sector bodies, and beyond, that will need to manage the outcomes of Brexit, ranging from re-allocating (often scarce) resources, re-framing organisational priorities, including de-prioritising undertaking activities that were previously undertaken pre-Brexit.

While the Government has allocated £3 billion to ‘no deal’ preparations and attempted to reassure the public that contingency plans are in place, it is far from clear as to whether these preparations are sufficient for managing such a crisis situation and the multiple uncertainties facing policy sectors (such as health, security, trade, fisheries and agriculture, to name but a few). The only publicly available documentation on Brexit preparations that the Government is a series of ‘technical reports’ covering different policy sectors. What is remarkable about these documents is how little useful information they contain about how the Government would manage the consequences of a no deal scenario. Moreover, there is scarce (if any) evidence to suggest that such planning documents have been co-produced with all of the relevant public sector managers and leaders who are, in academic terms, important ‘agents of organisational learning’ i.e. they know, from experience, the extent to which different Brexit scenarios are *likely*, if not definitively, to impact on their core business and on their stakeholders (certainly more so than politicians). The problem, for the public sector, is that the technical papers provide no guidance on the actions that might be taken if the negotiations fail and the implications for individual policy sectors and, ultimately, service users. This cannot in any way be described as a sensible approach to contingency planning and is, strangely, rather contrary to the UK Government’s general narrative about resilience cultures based on ‘bottom-up’ inputs to crisis preparedness and management. These documents are therefore of little help for understanding how the public sector can navigate and manage such uncertain times.

Studies of risk and crisis management in the UK context have, for the most part, tended to show that much has been learned in government since the turn of the millennium when it comes to crisis preparedness due to learning lessons from crises such as disease outbreaks, flooding and terrorist incidents. These typically involve establishing systems for evaluating risks, collaborative contingency planning (as well as having scenario and simulation exercises), coordinating the actions of public and private sector bodies, and escalating crisis responses to the Cabinet Office if an inter-departmental response is necessary. What seems to have happened is that despite Government ministers and Brexit supporters repeating the assertion that “no deal would be better than a bad deal” since as far back as a

few weeks following the Brexit referendum, it is only in the latter part of 2018 that the government has openly communicated the idea of planning for a 'no deal'. This indicates poor crisis leadership when it comes to the timeliness of preparing for the eventualities of Brexit and in terms of effectively communicating risks to the public sector.

There are also wider consequences of Brexit for the public sector across the UK, which is not being discussed in media coverage. Planning for the uncertainties of Brexit has taken up considerable amount of time and resources, which raises questions about opportunity costs in terms of 'what's not being done' in the public sector. Distracted by Brexit uncertainty, the energy and attention given to developing strategic organisational cultures in the public sector, especially in regulators and national agencies, appears to have waned. The public sector in Britain has, to varying degrees, moved into a post-new public management environment when the focus on management in the public sector is about delivering 'public value' and demonstrating the outcomes of programmes and services (therefore moving away from an 'output' mentality to service provision). Will these institutional memories be lost in light of the likely changes to the public sector as a result of Brexit i.e. in a similar way to the lessons of crisis preparedness?

These are significant risks that requires resilient and effective public sector leadership at multiple levels for the uncertainties of Brexit to be navigated.

## **Bibliographic Information**

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