

Brexit is a Crisis of Leadership, not Democracy

In June 2016, the United Kingdom saw a surprise result with 52% of voters supporting the country's leaving the European Union. This was a surprise on many levels not least that 'Remain' was the dominant campaign and ahead in virtually every poll throughout the contest. While this result is sometimes discussed as a rise in popular nationalism, it is best viewed as a crisis of political leadership – where Brexit is a means, not an end, to a Conservative partisan project which also explains the failure of two Prime Ministers to enact it and a third to 'get Brexit done' as promised.

The first point is that Brexit didn't originally mean Brexit. At the beginning, the purpose of Brexit was to stop UKIP from draining support from the Conservatives. Then Prime Minister David Cameron entered office in an unwanted coalition government in 2010. A large part of the reason was that many Tory votes had gone instead to UKIP and its vote share was growing each election. So to stop it, Cameron offered a referendum on the UK's membership in EU. His plan was never for Britain to leave, but to get voters to leave UKIP.

The plan was remarkably successful. At the 2015 general election, Cameron managed what few Prime Ministers achieve: an increased number of MPs and overall majority. UKIP's votes had collapsed and his trick had worked ensuring his Conservative government would continue. On the heels of his surprise national victory, Cameron raced to conclude the referendum campaigning against Brexit – to get it over with and then get onto his domestic legislative agenda. Obviously, things did not go as he planned.

The second point is that Brexit then came to mean not Brexit, but becoming the next Tory Prime Minister. Leadership rivals all claimed they could bring the country together but the real issue was unifying the Tories. When Cameron resigned, it was only Tory members of Parliament who were

choosing the next leader after all – and most had backed Leave. Theresa May emerged victorious by promising her support for Brexit and winning over just enough initial credibility for not having much campaigned for the other side, but she had backed Remain and was able to win over anti-Brexit voices too.

The third point is Brexit was not going to happen, or at least not in the timescale of two years. While I was heavily criticised at the time for saying in August 2016 that May would not deliver Brexit, I turned out to be the only one right about that. Brexit of any variety will damage Britain's economy and global standing. When people are worse off, it will be no consolation for them to be told that they should be happy with their declining fortunes because they had been convinced they should vote for it. Instead, the governing party will get blamed not least because Brexit was promised to increase prosperity. This is a heavy incentive not to deliver a Brexit beyond name only.

And then there is Brexit's complexity. No one seems certain about how many EU laws the UK would need to divide into what they want to keep, what they want to change (and if so, how so) and what they want to scrap. One conservative estimate is there are 18,000 laws to deal with. Without any vision for what Brexit should look like and after a campaign that lacked a manifesto, the UK government was never in a position to get to the detail of sorting out what to do with these 18,000 laws other than keep as is and make everyone wonder what the point of Brexit really is if it doesn't lead to any changes.

It was unsurprising therefore to see May take the first six months fighting an impossible court battle over whether she needed Parliament's approval to start Brexit. She knew such support would come in a stonking majority – and ultimately did. But the seemingly vexatious litigation which she lost had all the appearances of someone trying to get the courts from stopping Brexit and being a useful scape goat to avoid an outcome the government didn't truly want.

May was then soon replaced by Boris Johnson, who colourfully promised Brexit 'do or die' and that he'd rather be 'dead in a ditch' than see Brexit fail by 31 October. Yet curiously for someone making such strong statements, he actually pulled votes on getting Brexit done a week before the deadline not even bothering to make any serious attempt. More the actions of

someone using Brexit to rally supporters to keep power than to ensure Brexit happens come what may in fact.

At the time of writing, Johnson's pledge to 'get Brexit done' appears to have helped him win a large majority coupled with a poorly campaign by the opposition Labour Party. But there are three takeaway points. First, the success of 'get Brexit done' is not down to support for Brexit, but for bringing to an end the thus far abstract, endless chatter about Brexit. Voters want to move on and talk about something else after three years of political paralysis. Secondly, Johnson has seen the UK technically withdraw from the EU, but otherwise remain a member in all but name. Freedom of movement continues, the ECJ remains top and much else.

And finally, Brexit beyond name only break seems further away than ever. This is mostly because of the complexity of delivering it and partly a failure of leadership to come clean on its costs. But it is also a political failure in a wider sense of being a electioneering football used as a means to secure power, not an end to be delivered. Without any change in leadership or context, Britain's paralysis over Brexit may well continue even with a Tory victory.

Some might say democracy has been betrayed by a failure to deliver Brexit, but this overlooks the damage to democracy goes much further and deeper than that. All the while the Prime Minister refuses to publish a report signed off by the security services for release to public that confirms what, if any, alleged foreign interference took place in the EU referendum and what impact this had. One can only speculate why - and therein in secret lies the greater threat.

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