

Brexit election for the fate of the free world

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With the election campaign by now well on the way, it's safe to say that 12 December 2019 will be the first time that British citizens go to the polls to vote on whether to leave the EU.

The 2017 election was not about Brexit because both the main parties had pledged to deliver it. And the 2016 referendum was about many things, a reckoning with the financial crisis, anger at austerity and growing inequality, the chance to give the establishment a bloody nose, besides the issue of leaving the EU.

While many try to argue that elections are about a whole range of issues, not just Brexit, that's blatantly false: All the other issues can be addressed again at some other point; leaving the EU will be final for at least a generation.

It would be tempting to say that this is also the first election in which there is more clarity about what Brexit would actually mean. But, alas, a thick fog of obfuscation still obstructs both the Tories' and Labour's vision for a post-EU future. Most likely, because no realistic vision exists, or is even possible.

The policy trajectories followed by both main parties on Brexit are an object lesson in centrist political opportunism and cowardice. Both ostensibly campaigned to remain in 2016, albeit half-heartedly, certainly on the part of Jeremy Corbyn. And in 2017 both more or less said they wanted to make Brexit work.

This time around, both are equivocating (a more political word for lying in this instance). The Tories have shelved their own deal and are flirting with the no-deal cliff-edge while Labour pursues Schrödinger's

Brexit, both in and out, for and against, at the same time. Poor British voters. Poor befuddled European observers.

Still, the British political situation is not that unfamiliar to Europeans. On the continent there is no shortage of centre-right parties captured by their more extreme-right wing. Nor is there a dearth of ineffective and confused centrist and progressive responses. Across the Atlantic it's much the same.

These constellations have in common their version of a populist movement such as UKIP/Brexit Party, Tea Party, Northern League, Front National, AfD etc. that pushes the centre parties to the right and plays havoc with the loyalties of the traditional left.

It's a by now well-known litany of Western Liberalism in crisis. But what remains surprising is that it's the two countries that were previously seen as the bulwark of this system, the UK and the US, that have succumbed. Many other Western countries now feel orphaned.

Yet, it can hardly be said that Europe is awaiting the UK election result with baited breath – expectations of a Conservative landslide might have something to do with that. But maybe it should. Populism is rampant on the continent and feeds off the same resentments as in the UK and US.

While not exactly complacent, Europe's political elites feel they have it now under control, at least as far as anti-EU sentiment is concerned. This is partly due to the bad example the UK's Brexit mess has set for anti-European parties since 2016 and partly thanks to the result of this year's elections to the European parliament that supposedly saw off a populist take-over.

But such complacency is on very shaky ground: For the first time, neither of the main centrist blocs emerged with a majority in the European parliament. And internal challenges to the EU, for example from Hungary and Poland, mean that while Brexit-type defections may for now be on hold, the new populist course is to hollow out the Union from within by chipping away at common policies such as migration, human rights and social components, a tactic not dissimilar from the one followed by many a British Prime Minister in the past.

The mechanism responsible for this state of affairs goes back to before Brexit, before the financial crisis and before the Lisbon and Maastricht treaties. It's tempting to keep looking for where things went wrong and then try to fix them. But analysis of the causes of the current right-wing nationalist, populist moment has been part of the centrist and progressive paralysis.

One common thread does emerge, however: Centrists and to a degree progressives have become so convinced of the logic of their own arguments that they've assumed automatic backing for them – while the right has taken ownership of the anger and resentment that has been stored up in society and is campaigning hard, and dirty.

The biggest mistake that moderates and progressives can make is to take the high road and cave for the sake of national unity or decency.

Another mistake is to think that Brexit is the endgame, there is much more at stake. Last time the UK voted for Brexit, it came as part of an angry populist cascade that included the election, shortly after, of the unmentionable 45th president of the United States.

Now, once more, the world is in an extraordinary moment of flux. With protests wracking countries from Spain and Lebanon to Hong Kong and Chile, both the forces of reaction and progress have mobilized. The main prize, as last time, is the presidency of the US, let's say the leader of the free world.

A December surprise in the UK would send a signal that the arguments of selfish nihilism are on the retreat. So, no pressure, moderate, remain-inclined British voter, the fate of the free world depends on you.

But you'll have to get angry and fight, hard and dirty, and not accept defeat just because it would be the decent thing to do, and, oh, because we should just 'get on with it'. The other side wouldn't, and didn't.

****This blog is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of Centre for Brexit Studies or Birmingham City University.***

