

**Watch their lips.....!**

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Yesterday was November 5<sup>th</sup>. This date is notable because, in 1605 'trigger man' Guy, also known as Guido, Fawkes was discovered in the cellars of Parliament about to light the fuse on barrels of gunpowder was to be detonated to explode at the opening of Parliament. Fawkes was part of a wider Catholic conspiracy to assassinate King James I and restore a Catholic monarch to the throne.

'Guy Fawkes night' has less significance than it used to due to restrictions on the sale of fireworks that has massively reduced the number of horrific burn injuries. Nonetheless November 5<sup>th</sup> is still a night when you see some spectacular fireworks going off. Amusingly, one commentator being interviewed remarked that compared to contemporary politicians, Guy Fawkes was a paragon of terms of the honesty of his intent.

The election that is going to take place over the next five weeks is one in which honesty, integrity and, above all else, willingness to 'do the will of the people' will be sorely tested. If the last year or so is anything to go by, we can expect there to be many metaphorical 'fireworks' between yesterday (Tuesday), when Parliament was dissolved, and the General Election that will take place on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> December.

Since the last General Election on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017, Parliament has been characterised by tumultuous events that have been as breath-taking as they were unprecedented. At times the effective rulebook for Parliament, Erskine May, has been severely tested. That viewing figures for live television coverage of Parliament has vastly increased and former 'Speaker' John Bercow is a household name is testament to the importance attached to Brexit.

Brexit has utterly dominated politics for the last two years. Indeed, it's the reason that when Parliament was ended on 8<sup>th</sup> October, history was created by it being the longest session ever at 839 calendar days since June 21<sup>st</sup> 2017. However, as MPs will acknowledge, the last

couple of years will be remembered as one when very little of substance was achieved.

Just over twelve months ago Theresa May achieved a withdrawal deal that included the infamous 'Backstop'. Brexit undermined May's period as Prime Minister and she found that she was completely stymied. Her resignation earlier this summer was no surprise and led to Boris Johnson replacing her. Having renegotiated a withdrawal deal that would mean Northern Ireland *de facto* remains part of the EU customs union, Johnson presented a way to depart the EU to Parliament.

However, rather than allow MPs the additional time they believe was needed to sufficiently scrutinise his WAB (withdrawal agreement bill), he pulled it and instead created the circumstances that have led to the third election in four years. And with resonance to 2017, this election will be one that is fought by all of the political parties with emphasis on the still unresolved issue of the manner of the UK's departure from the EU.

The Tories promise to get 'Brexit done' By this, they will (should they achieve a majority) implement the WAB pulled a couple of weeks ago. However, many suggest what this deal will result in is a 'hard' Brexit. Moreover, there is a danger that should there be no agreement on a free trade deal by the end of the transition period, departure with no-deal (in effect) by 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

The announcement that No 10 Downing Street has indicated that it does not intend to make good its promise to allow MPs to vote on extending Brexit transition has led many to assert that the reason Johnson has been able to procure the support of the ERG his predecessor could not is that this deal is simply no-deal delayed.

Cynics contend that Johnson is working on the assumption that most people are so utterly disillusioned by Brexit that they will buy the line that support for his party will indeed get it done through his deal. Given the economic consequences of allowing the UK to depart with no-deal, there are many others who believe that any promises that Johnson gives during this campaign will have as much worth as those he gave to the DUP not to put a customs border down the Irish Sea.

Besides, as widely acknowledged, apart from fighting the election against the Labour Party, Johnson is only too aware of the threat from Nigel Farage, who will argue that Johnson's WAB is not a pure Brexit that can only be achieved by the UK walking away from the EU with no-deal.

The potential for 'fireworks' being fired between Johnson's and Farage's parties will certainly create an interesting spectacle. Should the former not achieve a majority and the latter has sufficient seats to allow this to happen a big question is whether the two leaders come to some sort of 'partnership'. Johnson has stated that this could never happen.

Apart from Labour, the position on Brexit of all other political parties is pretty unambiguous though the Lib Dems' promise to revoke Article 50 would be a shock of epic proportions that would be too bitter a pill for the Tories to swallow to enter into another coalition. There is an outside possibility of an arrangement with Labour. However, it's difficult to see how Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson, who has made her position about Corbyn abundantly clear, could work with him.

Should Labour be looking for coalition partners the Scottish National Party might prove a better bet, though their stated position is explicitly based on remaining in the EU. The SNP's ideological stance that Scotland should achieve independence through another referendum that would allow it become an EU member in its own right would undoubtedly a basis for animated discussion.

Labour enter the December election as a party with a message on Brexit that some believe is too nuanced for many voters who are believed to be frustrated by the delay in leaving the EU. Corbyn's 'Get Brexit Sorted' is based on the belief that it will be able to renegotiate a better deal than Johnson, the 'softest' one of all, then putting it back to the people in another referendum.

Corbyn's acknowledgement at Tuesday's manifesto launch that he is indeed trying to talk to both leavers and remainers at the same time would suggest that Labour's stance will be to continue with constructive ambiguity. Whether this is enough to win a majority and, as Corbyn claimed, "bring a divided country together", will be seen once the results are known after polls close on 12<sup>th</sup> December.

Labour's manifesto appears firmly about what this country looks like beyond Brexit. Given Corbyn's roots this it is not surprising that he wishes to achieve a bigger state. The big question will be in how this could be afforded in the event of any Brexit occurring that would be likely to reduce business activity.

However, what is more surprising is that the spending commitments being made by the Conservatives, normally seen as a party that wishes the state to be smaller, will achieve the contrary. As The Resolution Foundation reported on Monday, regardless of whichever of the two main parties win, spending as a share of GDP would be likely increase to levels not seen since 1970s levels over the next parliament.

In January there is still the question of what will happen as far as Brexit is concerned. The possibility of continued uncertainty that would result from a 'hung' Parliament cannot be ruled out. However, compared to the economic catastrophe of the UK crashing out of the EU either at the end of either January or December next year, this would be preferable.

As the old joke goes, you can tell when a politician is lying when her/his lips move. A lot of lips are going to be moving during the next five weeks and time will tell how many false promises have been made. Whoever becomes PM after the election on 12<sup>th</sup> December will be faced with some tough decisions that are going to dictate the UK's economy for the next generation and beyond.

The end of the current Parliament will see the departure of far too many decent and thoroughly honourable MPs whose sole objective has been in attempting to achieve a Brexit that serves the UK's best interests or, at least, avoided a cataclysmic no-deal departure.

It is to be sincerely hoped that every MP who enters Parliament recognises what's at stake for every citizen and seek to emulate the example of those who have gone before them. We can only hope that they do not allow petty nationalistic ideology and isolationism to blind them to the economic and social justifications of maintaining close ties to our closest neighbours and trading partners.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of [\*Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion\*](#) (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 978-1694447807)