

Little Britaly

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Once upon a time, many years ago (before 2015), Britons used to mock Italy's political system. After all, Italy was famed for its unstable governments, with regular changing of the political guard (Italy was widely famed for having over 50 governments in 50 years after World War 2). Of course, in reality the problems this created were more complex – the 50 governments were shifting kaleidoscopes of coalitions, with power largely in the hands of the Christian Democrats.

After 1994 (following an earlier referendum), with the rise of *Forza Italia*, the mockery changed. Here was a country whose leader was gaffe-prone, facing allegations of corruption and ultimately became widely associated with the term “*bunga bunga*” amid suggestions of sexual impropriety. Some would suggest certain parallels with the UK's present situation.

Suffice it to say that whatever your political views, the boot (if you'll pardon the pun) is now very squarely on the other foot. It is the UK that is facing its 3rd General Election in 4 years, in addition to 3 referenda over the past decade (with, quite possibly, more to come).

It is the UK that appears to face imminent break-up, with Scotland looking increasingly likely to secede from the Union and questions over Northern Ireland's future. It is the UK that is about to willingly forego its seat on one of the most powerful decision-making bodies in the world (the EU Council). Of course, any British rump would probably come under pressure with regards to its permanent seat on the UN Security Council as well.

The upshot of all of this is that British politics [\[1\]](#) is presently unstable. The election of 2017 saw the two major parties enjoying their highest combined vote share since 1970, almost 50 years ago. In contrast, if present opinion polls are to be believed, 2019 appears to herald a sharp reversal of this (ironically in line with European trends whereby many “traditional” major parties have seen their vote-shares eroded in recent years).

Some of this reflects the peculiarities of the rather anachronistic “first-past-the-post” voting system used in the UK. However, a great deal is due to the vagaries of the electorate who remain polarised over Brexit and unhappy about a great many other issues. Of course, the irony of Britain’s once-stable polity being engaged in such contortions has not been lost on many observers in the rest of the EU, as Bonetti^[1] points out. {Bonetti, 2019 #937}

Ultimately, therefore, there is considerable uncertainty *a priori* about how the coming election will pan out. The consequences for the UK will be profound and reverberate for many years, not merely because of the bearing on Brexit, but perhaps even more importantly because of the bearing this will have on the *type* of Brexit pursued.

So, whilst we might not know who will win the upcoming election (although the Conservatives enter it with a substantial lead in national opinion polls) we do have a reasonable idea of what menu of choices will be available. It is clear that the Conservative Party will run on a platform of passing the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated between Boris Johnson’s government and the EU.

This would give the UK 6 months with which to begin negotiations on the “future relationship” with the EU. At that point, Great Britain (but not Northern Ireland) would then effectively be faced with the choice of a *de facto* no-deal exit in 31st December 2020 or making sufficient concessions to convince the EU to extend negotiations. We can clearly envisage what some of the EU’s red lines are likely to be.

Firstly, they will want to ensure that in exchange for tariff-free access, Great Britain largely adheres to EU environmental and labour standards. To do otherwise would be seen as allowing the UK to “undercut” the rest of the EU. Such plans are likely to be anathema to many on the pro-Brexit right wing of the Conservative Party who view regulatory divergence as the major benefit of Brexit. Many of the benefits of low-friction goods trade will not be apparent unless the UK also agrees to adhere to EU agri-food and safety standards. Similarly, compliance in chemicals will be important. In every case, the UK will be expected to become a rule-taker.

Since any deep FTA of the form envisaged would involve so-called “mixed competencies”, it would also need to be agreed and ratified by

every EU member state and some regional parliaments. Each will have important interests of their own – several EU states will be keen to ensure access to UK waters and Spain might want a greater say in the future status of Gibraltar. France and others will be keen that the UK maintains ‘protected designation of origin’ status for many agricultural goods. Once again, the EU will expect the UK to be a rule-taker and its interests will not be represented when such decisions are made. Many will also have a keen eye on potential Scottish secession as well.

The alternative is a ‘hard Brexit’, similar to a “no deal” scenario that unfolds in January 2021. This would enable the UK to sign a free-trade agreement with the USA, aligning the UK much more closely with US regulatory standards, particularly in agriculture. It is likely that such an agreement would herald a turn towards the US in areas including pharmaceuticals (potentially also including regulation that would affect NHS drug purchasing strategies) and rights for US investors “consistent with U.S. legal principles”^[2]. The upshot would be a country largely outside of the EU regulatory sphere that was much more closely aligned with the US in a number of critical areas.

Suffice it to say that the future envisaged by the Labour Party could not be more different. Their longstanding policy is to negotiate a customs union with the EU, which would lock the UK upholding minimum standards in several areas (including labour rights and environmental standards). They would also seek to go well-beyond these, forging an agenda predicated on greater redistribution.

It is also likely that such an agreement would entail something largely akin to Single Market membership, although the UK’s voice in setting regulation would be substantially reduced. Current Labour Party policy is that any agreement would need to be ratified by referendum, in which the *status quo ante* (at least in terms of EU membership) would be an alternative. The wider stated ambition of the Labour Party is to pursue a radical socio-economic agenda and in many ways, the entire debate over Brexit appears to be a distraction from this.

In terms of other major parties, the SNP’s platform is reasonably clear, seeking Scottish independence. Whilst the SNP’s official opposition to Brexit has been implacable and unequivocal, they are no doubt aware that their core agenda would be greatly boosted by a hard Brexit. The

Liberal Democrats seek a continuation of the *status quo ante*, and would pursue this in a much broader fashion than Labour, maintaining much of the present post-Thatcherite consensus.

The one outlier, and potential game-changer, is the Brexit Party. Ironically, their platform on Brexit is somewhat unclear. They seek a limited free-trade agreement with the EU, but are surely aware that the EU will not agree to this until the trio of issues (rights of EU nationals, monies owed by the UK and the border on the island of Ireland) are dealt with. They thus *de facto* wish to leave the EU without any agreement whatsoever.

This will also probably preclude a free-trade agreement with the US (since such is dependent upon the goodwill of legislators who will be heavily influenced by whether the question of Northern Ireland has been adequately settled). In essence, the party clearly stands for moving as far as possible as quickly as possible from the aegis of the EU. However, there is no clear stated aim in terms of what this would be *for*.

In other words, whatever happens the UK – or “Little Britaly” – will be utterly changed for many years to come.

1. Bonetti, D., *It isn't personal, it's politics*, in *Do They Mean Us? The Foreign Correspondents' View of Brexit*, J. Mair and N. Fowler, Editors. 2019, Bite-Sized Books: Goring.
2. United States Trade Representative, *United States-United Kingdom Negotiations: Summary of Specific Negotiating Objectives*, Office of the United States Trade Representative, Editor. 2019, Executive Office of the President of the United States: Washington D.C.

[\[1\]](#) I use the term British advisedly here, since the political situation in Northern Ireland has long been distinct from that of Great Britain and, of course, has well-known issues of its own.