

The Most Important GE Ever?

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It seems that there will be a general election before Christmas. This, it is believed, could break the impasse that has been created in Parliament by Brexit. However, as in all things associated with the 'B' word, it's likely that the outcome might result in unintended consequences.

Psychologists looking for historical precedent, always a dangerous pursuit, might look to 1974 for indicators of how things may turn out. In 1974 there were two elections, in February and October, neither of which resulted in majorities. The first election, on 28th February, had been called by incumbent Prime Minister Conservative Edward Heath who was beset by economic of inflation running at 20%, a trade (current account) deficit for the previous month of £383 million, the largest in history to that point and ongoing industrial relations problems including another miners' strike.

Heath has called this election on the basis that he needed to a strong mandate to deal with the problems and take what he regarded as difficult decision, particularly in the face of trade unions who felt that rampant inflation was eroding their living standards and were increasingly willing to take industrial action to secure pay rises; a situation many saw as a vicious cycle that was undermining business confidence and international competitiveness.

Though the circumstances are different, the motivation for the February 1974 election are resonant with the justification for the election that Boris Johnson wishes to hold in December to "get Brexit done" (this is an excerpt from a television speech Heath made on 7th February):

"Do you want a strong Government which has clear authority for the future to take decisions which will be needed? Do you want Parliament and the elected Government to continue to fight strenuously against inflation? Or do you want them to abandon the

struggle against rising prices under pressure from one particularly powerful group of workers ... For heaven's sake, let's get on with it."

Accordingly, the February 1974 Conservative campaign was summarised by the phrase "Who governs Britain?" As the outcome of the election demonstrated, not the Conservatives who did not secure the support of a sufficient number of "moderate and reasonable people...the voice of the majority", Heath had cited in his speech. A hung Parliament resulted and Labour's Wilson became Prime Minister of a minority government, his party having won 301 seats 17 fewer than the 318 needed for a majority.

Europe featured in the February election. It had been just over two years since the UK had, under Heath's government, following a vote in Parliament, become a member of the European Economic Community (EEC) on 1 January 1973. Opposition to such membership was rife from both the left of Labour and the right of the Conservatives.

One Tory MP, the infamous Enoch Powell, announced because of its policy on Europe that he was unwilling to support his own party and would not stand again as a Conservative. To add to Heath's woes, he recommended that voters should not give their support to the Conservatives and that that it was their "national duty" to oppose those he accused of being complicit in creating conditions whereby Parliament would be unable to make its own laws or impose its own taxes.

Labour, having been in government since 1974 as a minority party limped through the year until Wilson decided that on 10th there should be another election. Wilson had been able to bring stability and create a solution to the miners' strike which played well with an electorate that had suffered regular blackouts in the 1972 strike as generation of electricity was reliant on coal. Heath however, had suffered because of the fact that Ulster Unionist Party MPs refused to take the Conservative whip because of their detestation of the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973. In the election resulted the Labour Party won by a narrow majority of 3 seats.

Wilson remained as PM until 6 March 1976, Wilson suddenly and very dramatically announced his resignation to be replaced by James

Callaghan. Following losses at by-elections, Labour survived in government until the election of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher in 1979 by making deals in return support from the Liberals, the Ulster Unionists, the Scottish Nationalists and the Welsh Nationalists.

The two elections of 1974 had two very notable consequences.

In the February election Labour had promised that it would engage in renegotiation of the UK's terms of membership of the EEC and that would be a 'consultative referendum' on whether voters wanted to remain a member. The 1975 referendum that was held on 5th May on a turnout of 64.62% was won by a comfortable majority of 67.23% to 32.77%. Membership of Europe was settled for, as we now know, a generation.

The second more direct consequence was of Heath losing power in February 1974 and the Ulster Workers' Strike to bring an end to the attempt to create power-sharing under the terms of the Sunningdale Agreement, was that further political development as far as Northern Ireland were effectively parked. Instead, and against a worsening situation and atrocities in all parts of Ireland and England (including the car bombs in Dublin and Monaghan in May 74 and Birmingham pub bombings in November of the same year in which 34 and 21, respectively, were murdered by the UVF and IRA), increased 'securitisation' was utilised.

In the case of the latter, there are many who point out that the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 which came about under Labour PM Tony Blair, is striking similar to what was contained in the Sunningdale Agreement that was attempted a quarter of a century previously. As the late Northern Ireland MP for the SDLP famously quipped, "[the GFA] is Sunningdale for the slow learners" The fact that many thousands more were murdered and maimed physically and psychologically in those 25 years should make us all ashamed that there was not a greater willingness to face down the men of violence in 1974.

So, we face the prospect of an election in December – the first in this month since 1923 – in which, effectively, the main question is which party is most trusted to achieve a resolution to the political crisis that

Brexit has become. This general election will be dominated by a single issue that will mean that the usual 'bread and butter' matters such as health, crime, housing, transport are drowned out.

Many have argued that a far better way of solving the Brexit impasse would have been another referendum though this seemed all but impossible. On the basis of Heath's experience in February 1974 current PM Johnson will undoubtedly be aware of the danger of calling an election regardless of the fact that he is leading a minority government and his party is well ahead in the opinion polls. As his immediate predecessor, Theresa May found to her cost in in 2017, the only opinion poll that really counts is the one in which voters actually vote for their local MP.

The general election in December promises to be one in which campaigning is likely to be characterised by strident views and, sadly, bitterly fought argument in which 'punches will not be pulled' by many of the parties. The Conservative Party will campaign to have a majority to implement its Brexit deal that Johnson describes as "excellent" and which, it should be noted, treats Northern Ireland in a separate way.

As critics of this deal contend, it's entirely within the realms of possibility that if a trade deal with the EU is not concluded by this time next year, GB could be facing a de facto 'no-deal' on 31st December 2020. Indeed, even if Johnson gets a majority, and he decided that his excellent deal was no longer relevant in the absence of seeking another extension, something that is extremely unlikely, the UK would crash out of the EU on 1st February next year.

No-deal could be a very real outcome of this election if, because the Conservatives don't achieve the numbers required for a majority, sought support from, for example, any Brexit Party MPs elected. Nigel Farage has explicitly states that his party wants nothing other than no-deal.

The nightmare scenario of no-deal is scarily real and, as a wide range of economic analysts and commentators stress, would induce catastrophic economic consequences for this country as appalling as those that occurred after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008.

The Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn goes into this election with a message that is potentially confusing to some; to renegotiate with the EU (not a given), then out it to a confirmatory referendum. It seems that agreeing to an election in December has left within even with Corbyn's shadow cabinet nervous and has become described by Barry Sheerman in a tweet as "sheer madness". That Sheerman points out that Corbyn ignored their concerns having been "persuaded" by his advisors Seamus Milne and Karie Murphy does not bode well that party's unity.

We can at least expect a clear and consistent message on Brexit from the other main parties of the LibDems, the Brexit Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. However, like 1974, the situation in Northern Ireland will play a part in this election and the anger of the DUP at what they see as having been 'sold out' will be one of the unknown factors. The potential for reigniting the troubles that have been over since the Good Friday Agreement is all too possible.

When the results of the GE in December are known, probably once the polls close at 10.00pm, we will have a clear idea of what will happen next. To borrow a quote by U S Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld "There are known knowns" However, as Rumsfeld continued, "there are also unknown unknowns" which he acknowledged as being the most difficult to deal with.

This is the real danger of any election in December. Johnson's quest for an election to "Get Brexit Done" in a pre-Christmas general election conjures up an array of outcomes that may produce many unintended consequences for the UK. This is an election that many within the major parties believe is premature and not without considerable risk.

This is the probably one of the most important GEs since the second world war. However, what seems apparent is that there is the real potential after any election that occurs in December for politics and Brexit to get really messy and, as suggested above, produce dangerous outcomes.

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

