

Careful what you wish for!

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In the never-ending saga that Brexit has become, there is still much speculation as to what will happen next. The government's withdrawal agreement bill (WAB) passed on Tuesday evening by a majority of 30 (329 to 299) but, the 'timetable motion' for consideration by MPs having been rejected by a majority of 14 (322 to 308), is now paused leaving it in a form of 'limbo'.

We are into a strange situation of being uncertain how Brexit will end, if ever? That said, the stage we've reached is, in a strangely circular way, a 'logical' conclusion to our entry to Europe in the early 1970s.

Disquiet by many on both the right and left of British politics at the UK's joining of the EEC (European Economic Community) in January 1973 had festered throughout the rest of that and the following decade. Regular assurances that belonging to the EEC was merely for economic gain and to make business relationships between this country and Europe more effective, did little to assuage the concerns of those opposed to membership.

Former PM John Major signed The Maastricht Treaty on behalf of the UK in December 1991. As he discovered though, gaining Parliamentary agreement was to prove extremely difficult; particularly as it meant that the UK was now part of an organisation that as well as being overtly economic, now professed to have objectives that were to achieve enhanced political federalism through expansion.

Even though the UK created a veto on aspects known to be too difficult to achieve agreement on – including the creation of a single currency, the euro – this was not sufficient for some. Eurosceptics saw Maastricht as a slippery slope that would, in their view, emasculate British sovereignty. As Major discovered, dealing with those opposed to Europe were able to make life uncomfortable.

Eurosceptics within the Conservative Party are almost all right-wing in their political outlook. As such they believe that the UK's economic interests are best served by the country through its Parliament in being able to determine laws that are determined in Westminster and free of any influence from Europe. Supra-national regulations and/or laws as well as interference by the European Court of Justice are detested as argued by Eurosceptics as stifling competitiveness and entrepreneurialism undermining British business.

The belief on the right of the Conservative Party is that the UK once freed from Europe could, if in government, pursue an agenda avowedly dedicated to achieving a UK that is free of shackles to creating an utterly benign environment for enterprise. As many commentators, myself included, argue, this is exactly what leaving the EU with 'no-deal' would achieve.

If you want to see what such an agenda consists of, it has freely been available since 2012 in a book, *Britannia Unchained*, written by, as they were then, five backbench Conservative MPs.

The five authors of *Britannia Unchained*, Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab, Chris Skidmore and Liz Truss, all of whom had only been in Parliament since the 2010 election, were happy to be considered as dedicated 'disciples' of Thatcherism. Their views, contained in *Britannia Unchained*, is that what is needed is a continuation of the radical reforms implemented by Margaret Thatcher on becoming PM in 1979.

As Kwarteng *et al* contended, tax reduction and slashing of regulations on business, together with policies to make workers more productive, considered essential to improve enterprise that had become sluggish in what Thatcher saw as an overly-socialist state of the 1970s, are once again urgently required.

Commentators who reviewed *Britannia Unchained* on its publication seven years ago pointed out that it was written in a deliberately provocative – some would say sloppy and unsubstantiated – style intended to generate controversy. Lines included, "The British are among the worst idlers in the world," and their belief that "We work among the lowest hours, we retire early and our productivity is poor.

Whereas Indian children aspire to be doctors or businessmen, the British are more interested in football and pop music.”

Britannia Unchained was considered at the time to be a right-wing manifesto and its authors considered by the Cameron-Clegg government to be out too of step with prevailing wisdom, austerity notwithstanding, to allow them any real prospect of advancement. Fast forward seven years and it can be seen that all five of the authors of this book have advanced after the departure of Cameron.

Indeed, apart from Kwasi Kwarteng, who was previously a minister under Theresa May, the other four are currently ministers under Boris Johnson. Priti Patel is Home Secretary. Dominic Raab is Foreign Secretary. Chris Skidmore is Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. Liz Truss is Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade.

That the authors *Britannia Unchained* now considerable influence to implement the sort policies they could only have dreamt of when it was published in 2012 is obvious. Their vision of what some suggest will be the UK becoming a ‘Singapore-type’ economy on the edge of Europe will be facilitated by Brexit, particularly if it were to be under ‘no-deal’ scenario.

Fascinatingly, and with great prescience given the he was writing in *The Guardian* in August 2012 concerning the imminent publication of *Britannia Unchained*, social commentator Andy Beckett claimed the following:

“In radical right circles, it is strikingly common to hear comparisons between Cameron’s government and that of his Tory predecessor Edward Heath: narrowly elected in 1970, briefly tough before a chaos of U-turns, replaced in 1974 by an often equally beleaguered Labour administration – before the right’s big moment finally arrived in 1979, with Thatcher’s election. If history repeats, which it rarely does exactly, we should expect the Unchaining of Britannia to commence in 2019.”

Johnson’s WAB was/is regarded as being a conclusion of the process of creating the long cherished Eurosceptic dream of achieving freedom from the EU. After Tuesday’s vote that has led to it being

paused, what occurs subsequently remains unclear. What seems apparent is that the appalling vista of a no-deal, something Johnson repeatedly claimed he was entirely comfortable about, is once again being talked about. Avoiding this is what unites the majority of MPs.

What we do know for sure is that in order to achieve the prerequisite conditions to allowing the ardent right-wing members of the Conservative Party to support the WAB but, critically, not in a way that undermined the principles enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (an international treaty), was to separate Northern Ireland.

Though not all in Northern Ireland were happy, especially some within the Unionist community (loyalists being far more strident), it was intended that under the WAB this part of the UK should operate under EU customs union rules. This was regarded as essential to allow freedom of goods across the Irish border that the GFA has, in effect, in practical terms invisible.

In any divergence of rules between Great Britain and the EU Northern Ireland will become increasingly disconnected. This may or may not be a good thing and, perhaps, in the fullness of time may be seen to have been a blessing for Northern Ireland that is economically connected to the Irish Republic.

Moreover, if the most apocalyptic predictions about what will be implemented in Great Britain come to pass, the citizens of Northern Ireland may celebrate their own 'freedom'. However, it must be asked, what is the cost to those outside of Northern Ireland? As Irish writer Fintan O'Toole writing in Tuesday's *Irish Times* argues:

"[Johnson's] deal with Brussels effectively lifts the looming threat of a hard Border and it is very much in the interests of the vast majority of people on this island that it wins parliamentary approval. But it is also a terrible deal for the people of Britain – it opens the way to a hard-right, radically deregulated version of Brexit. In effect, it limits the damage to Ireland by increasing the damage to Britain. Basic decency demands that we recognise the inherent discomfort of this situation."

There is good reason to believe that Scotland may seek to emulate what is going to occur in Northern Ireland by once again seeking independence and some form of expedited entry to the EU. As such

Brexit will impact on what some will see as an increasingly 'littler' England.

It may be legitimately asked if the outcomes and consequences of the process that has led to the UK leaving the EU is what was envisaged by voters in June 2016? It may also be a case that if things turn out as badly as is being predicted by some that it will truly be a case of being careful what you wish for.