

Water, water, every where....

By Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

“Water, water, every where,” are the well-known words included in poem ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (originally The Rime of the *Ancyent Marinere*), by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and published in 1798. It is based on the imagined the experiences of a sailor who has returned from a long sea voyage and is supposedly told to another guest whose reactions range from bemusement, impatience, fascination and fear.

Once he has finished telling his story, the mariner departs leaves and guest returns home. Waking the following morning the person to whom the mariner has related his experience is “a sadder and a wiser man”. In that sense, the tale of Brexit is beginning to resemble the mariner’s tale in the tremendous range of emotions that people have undergone.

Tuesday’s momentous decision by the Supreme Court that Suspending Parliament was unlawful has created a sense that we are truly in unprecedented waters. Though this decision was expected, the damning verdict delivered by Supreme Court president Lady Hale that the government having used prorogation in this way, “the effect on the fundamentals of democracy was extreme”, is damning.

In that aftermath of the judgement commentators were struggling to find words that adequately expressed their shock. For example, Clive Coleman, the BBC’s Legal Affairs Correspondent, was moved to state, “Wow! This is legal, constitutional and political dynamite,” and that it was “Unprecedented, extraordinary, ground breaking”

Coleman believes that “it is difficult to overestimate the constitutional and political significance of today’s ruling” in that the PM had been found to have “acted unlawfully in shutting down the sovereign body in our constitution, Parliament, at a time of national crisis [...] without any legal justification.”

Crucially, there will be a time when this country can move on from the paralysis induced by Brexit. That is a certainty. However, when this will happen and how any government will deal with the deeply embedded social and economic problems is more uncertain. The announcement of bankruptcy of Britain's oldest travel agent, Thomas Cook, would seem to offer a metaphor of how mismanagement and misunderstanding of the changing world creates a sense of crisis resulting in eventual collapse in confidence.

In the last number of weeks there has been much obsession on the personality-driven aspect of Brexit and, in particular, how the relative stance of the leaders of the main parties will impact on the eventual outcome. The political conferences currently being held are an opportunity for each of the leaders to unequivocally state their position should they become the next Prime Minister (PM) after any general election (GE); assuming that the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union has not already been achieved on Halloween.

The need to appear distinctive in any GE would seem entirely sensible. In the last couple of years there has been confusion as to precisely what a vote for each party might mean; most particularly Labour and the Tories who've both engaged in intense debate about what their formal position concerning Brexit should be. It's hardly surprising that this has been reflected in the ever-changing opinion polls.

LibDem leader Jo Swinson in the first of the major conferences made clear her support for her party to revoke Article 50. Though avoiding another referendum that many have proposed as a way to solve the current crisis it is nevertheless enthusiastically supported among rank and file Lib Dem members. It's also likely to garner support from across the political spectrum.

Elections for local authorities and the European Parliament held early in the summer demonstrated the ability of LibDems to draw support from both pro-EU Conservative and Labour supporters who are disillusioned with their respective parties. However, these elections also showed the potency of a pro-leave party in drawing away support from the two main parties from those who are vehemently in favour of the UK's departure.

Dealing with the dilemma of facing in two directions at the same time has exercised the Labour Party over the last year or so. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn has seen support ebbing away to both the LibDems and the Brexit Party. The desire to engage in constructive ambiguity has not proved effective and, as a consequence, there has been much anguish and debate as to what is the best way to attempt to stem the loss of votes that is undermining any possibility of winning sufficient seats to form a government.

The Labour Party Annual conference being held this week in Brighton may be seen as how not to clarify your position. Corbyn's position had been to delay any decision on what the party's position is in terms of Brexit and, especially, how Labour would campaign in a referendum until after an election. This created consternation among members, the majority of whom are believed to be pro-EU members, and who prefer the party to become an unambiguous pro-remain party.

That the Corbyn view won through may seem academic. However, the images that will have been seen by television viewers is of a disunited party. Matters weren't helped by many within Corbyn's own cabinet making clear their views Labour should be prepared to unambiguously back remain. The most notable supporter of this position is deputy leader of the Labour Party, Tom Watson who was directly elected by members in September 2015 and therefore feels free to publicly disagree with the leader on a range of policies including Brexit.

However, Watson's is not the only dissenting voice. Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry and Shadow Brexit secretary Sir Keir Starmer are both willing to enthusiastically back remain in a way that does not align with Corbyn. In the swirling undercurrents that seem to continuously flow within the Labour Party, Thornberry and Starmer are seen as potential leaders should Corbyn step down. But both have been accused of unwillingness to pledge absolute loyalty to their leader which does not endear them to the faction that surrounds him and are determined to ensure his legacy is perpetuated by a successor equally dedicated to his left-wing ideology.

Curiously, John McDonnell, Shadow chancellor, who has always been regarded as Corbyn's most loyal and trusted lieutenant, has also been willing to differ from him on Brexit. He has stated that there is no deal

that can be negotiated with the EU that would be better for the country than remaining in the EU; not a million miles from the LibDem's agreed policy.

Nonetheless, McDonnell happily accepted Labour policy that was agreed on Monday of deferring any decision on the party's stance concerning Brexit until after a GE. Equally, McDonnell promised that there would be EU renegotiation of any deal that would as well as a confirmatory referendum should it win such an election.

For a party showcasing its desire to be seen as a government-in-waiting, this is not helpful to its case. Using 'constructive ambiguity' in order to try and 'play' both leavers and remainers does not go down well according to leading psephologist Prof Sir John Curtice. Speaking on the *Today* programme on Tuesday, he believes that there will be a challenge facing Labour at any general election in that the "arithmetic doesn't lie".

Which brings us to the stance of the Conservative government led by PM Boris Johnson. Until Tuesday morning there was uncertainty as to what he'd say on Brexit at their conference due to be commence on Sunday in Manchester. Johnson who'd come to office previously proclaiming that the chances of no-deal were "a million to one" but that he was prepared to take the UK out of the EU on 31st October, "do or die", would have been anticipated to be, similar to Labour, trying to assuage both factions of his party.

The reality is that we simply don't know at present.

What we do know is that the chaos and uncertainty of Brexit continues and that the ability of the present government to deliver any deal is now more in question than ever before. Tuesday's judgement by the Supreme Court leads many to believe that Boris Johnson, a PM about whom serious questions were being asked about even before he became leader, means he is now under more scrutiny than ever.

It's also abundantly obvious that there is a palpable sense of fear among many in the country's leading industries about the consequences of the UK crashing out of the EU on 31st October with no-deal. According to analysis carried out by manufacturing trade body Make UK and business advisory firm BDO the parts of the UK

most exposed to a no-deal exit by the UK are also the most deprived. Ironically, many of these areas voted by a majority to leave the EU.

Manufacturing, particularly in the Midlands where the Centre for Brexit Studies at Birmingham City University is located, it should be noted, provides many tens of thousands of jobs as well as making the goods that are so valuable to the UK economy and exports.

A report by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body representing for specialists asserts that few organisations are prepared to cope a reduced inflow of EU workers after Brexit and have little awareness of the proposed new rules as well as lacking in planning due to the political uncertainty.

What a mess.

It's no wonder so many are feeling emotions resonant with the guest being told the story by the Mariner in Coleridge's poem. Indeed, the lines in his poem "Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink" might be adapted to state, Brexit, Brexit, every where, But no sanity to be had!"