

# Has Brexit Been Stopped?

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British politics oscillates between two modes on Brexit and changes at the flick of a switch. Coinciding with elections it is obvious that there exists a large and determined vote to leave the EU which probably forms a majority. This was true of the Brexit referendum, the 2017 General Election and the 2019 European Elections.

As soon as the election is out of the way, the majority of the media and the most political parties switch to 'remain' mode. The emphasis is then heavily on how damaging Brexit will be, especially a 'no deal' Brexit, how the majority in the electorate were fooled and did not appreciate the consequences of their vote. The pro-Brexit majority were apparently certainly not voting for 'no deal' and were implicitly voting for some deal. In some cases it is argued that the partial exit of the Withdrawal Agreement was what they voted for.

Elections do matter and even the somewhat pointless 2019 European elections changed the direction of UK politics. The rise of the new Brexit to first place with 31% of the votes concentrated minds within the May government. Even more important was the derisory 9% achieved by the Tories themselves. Facing the prospect of the extinction of a party with a 300-year history, May's leadership collapsed, and a new election took place, this time for the leadership of the Tory party. Once again there was a large pro-Brexit majority, albeit among a small electorate of Tory members.

The election of Boris Johnson appeared to change everything. For the first time since the referendum the UK Government was led by leavers. Although even Brexiteers tended not to trust Johnson, he stated his position with utter clarity and left no wiggle-room. His position was to leave the EU by October 31<sup>st</sup> with or without a deal. Any deal, he said had to exclude the backstop which pinned the UK inside the EU's customs union and single market indefinitely.

For several weeks the leavers appeared to be in pole position, but only because parliament was in recess. The return of parliament led to an immediate attempt to block no deal though legislation. The Remainer opposition gained control of Parliament's order paper and rammed through a bill forcing the government to apply for an extension to the EU's Article 50 leaving process for a further three months.

Despite its huge importance as a Bill which could keep the UK in the EU against the wishes of the referendum majority, it was passed in only four hours with minimal debate, backed by the strongly pro-remain Speaker, John Bercow. Bercow also ruled that the bill did not require Queens Consent since in his view it did not impinge on the royal prerogative. Senior lawyers disagreed but to no avail.

The Remainers also attempted to use their majority in the Lords to guillotine the bill, allowing no debate what-so-ever. The outrage of the Remainers at Johnson's announcement of an unusually long suspension of parliament during the Conference season in September, was not in evidence when the political innovation came from their own side.

This attempt to snatch the reins of government away from the government itself would not have been possible without the votes of 22 Tory MPs who voted against their own government. They were duly expelled from the Party despite several decades in parliament in some cases and recent senior ministerial positions in others.

With no majority, Johnson is now pressing hard for the general election he had clearly been planning for weeks and which he is confident of winning. He would start with an 8-10% poll lead over Labour but would need an arrangement with the Brexit party to avoid serious splits in the pro-Brexit vote. An almost even split of votes between the anti-remain Labour and Liberal Democrat parties would also need an electoral pact to win an election, but this is more difficult since both parties see themselves as the future main opposition to the Tories.

The machinations of the past week have bewildered many potential voters. The key reason is that the remainder alliance is operating with concealed and inconsistent aims. Some genuinely wish to achieve a

deal. An amendment to the Benn-Birt Bill forcing a new extension argues that the deal should be the only one on offer from the EU, ie. the Withdrawal Agreement rejected three times by parliament.

Many simply wish to reverse the referendum result and remain in the EU. Some are doing this covertly. Their weapon of choice is a continuous series of extensions to the exit date. Others are overt. The Liberal Democrats have a policy of remaining in the EU and despite their name take an incautious attitude to over-turning a referendum decision for the first time in UK history.

All of the Remainer alliance ostensibly view a no deal exit as a 'catastrophe' (their descriptor of choice) inflicting immense damage to the UK economy. It is in this respect that that the Brexit debate is weak and dishonest. While it is true that Government documents warn of serious potential damage from 'no deal' the public only learns of these via media leaks. The documents themselves are never published and their reasoning cannot thus be interrogated. Political, business and other spokespersons who repeat the 'catastrophe' claim never (yes absolutely never) explain how this eventuality will come about.

The most common claims are that short-term food and medicine shortages will occur and prices will rise. In the longer-term it is claimed that GDP will be lower (by up to 9% by 2030) but this originates from discredited Treasury modelling. The shortages are apparently to be caused by congestion at ports although this is rarely made clear. Certainly, the main worries of business appear to be around congestion at ports.

A close look at most claims of business or NHS doctors shows that their statements are in fact conditional. They say that shortages could occur *if* there is congestion. Yet the British Ports Authority has repeatedly said that most ports can cope easily with no deal. The focus is usually on RoRo ports and particularly Dover. Even if congestion did occur at Dover it is only the UK's ninth largest port accounting for 5% of trade by tonnage. HMRC have said they will prioritise smooth running over checks at ports and Calais port has said it expects no extra checks and is ready for no deal.

The opposition to no deal is based on what in the USA would be termed 'fake news'. Remainers give no time to explaining or checking their apparent concerns. Their real aim is to reverse Brexit while attempting to disguise the anti-democratic nature of doing so.

At the time of writing it is unclear whether this bid can succeed, but the thought that a legal and well-conducted referendum, won by over a million votes on a high turnout, could be over-turned, remains monstrous. It would have incalculable consequences but let's hope that British democracy finds a way of avoiding such an outcome.

**Disclaimer: This blog is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of Centre for Brexit Studies and Birmingham City University.**