

# “It’s Like a Game of Snakes and Ladders.....”

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Speaking to a political insider yesterday about what has been going on over the last few weeks, this person claimed that, “It’s like a game of snakes and ladders in that the two sides (those who are pro and anti-Brexit) seem to be up one minute and sliding down the next.” Significantly, as this insider stressed, “The difference is that the consequences of failure are incredibly high for all concerned; most especially the citizens of the UK.”

As far as the increasingly-exasperated general public is concerned, in the apparently never-ending ‘game’ that Brexit has become, it’s probably a fair bet that politicians are seen in the same way as the carnivorous reptiles referred to in the title. That Westminster was returning on Tuesday after its summer recess meant anticipation as to what was likely to happen once the House of Commons chamber, traditionally universally regarded as a citadel of democracy, was reaching fever pitch.

Monday evening’s feisty statement by Prime Minister Boris Johnson outside 10 Downing Street gave us a definite sense of the way things were going to go. Johnson showed his willingness not to ‘pull punches’ in making it clear what his views are on any attempt by Members of Parliament to create a bill, that if successful, would mandate his government to avoid the United Kingdom leaving the European Union with ‘no-deal’ by the deadline of 11.00pm GMT on 31<sup>st</sup> October and seeking another extension.

As widely predicted, the alliance of rebels of MPs from across the House in creating a bill through the use of an emergency order SO24 (standing order 24) that was debated on Tuesday and in which a majority of MPs voted for Wednesday’s business to its consideration was met with immediate derision by Johnson. Johnson stated that he will call an election on Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> October.

Johnson's intention in calling an election on 15<sup>th</sup> October is calculated to put him and those who support him as defenders of the will of the people who voted by a majority to leave the EU back in June 2016. Indeed, as he stated immediately after the defeat, his first Parliamentary vote as PM and the first time this has occurred since Pitt the Younger suffered similarly in 1793, "If the House votes for this bill tomorrow, the public will have to choose who goes to Brussels on October 17<sup>th</sup> (the next scheduled summit) to sort this out"

Not for the first time as far as the decision by former PM David Cameron to hold a referendum on continued EU membership is concerned, there is intense speculation as to what will happen next, what the eventual outcome will be and, in particular, the long-term consequences of Brexit will be on the state of politics, the economy societally. As many commentators believe, the stakes could not be higher.

If the election does indeed occur, this would create a minor historical footnote as every British General Election since 1935 has been held on a Thursday. Intriguingly in terms of the history of British general elections, previously any weekday, including Saturday, regarded as a normal working day was used. Moreover, until 1918 there were often held over a number of days with different constituencies selecting the particular that most suited it. This, it was alleged, created a 'bandwagon effect' for a successful political party and the thereafter the convention of all votes being cast on the same day was established.

Crucially, though, because of the Fixed-Term Parliament Act, that was brought in by the Conservative/LibDem Coalition government of 2010-15, Johnson may call an election, unless there is a two-thirds majority of MPs in support of one, it won't happen. Similar to Theresa May in 2017, Johnson is undoubtedly optimistic that an election would improve his majority, especially as opinion polls give him what looks like a healthy lead.

According to the latest poll from YouGov carried out last week, the popularity of the main political parties is as follows; Tories (33%), Labour (22%), Liberal Democrats (20%) and Brexit Party (12%). Given that before he spoke in Parliament on Tuesday, to use a phrase he employed in his campaign to become leader of the Conservative

Party, Johnson's government majority of one seat was, even with the support of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), "vanishingly" thin. He appears to have nothing to lose.

However, after Tuesday's dramatic defection of MP Phillip Lee to Liberal Democrats – by crossing the Chamber just as Johnson started to address the House, Johnson's majority disappeared. This is normally the point at which any government would be expected to face a vote of confidence.

However, the situation Johnson faces got a whole lot worse as a result of the defeat suffered by MPs voting to take control of Wednesday's Commons agenda, by 328 votes to 301, to consider a bill to stop the UK leaving the EU on 31<sup>st</sup> October without a deal. He suffered a rebellion of a number of many long-standing and influential MPs from his own party that was, even compared to what we've already witnessed during the Brexit process, astonishing.

That 21 very senior Conservative MPs were willing to defy the, what is known as, the 'Whip' to vote in line with the Government's wishes tells us that there is deep concern about the potential impact of the UK leaving the EU with no-deal.

These rebels, who have been expelled from the party (they may be invited back as has happened previously), include Philip Hammond, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer up to two months ago. Ken Clarke, a former Chancellor and Home Secretary, who has long been a critic of the Government's approach to Brexit even under Theresa May. Nonetheless, his willingness to rebel in support of stopping no-deal though less surprising, must still be seen in the fact that he is the longest-serving MP and 'Father of the House'. Equally, that former Attorney General Dominic Grieve was part of the group of rebels is not surprising.

The list of rebels also included Tory grandee, Sir Nicholas Soames, regarded as a talisman in Conservative circles, and grandson of Sir Winston Churchill, Johnson's hero. Former Ministers Justine Greening, David Gauke and Rory Stewart also rebelled in full cognisance of the threat that they faced of expulsion. Many within, and outside of, the Conservative Party contend that current strategy by Johnson is being dictated by Svengali Dominic Cummings who, as

Philip Hammond claimed on Radio Four's *Today Programme* on Tuesday, is not believed to be a member of the Conservative Party. As is also being asserted, jettisoning talented individuals such as these makes the Tories seem less moderate and, potentially, less electable in the future.

Where do we go from here?

Perhaps the only certainty we have is continued uncertainty. Worryingly, Parliament feels febrile and chaotic. The UK economy is plunging into recession as business output and confidence shrinks. The public wants a resolution to Brexit.

The fact that the bill requiring the government to avoid no-deal was passed, including an amendment to put cross-party version of May's deal back on table, by a majority of 28 on its third reading, meant that Johnson had, at that stage, been defeated in all three of the votes he'd overseen since becoming PM.

For the record, the record of predecessors is that Margaret Thatcher lost only four in 11 years, Tony Blair also lost only four in 10 years, David Cameron lost 10 in six years, and Theresa May lost 33 in three years.

Johnson, having lost the vote on the 'Benn no-deal bill', and assuming he cannot agree a revised deal, must go the EU and seek an extension of three months – something he categorically stated he won't do, before immediately calling an election for Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup>. This was voted on by MPs but was not supported by the required majority of two thirds of MPs attracting 298 votes compared to 56 against. This effectively represented another defeat for Johnson.

Regardless, there is a view that at some point in the not-too-distant future, possibly after Brexit has been resolved, hard as that seems to believe will ever happen based on recent experience, there will need to be an election as Boris Johnson cannot limp along with a deficit of 40 plus seats. However, any such election creates peril for both main parties.

May discovered to her cost in 2017 that the only poll that really counts is the one in which people cast their votes. Challenging the

opposition, in particular Labour, to engage in an election is all very well but there is no guarantee that it will solve the arithmetic problem of gaining a sufficient number of MPs to support any revised deal Johnson might strike with the EU.

It's worth recalling that in 2017, Theresa May believed the polls telling her that the Tories had a 21% lead and expected to increase her majority, not to end up in worse state and end up having to rely, after a considerable bung (some £1 billion), on the Democratic Unionist Party – the only major party in Northern Ireland not to agree to sign the Good Friday Agreement.

The 2017 campaign proved to be dreadful for May, who performed badly. Her wooden performance, undermined the remainder of her time as PM; most especially after the deal with the EU she so passionately advocated, was defeated three times. Should there be an election, Boris Johnson would be expected to perform more engagingly and employ his skills in winning over audiences with a combination of bluster and tub-thumping as we saw as soon as he became PM on the steps of Downing Street.

Labour's problem is that since the last election, Jeremy Corbyn has stated his party's wish to fight an election. That he and his party passed up an opportunity to have one on 15<sup>th</sup> October is regarded as utterly sensible given that Boris Johnson is mistrusted by all opposition parties and, it has been demonstrated in the past couple of days, quite a number of Conservative MPs.

In 2017, Corbyn performed much better than as a seasoned campaigner 'at the stump' in claiming his party's commitment to the UK's departure from the EU, as well as proposing committed to ending austerity. In any future election he would have to fight on the basis of being, at best equivocal, about Labour's position on leaving the EU; something that would damage the prospects in constituencies in which traditional supporters voted to leave in the 2016 referendum.

Significantly, the most recent metrics for Corbyn show that he is seen as much more incompetent at 66%, compared to Johnson whose is 43%, though their performances in the coming days may alter this perception. It certainly appears that, as many suggested, Johnson's bumbling style has undermined his credibility and that Corbyn has

risen to the task of, very belatedly, providing leadership in the ongoing sense of crisis.

Avoiding the economic catastrophe of a no-deal, the purpose of creating the bill that was agreed by MPs on Wednesday, is seen as essential by all but the diehard. In the meantime, Johnson's task of achieving any agreement with the EU – something many believed to be a sham to run the clock down to a no-deal – will be extremely difficult because of the attitude of members of the European Research Group, now led by former Brexit Secretary and ultra-Brexitteer Steve Baker, who state that they will reject any deal he might wish to propose.

Johnson also recognises that deviation from narrative that he is willing to consider anything other than no-deal raises the hackles of the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage which would be neutered if this is indeed the outcome. The Brexit Party pose a particular threat to the Conservatives in taking its seats as well as potentially to Labour in constituencies it holds but that voted to leave in the 2016 referendum.

The Conservative Party has shifted to the right and, as Ken Clarke claims, to have effectively made it a version of the Brexit Party that subscribes to what is a grubby and utterly nationalist agenda. The notion of 'one nation Conservatism' appears to have been binned. This is not good for democracy and does not bode well for the future.

Ultimately, there is a need for compromise and sanity by Parliament and, of course, the Government. In the continuing game of snakes and ladders there are too many of the former for sensible thinking and it must be asked where the latter is to climb out of the current crisis.

Without a properly negotiated deal that allows the UK to withdraw from the EU, this country is at risk of an economic catastrophe of a sort that would rival the effects of the Global Financial Crisis ten years ago that damaged the UK so much and led to the austerity measures that have caused misery among the poorest and most disadvantaged communities.