

When two tribes go to war.....

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No prizes for guessing that the title of this week's blog refers to the 1984 number one hit 'Two Tribes' by Liverpool's Frankie Goes to Hollywood in which the key lines are, "When two tribes go to war, One is all that you can score..." Though from the outset the decision concerning the UK's continued membership of the European Union (EU) was binary in whether to stay or depart, and there were essentially two factions based on this, within each there was disagreement.

The announcement Boris Johnson's government has requested the Queen to suspend Parliament next week after MPs have return after their summer break and will only return a few weeks before the Brexit deadline on Halloween (31st October), has created shock waves in an ongoing process that had already thrown up some pretty unprecedented events already.

Though Johnson has claimed that whatever Queen's Speech takes place after the suspension, on 14 October, will include his "very exciting agenda", apart from diehard Brexiters, all other commentators believe that what is taking place is to undermine MPs ability to pass legislation that would to stop a no-deal Brexit on 31st October.

Using the proroguing of Parliament – something that occurs annually as a matter of routine – is regarded as unprecedented as a device by a government to effectively bypass MPs. In the representative democracy we are part of, this is seen something that would usually only be carried out in extreme circumstances.

It's therefore unsurprising that [House of Commons Speaker John Bercow](#) has said that what is being attempted is a "constitutional outrage". Bercow is clear in his belief that it represents "an offence against the democratic process and the rights of Parliamentarians as the people's elected representatives". Further he contends:

“However it is dressed up, it is blindingly obvious that the purpose of [suspending Parliament] now would be to stop [MPs] debating Brexit and performing its duty in shaping a course for the country.”

There is a belief that the Queen will be out in an invidious position in that she will effectively be asked to assist Johnson in implementing something that will result in a no-deal that, as a consequence, will make the break-up of the United Kingdom more likely if Northern Ireland and Scotland eventually decide their future is more assured by parting ways with England.

Fascinatingly, Tom Newton Dunn, political editor of The Sun has tweeted that even among those who belong to Johnson’s government – who were presumed to have been chosen for their utter loyalty – there is “serious disquiet” about what the announcement to suspend Parliament. Newton Dunn believes that the primary objective is to “invite on a no confidence” when Parliament returns on 3rd September that would result in a general election that would allow him to position himself as defender of the will of the people against MPs who he will claim are recalcitrant in fulfilling the outcome of the June 2016 EU referendum.

[As Newton Dunn tweeted:](#)

“Boris also needs two thirds of MPs to agree to an election under FTPA, can’t just call one himself – and they may not. All depends on whether Corbyn agrees to whip in favour or insist on legislation to block No Deal first. One senior minister tells me: “I don’t think No10 really understands that if we don’t have the MPs then we don’t have control. I think it is 50/50 what happens next”.

What appears clear is that Brexit has boiled down to the question of willingness to support or oppose leaving the EU with ‘no-deal’. Events are moving towards a stand-off between two tribes. One side vociferously claim to be enacting the democratic will of the people who voted to leave in the June 2016 referendum. This group consists of, mainly, Conservative members of Parliament, especially those who belong to the peculiarly named European Research Group (ERG) and includes a cabinet of committed ‘no-dealers’ led Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

No-deal is enthusiastically supported by the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage and has offered to work with Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party through a “non-aggression pact” to achieve in a general election. Farage, ever the opportunist is offering the prospect of support provided Johnson is willing to instruct prospective MPs to stand down in order to let the Brexit Party win. This would appear to be a case of who needs enemies with ‘friends’ such as Farage

Indeed, Farage has warned Johnson of the consequences of any temptation to deviate from his stated intention to depart the EU without a deal. At a rally of over 500 prospective candidates for his party on Tuesday, Farage proclaimed that because of Johnson’s support for Theresa May’s Withdrawal Agreement with Brussels when it was put to Parliament for the third time, “That raises a very big question. Can you trust Boris Johnson on this question?”

Looking at a sample of the candidates for the Brexit Party reminds me of the line from American stand-up comedienne Tina Fey who has stated that those engaged in politics and prostitution are the only jobs “where inexperience is considered a virtue.” What drives those standing for Farage’s party is an apparent nationalistic fervour to achieve withdrawal by the UK from the EU with no transition arrangements whatsoever, and regardless of the cost.

Farage’s offer of the “non-aggression pact” is resonant with that between Hitler and Stalin that proved so illusory and, eventually, cost the lives of millions. It also reminds one of the saying that there is little or no honour among thieves. It seems that this now applies to politicians.

Moreover, the quote, “One of the key problems today is that politics is such a disgrace, good people don’t go into government” seems apposite. That fact that it was made by sometime business leader and current President of the United States, Donald Trump adds a certain frisson of amusement.

The other tribe that has emerged is the grand coalition consisting of the majority of all other parties whose aim is to explicitly to remain, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Scottish National Party, the Independent Group for Change and the Labour Party which, since the result of the 2016 referendum have engaged in what is known as

constructive ambiguity of trying to appeal to its supported who voted to leave and remain. This is a significant in that hitherto, there has been anguished debate, indeed, some would argue, conflict in terms of agreeing any coordinated overall strategy.

The Liberal Democrats have been consistently opposed to any withdrawal. Recently elected leader Jo Swinson made clear her position that if there was to be a vote of no confidence that resulted in the removal of Boris Johnson's government, she would not be willing to be part of an administration led by Jeremy Corbyn. This led to a criticism from loyalists of Corbyn who cited Swinson's support for austerity policies implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition between 2010 to 2015. In particular shadow trade secretary, Barry Gardiner, accused Swinson of being petulant.

Though other parties were more sanguine about the prospects of working with Corbyn, the dispute with Swinson hardly suggested a basis for harmony in stopping a no-deal withdrawal. Members of all parties have become exasperated in the inability of MPs to coordinate their efforts. As they realise, no-deal will potentially result in, according to the majority of seminal economists, financial calamity. Additionally, as the contents of the recently leaked Operation Yellowhammer Cabinet report indicated, no-deal will cause social disorder and chaos as following the immediate effects on free trade between this country and the EU.

Boris Johnson's 'do or die' approach to leaving the EU on 31st October certainly appears to have concentrated the minds of all politicians. Change UK MP Anna Soubry tweeted that the meeting held on Tuesday was "excellent" and that it was agreed by all that the main objective was to ensure that no deal was stopped "by legislation".

Green Party MP Caroline Lucas also tweeted that the cross-party meeting was "positive" in considering ways to stop a no-deal Brexit. Employing language that would normally be indicative imminent war, Lucas stated that, "Moving forward, we need to find common ground to stand on, not small hills to die on"

So, for the first time, among the leaders of parties opposed to Brexit on the basis of no-deal, there is now appears to be a clearly defined and agreed position of resisting no-deal. The significance of this did

not go unnoticed by the government who suggested that such a coalition was “anti-democratic” and tantamount to “sabotage” and suggested that they should be “honest with the British public” in that it is to undermine the will of the people who voted to leave in the June 2016 referendum.

A [tweet sent by the Conservative Party](#) with a picture of the six opposition leaders was accompanied by a message which reinforces this message:

“These 6 politicians are plotting to cancel the votes of 17.4 million people.

We respect the result of the EU Referendum.

We will get Brexit done by October 31st and take this country forward.

Show them they can’t ignore it.”

What comes next is, literally, the multi-billion pound question upon which the UK’s withdrawal rests? The legal default position still remains that the UK will leave the EU on 31 October at 11.00pm GMT unless there is an agreed deal or something dramatic happens to stop no-deal. The latter would require a change in law to alter the default position. The announcement by Johnson of the intention to ask the Queen to suspend Parliament has significantly increased the chances of a no-deal departure; something recognised by the financial markets and seen by the immediate drop in the value of the pound against the euro and dollar.

Earlier this week we heard about a six-page document that had been prepared by shadow attorney general, Shami Chakrabarti, for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, stating that any suspension of Parliament by Boris Johnson to achieve a no-deal departure from the EU would represent the “gravest abuse of power and attack on UK constitutional principle in living memory”. Additionally, Chakrabarti believes, suspension of Parliament to achieve such a purpose would be open to an immediate legal challenge in the courts.

[Speaking on BBC Radio 5 Live](#) in the immediate aftermath of Johnson’s announcement, Chakrabarti stressed the criticality of the

importance of “opposition parties [being] more united” and asserted that the courts will be used to “protect our parliament and parliamentary democracy”. She passionately stated her belief that Johnson has “been getting away with blue murder, but this time he’s gone too far” and urgent action will be necessary:

“I think we will work across parties to defeat this strategy in parliament. And I hope it doesn’t come to it, but if down the road it ends up in the courts, I have little doubt that the courts will step up to protect our parliament and parliamentary democracy.”

When Johnson cites the argument that leaving is the result of the vote held in June 2016, he conveniently ignores the fact that the majority was not overwhelming and, crucially, opinion polls held recently indicate that a majority specifically reject leaving with no deal. Labour’s shadow chancellor John McDonnell makes clear his belief that any attempt to undermine the role of MPs in Brexit would be seen as utterly contrary to the spirit of representative democracy that has served the UK so well for centuries:

“Prime Ministers come and Prime Ministers go but I don’t think we have seen a Prime Minister like this who has had the potential to threaten the very nature of our democracy. And I just want him that we will not and let that happen. We will use whatever mechanism necessary.”

That Jeremy Corbyn has written to 116 Conservative MPs including former PM Theresa May, as well as former Chancellor Philip Hammond and other former cabinet ministers David Gauke and Greg Clark to urging them to support the cross-party coalition intended to stop a no-deal Brexit would suggest that we can anticipate much excitement in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, the one thing that seems assured, is that the two Brexit tribes seem ready to engage in war. On that basis there will be, it seems abundantly clear, only one winner. And, in homage to Bachman Turner Overdrive’s wonderfully evocative 1974 hit, it’s very tempting to say that whatever we’ve experienced up to now, however strange and unprecedented, “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”