

Don't Waste This Time

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Whilst reading about the Conservative leadership candidates' ongoing national beauty parade, I was reminded of Donald Tusk's quote when the UK was offered a 6-month Brextension: "do not waste this time". Yet this is precisely what is now happening. I don't think I'm alone in finding the current actions of the UK's political class more than a little bit self-indulgent.

After the UK's Brextension was granted on 10th April, government – and many businesses – breathed a huge sigh of relief. This was understandable, but very much misplaced. Like a student given an extension on their homework, the optimum response is to go away and swot really hard in order to make the best use of the extra time.

Like a lazy student, the UK did not bother to do its homework and is now whiling away the extra hours in the pub. The civil servants involved in "no deal" planning have been stood down and, far from using the additional time to beef up preparations, these have now effectively been suspended. Brexit is being simultaneously treated both as an inevitability and something that will never happen. Neither is correct.

Political bickering, both between parties and within them, continues unabated. After failing to convince MPs to vote for the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated with the EU, Theresa May committed political hara-kiri, leaving the ruling Conservative Party to find a new occupant for Number 10 (although perhaps the Iron Throne would be more apposite).

The current spectacle, in which members of the public get to watch two individuals appeal to less than 0.25% of the population, will carry on until 22nd July. At that point, the new Prime Minister will be invited to form a government. This means that the new Prime Minister will have one – perhaps two if we're truly blessed – days accountable to parliament before the summer recess.

The summer recess is currently scheduled to continue as planned – heaven forbid that this be removed – leaving Parliament to return on 3rd September. It is possible that a vote of confidence will be called by the opposition immediately on that one day. If the Conservatives were to lose this there would be a General Election. This would take at least 4 weeks and probably longer.

Such an eventuality is relatively unlikely – I imagine that Jeremy Corbyn will want to keep his powder dry until after the Brecon by-election when he will hope his chances of unseating the government will be higher. In any event, Parliament will return for just a few days before the next parliamentary recess – for party conference season. Again, it is unlikely (but possible) that this will be cancelled or rescheduled.

At this point, parliament will probably return on 8th October, leaving us all to run around like headless chickens once again in time for “trick or treaty” day: Halloween. In other words, we will have wasted the Article 50 extension granted. The parliamentary arithmetic will remain the same and, at some point, a General Election will have to happen – if only by dint of the fact that the Government’s majority in Parliament is likely to vanish.

It didn’t need to be like this. The first month of the Brexit extension was spent in negotiations between the two largest parties in Parliament. It was apparent to most at the time that such efforts were probably doomed to futility – the temptation to seek narrow political advantage was just too great.

This is a great failing on the part of those tasked with ruling the UK. Putting narrow political advantage over the wellbeing of the people of the UK is not something that is likely to be forgotten come election time. What is even more disappointing is that there should have been a clear path to an agreement^[1].

Firstly, Labour and the Conservative parties should have agreed to vote to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement, subject to its being approved by the populace. This should be uncontentious: the question has never been asked before and it is clearly democratic to allow the population to express a view on the Withdrawal Agreement.

The only possible point of contention is as regards what alternatives should be on the ballot paper. I believe that ‘no deal’ (i.e. leaving without ratifying the Withdrawal Agreement) should definitely be an option. Although opposed by some politicians, failure to permit it as a valid option would fundamentally deprive the electorate of choice, which is surely the purpose of such a vote. Once again, this fulfils an obvious test – the populace have never been asked whether they want to leave the EU with a Withdrawal Agreement or without one.

The question then arises as to whether the option to remain an EU member should be on the ballot. The argument is often made that it should not. Opponents of a “second referendum” argue that this choice has already been ruled out by the results of the first. This is wrong. It is incorrect simply and entirely due to mathematics.

In public choice (voting, either in referenda or otherwise), the order in which one asks the question matters.

The *Condorcet* paradox^[2] clearly demonstrates this. A public vote would not be a panacea – indeed the procedure is likely to be deeply problematic and will leave many unhappy. Nevertheless, now that the House of Commons has proven unable to untie the Gordian Knot of Brexit, the British people must break it.

[1] I appreciate that the two parties have quite different ideas of how the future relationship should unfold. However, compromise should have been possible, particularly given the fact that the Political Declaration is not legally binding. The argument that a future government could renege on what has been agreed does not hold water: this is always true. No government can (or should) bind the hands of its successors in this way – it is a fundamental tenet of democracy that the population always have the right to change their minds in future. This, after all, is why the result of the 1975 referendum could be reversed by that of 2016.

[2] See this interesting paper on the subject: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002795011924700103>