

Should [we] stay or should [we] go?

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Fans of punk rock group the Clash will recognise that the title of this blog is based on their 1982 hit single 'Should I Stay or Should I Go'. As time goes on in the quest to find a solution to the UK's potential withdrawal from the EU, one line from this song, 'This indecision's bugging me (*esta indecisión me molesta*)', seems ever more apposite.

The perception among many people is that a majority of MPs will never reach agreement on Brexit. Negotiations between teams from Conservative and Labour to create a compromise sufficient to attract enough support to gain agreement across the House of Commons are, according to rumours, unlikely to conclude successfully. Any hope these negotiations would avoid the need to hold elections to the European Parliament on 23rd May have been dashed.

Parliament's inability to agree on a deal that will enable the UK to abide by the decision of voters in the referendum of June 2016 continue to have a profound impact on the political system as well as, of course, the economy. Just under a week ago the local elections took place. When final results came in it was clear that whilst the Lib Dems and Greens did well in, respectively, gaining an additional 676 and 185 seats, for the two main parties there was little to cheer about.

The belief by many commentators that there would be a 'Brexit backlash' against the two major parties proved to be so. It is speculated that given the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage did not put candidates forward in the local elections last week, means that results for the Tories and Labour could have been even worse. The Brexit Party that is, it should be stressed, only weeks old, will be standing in the elections for the European Parliament. Opinion polls suggest that Nigel Farage's party which is vehemently anti-EU, is likely to inflict a drubbing on the Conservatives who lost 1,269 council seats last week.

Though there is a tendency for the party in power to suffer, last week's loss by the Conservatives, its worst performance since 1995,

indicates that its core voters are not happy with its handling of Brexit. Theresa May's inability to secure Parliament's approval for a deal to put into effect decision to leave by the 29th March, as required under the Article 50 process, hurt her party in the local elections. Unsurprisingly, hardcore Brexiters within the party argue that immediate withdrawal from the EU without a deal is the only way to accede to the wishes of those who voted to leave the EU almost three years ago.

If the Tories got, to use the popular parlance, 'a severe kicking', Labour received a lesser one. Normally, the main opposition party, benefits in more or less proportion to a governing party's losses. As last Thursday demonstrated, this did not occur. Labour lost 63 seats. As a party insider acknowledged on Friday when the results became clear, it is seen as too supportive of Brexit by its core voters who want to remain, mainly in the South and insufficiently enthusiastic to leave by its core supports largely in the north.

So called 'constructive ambiguity' that the Labour Party has used to try and face both ways has, as internal critics assert, caused it to be likely to be stuck in the middle of the road and likely to be hit both ways. Since the 2016 referendum, Labour has experienced some internal conflict concerning Europe, mainly from MPs in northern constituencies who believe its crucial to their integrity to respect the wishes of those they will eventually need for support to be re-elected who, in many cases, by significant numbers voted to leave.

Whilst Labour's internal conflict on membership of the EU between those who wish to remain and those who believe that leaving is essential to maintain respect for democracy, has bubbled to the surface from time-to-time, it's largely been kept in check. Labour's problem is that whilst its leader Jeremy Corbyn is ambiguous on his position apropos of the UK leaving the EU, its members are not. It is believed that an overwhelming majority wish to remain; most especially if the alternative was leaving with no deal.

Writing on the website *The UK in a Changing Europe* in January this year, Professor Tim Bale in an article 'Labour members love Corbyn, but hate Brexit' examines the belief among many of Labour's leadership that Brexit must be delivered to comply with the wishes of the EU referendum. As Bale's describes, a survey carried out by

ESRC on its behalf of Labour Party members and sample of voters provides clear evidence that leaving the EU is certainly not what is desired. Using the results of this survey Bale shows that 83% of Labour members surveyed voted Remain in 2016. Significantly, Bale states,

“Some 73% of current Labour voters think – in hindsight and irrespective of what they themselves voted in 2016 – that the UK was wrong to vote to leave the EU. That proportion rises to 89% among Labour members – and is a view shared, too, by 31% of the small minority of members who did vote Leave in the Referendum.”

Undoubtedly, as is the case with the Tory Party, last week’s local election results have spooked leadership within the Labour Party. Many in both parties believe that the faster a deal can be achieved through negotiation between the two major political parties on Brexit the better. However, the law of physics stating that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction holds true. Whatever Labour MPs might agree is bound to cause revolt among Conservative MPs.

Voting in Parliament on Brexit over the last few months explicitly demonstrates that achieving a majority for anything other than rejection of a withdrawal from the EU with no deal, has proved extremely difficult. And as the leadership of both parties are only too aware, whilst the argument that leaving was the will of the majority of those who voted in the EU referendum in June 2016, an advisory vote that is not legally binding, there is no clarity in what this meant.

The current negotiations between the Labour and Conservative parties may provide a way out of the Brexit impasse. However, as many in both of these parties are surely asking themselves, is this objective worth the risk of greater internal conflict, dramatically reduced membership and, in the worst-case scenario, a split?

Elections for the European Parliament, will according to many observers, provide an opportunity for all major political parties to present a clear view on where they stand. In the case of the Lib Dems and Green Party there is absolutely no doubt. Equally so in the case of the Brexit Party. However, in the case of Labour and the Tories there remains fundamental disagreement between factions who wish to stay and those who wish to go.

Labour's hope that trying to occupy the middle ground will enable it to weather any disquiet from leavers and remainers was shown last Thursday to be potentially fallacious. What may prove to be a deal-breaker is the insistence that whatever deal may be agreed with the Conservatives is put to a confirmatory vote by the people. It has already lost MPs who defected to Change UK and leadership recognise the risk of being seen by other MPs and its members in being too fulsome in supporting even what might be regarded as a 'soft' Brexit that includes continued membership of the customs union.

Within the Conservatives there is, not for the first time in its history, rancorous dispute concerning Europe. The manner of departure from the EU is causing a level of bitterness that will possibly result in Theresa May's departure as leader and Prime Minister more prematurely than she'd like. The battle lines are now very clear between those who argue that those who voted to leave almost three years ago was with no deal and those who believe that this would be disastrous economically and a negotiated deal is essential.

Intriguingly, given that the 'starting trigger' to the current crisis was the decision by David Cameron to hold a referendum on continued membership of the EU, holding another one is increasingly regarded by many as a way of resolving it. The 'mood music' of recent days suggests that some who'd been opposed to holding another vote that this may be the only sensible solution if a deal cannot be agreed by Parliament.

Though a significant number of influential commentators and politicians within all parties have long been supportive of what would effectively be a third referendum on this issue as a way of getting people to make the final decision, many have stated their opposition to allowing another vote. However, it is significant that those now supporting another vote by the people include ardent Brexiters such as former Chairman of the Conservative Party Eric Pickles and Tory MP Daniel Kawczynski.

Daniel Kawczynski is significant because he is a former member of the ERG group that remains implacably opposed to departure from the EU other than with no deal. Speaking on the Emma Barnett show on Radio 5 he believes that if the current indecision and deadlock in Parliament continues, another vote will be inevitable:

“If we fail, if there can be no compromise between the parties, I can actually see then the logic, and other people will be demanding another referendum. And those like me who have genuine concerns about what will happen to our society if we go through this process again, we will lose that debate over the referendum, because it will be the only option then left available to try to break the gridlock that we’ve entered into.”

In what amounts to some pretty ‘straight talking’ Kawczynski makes clear who he blames for the deadlock. He believes that the ongoing political crisis is the fault of members of ERG, of which he used to be a member, and other MPs who’ve shown no willingness to listen to what their constituents tell them and compromise in order to achieve an agreement that allows the UK to leave the EU in a way that minimises economic damage.

Coming weeks will be likely to be characterised by the bile we’ve witnessed in the last four years since the European Union Referendum Act 2015 became law. This will be especially the case during the campaign for the European Parliament.

However, there is cause for optimism in that sense and logical sensible thinking may emerge. There will either be a negotiated deal agreed between Labour and the Tories that can attract majority support among MPs in Parliament. Alternatively, failing that, there will be sufficient recognition that the only way out of the current crisis as to whether we should stay or we should go, as well as the means by which to achieve the latter, is to go back to the people.