

# The Current State of Brexit; Calm Before the Next Storm?

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As far as members of the two major political parties are concerned, Brexit is increasingly a case of trying to reconcile the impossible. The political paralysis of recent months has seen both Prime Minister Theresa May and her shadow, Jeremy Corbyn, under intense pressure from an apparently ever-widening spectrum of views on Brexit within both parties.

Though local elections are usually seen as being a bellwether of the state of support for major political parties, any results are considered knowing that voters frequently support candidates on the basis of promises made to deal with 'bread and butter' issues that affect their area. Accordingly, encouraging results in local elections, especially for parties in opposition nationally, provide little or no guarantee of voting intentions come a general election.

This week's local elections will be analysed more closely than usual because, had Parliament agreed Theresa May's deal negotiated with the EU, they would have been the first test of democracy following the UK's departure. That the UK is still a member of the EU is not what was anticipated when the two-year Article 50 process commenced on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2017.

Political commentators believe that there will be a backlash by many voters against politicians, even at local level, who are collectively seen as not having facilitated the will of the people as to Brexit. Headlines over the weekend suggest that the Tories are likely to lose up to 1,000 seats in Thursday's local elections. psephologist Robert Hayward, who is a Tory peer, believes that Conservative Party should be prepared for the loss of 800 seats.

Some leading Brexiteers seem to be almost taking delight in the probability that voters will give candidates within their party a 'kicking' on Thursday. Brexit has shown its power in damaging traditional

alliances. One influential Brexiteer, Priti Patel, a former international development secretary, strongly believes Conservative Party will be punished due of its inability to deliver Brexit.

She said: "I think without a doubt that frustration is there. I have heard it myself. I've experienced it both with my council candidates and when I've been on the doorstep ... The mood is dark.

"The public are frustrated. They are fed up I think more widely with politics and the way in which Brexit has been handled and in particular the fact that, as many people say to me in my constituency, they expected us to leave effectively on the 29th of March. This has not happened."

Politicians, largely, don't garner much sympathy. That stated, many decent and hard-working local councillors are likely to lose their seats because, in no small part, because of Westminster's inability in agreeing a deal that would have allowed the UK to have already left the EU.

That those losing their seats may be replaced by individuals whose only political motivation is based on the UK's departure from the EU, creates a potential tension that may mean local voters' needs are not as well represented as they might otherwise have been. Politicians from the mainstream parties tend to possess a greater wealth of knowledge of local issues affecting voters and, crucially, adhere to coherent manifestos dedicated to long-term improvement of the environment and economy.

The relative calm concerning Brexit in the last few weeks was mainly due to the Easter recess. Some may begrudge Westminster politicians having a holiday because, as well as being seen to have thwarted Brexit, they are believed to be over-paid and are still associated with the parliamentary expense scandal of a couple of years ago.

Those who know anything about politics at every level will be aware of the tremendous effort that the vast majority dedicate to their role. In Westminster Brexit has increased the strain felt by MPs in the continuing quest to find a compromise in how to leave Europe in a

way that does not create unnecessary long-term damage to the economy.

Fascinatingly, recent months has seen a spike in viewership of live proceedings from the House of Commons concerning Brexit. However, for the vast majority of people, the workings of Parliament remain something of a mystery and appear somewhat arcane.

Speaker John Bercow's use of procedures dating back hundreds of years combined with language that must be adhered to, gives the sense of a system out of touch with common people. Moreover, the fact that in order to vote, MPs must walk through corridors, known as lobbies, the 'Aye' and 'No', on either side of the Speaker's chair, only adds to this belief.

For those who voted by a majority to leave back in June 2016, the desire by MPs in creating a workable solution to Brexit is regarded as posturing. MPs, it's argued, simply don't respect the will of those who voted to leave by 51.9% compared to the 48.1% who wished to remain (17,410,742 and 16,141,241 votes respectively). For critics of the established order this gives plenty of ammunition.

Another reason that has been advanced for relative calm and lack of debate in the media as far as Brexit is concerned, is that political leadership within the two major political parties are acutely aware that it does nothing to assist their candidates in the local elections. Brexit, arguably the greatest crisis to confront politicians in a generation – some argue since the second world-war – has effectively been temporarily ignored.

A source from Downing Street is quoted as stating that there has been an informal instruction to keep schtum in the lead up to the local elections; "There is a direct correlation between us arguing on television and people getting fed up, so we are hoping to avoid that on the eve of the polls."

Between now and the local elections little is likely to change in terms of the eventual outcome of Brexit. Whatever the results that emerge from Thursday, the main emphasis will continue to be on finding a way out of the impasse that has resulted in Theresa May's deal being

defeated three times between January and March (in two cases by historic margins).

The argument that Parliament was able to demonstrate its capability in debating Brexit, an issue so complex, multifaceted and divisive that it should never have been subject to a binary vote in the 2016 referendum, appears to cut no ice with voters.

Prior to Easter's recess, the series of indicative votes made it abundantly clear that Parliament was only able to agree on what it does not want; leaving with no deal an outcome supported by hardcore Brexiteers. Achieving a parliamentary majority for all other solutions presented proved impossible.

This caused Theresa May to try an approach that previously seemed unthinkable. Reaching out to Jeremy Corbyn to ask for assistance in finessing her deal to ensure adequate support and thus avoid reliance on assuage concerns among Brexiteers within her own party as well as the Democratic Unionist Party made sense.

Gaining a political consensus, critics of May's Brexit negotiating strategy believed, was something she should have done much sooner; ideally immediately after having become leader of the Conservative Party and, in replacing David Cameron, Prime Minister. Those who know her well believe that it was only ever the prospect of impending crisis in failing to gain Parliament's agreement as well as the danger of 'crashing out' with no deal that finally forced her to change.

All is not well in the opposition. Reports from well-placed sources in the Labour Party suggest internal arguments about the best way to achieve withdrawal from Europe that maintains respect for the outcome of the June 2016 EU referendum but ensures protection of jobs and the economy. One of the major arguments that is occurring is whether in negotiations with the Tories there should be insistence on a confirmatory referendum.

Like the Conservatives, the Labour Party recognises that many of those who would traditionally support them voted to leave. Though the Labour Party does not wish to be seen as disregarding the outcome of

the EU referendum, it is equally dedicated to avoiding the effects that would flow from a 'disorderly exit' caused by no deal.

Labour, especially under Jeremy Corbyn, wishes to be perceived as absolutely democratic. Its current dilemma is in what to include in its manifesto for the EU elections should they take place on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> May. A significant number of the National Executive, representing the views of a large proportion of members, as well as many trade unions, believe that given the magnitude of what may occur under any deal that is agreed by Parliament, has to be put to a confirmatory vote by the people. Such a vote would be deeply unpopular among Brexiteers and inevitably cause another storm.

Other rumours suggest that there are ongoing difficulties between negotiators from the Tories and Labour in trying to reconcile their relative positions, particularly the appropriateness of a Customs Union and the matter of workers' rights. Any hope that such negotiations, initially regarded as having a very limited chance of success, would be completed before the revised EU deadline of 12<sup>th</sup> April proved to be dashed. Instead a new series of deadlines have been imposed by the EU.

Should no deal be negotiated and agreed by 31<sup>st</sup> October, there is a possibility of the UK crashing out with severe economic and social consequences; the only outcome Parliament was able to agree would certainly not be in the national interest.

May and her ministers apparently still hope that it may be possible, either with or without success in talks with the Labour Party, to achieve agreement by the 22<sup>nd</sup> May and thus avoid the expense, estimated to be at least £100 million, of taking part in elections to the European Parliament a day later.

This is brinkmanship of the highest order. However, should this not be possible these elections will indeed go ahead. Doing so will, it is argued by many leading politicians, cause a storm of outrage among voters.

Leading Brexiteer John Redwood, formerly Secretary of State for Wales in Prime Minister John Major's Cabinet, and twice unsuccessful challenger for the leadership of the Conservative Party in the 1990s,

used a column in Monday's *Telegraph* to contend that both major parties are likely to suffer backlash from Brexit:

“Many voters feel let down by both main parties, who promised to take us out of the EU but who have conspired to keep us in for longer. The polling for the European elections shows Labour and the Conservatives on a combined 37 per cent or so, under half their level of support of less than two years ago.”

Writing in the *Express* last week, Macer Hall, Political Editor, suggested his sources in Whitehall believe that May recognises the challenge of achieving an agreement to leave the EU before 22<sup>nd</sup> May is virtually impossible. Instead, according to Macer, the PM instead will seek to achieve agreement by 30<sup>th</sup> June. Doing this, he explains, would mean any British MEPs elected on 23<sup>rd</sup> May would never actually take up their seats.

Holding the EU elections will unquestionably prove unpopular. Polls suggest that the major beneficiary will be Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party who have promised to be as disruptive as possible in a parliament they have nothing but contempt for. This prospect will create dread in equal measure among most MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) from other parties and those tasked with providing administration of the EU.

For this reason, there are many in this country and the EU who surely hope that it will be possible for the deal negotiated with Theresa May, even if it is revised following discussions with the Labour Party, to be agreed by Parliament.

However, should such agreement not be possible by either 22<sup>nd</sup> May or 30<sup>th</sup> June, we then enter the summer recess with the impending deadline of another cliff edge at the end of October. This could lead to an extremely scary Halloween if we finally crash out with no deal on this date.

This could unleash a storm of economic and social consequences causing long-term damage to the UK from which recovery in prosperity and living standards for all will be difficult. Let's hope the current period of relative calm allows cool heads and wisdom to prevail.