

The Possibility of Compromise

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Compromise has been argued to be a virtue and necessity in politics. As my colleague [David Hearne](#) so eloquently pointed out in these pages recently, dogmatically sticking to one's position regardless of its futility seldom makes for a good long-term negotiating strategy. In that sense, one really could say that "only the impotent are pure".

And the current Brexit deadlock in Parliament has displayed this time and time again. Whether it is a Prime Minister who cannot take "no" for an answer – surely reminding me of that caustic definition of insanity – repeating the same behaviour over and over again but expecting a different outcome, to Brexiteers who continue to dogmatically hold out against compromise despite lacking the numbers in Parliament to effect their chosen "clean Brexit" on the country at large.

And so we have it again today, with the publication of Theresa May's letter to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council (that arm of the EU that is comprised of national leaders who get to decide whether we have an extension to Article 50 or not). May, despite being told "non" or "nein" to her previous request for a short extension to June 30, has done so again. Maybe this is just a matter of playing politics to the domestic gallery, but why waste everyone's time any further?

Tusk, for his part, is suggesting a "flexible" departure schedule for UK, "offering" up to 12 months extension, with the option to leave earlier if an agreement can be reached between Government and Parliament, and thereby the UK and EU. This would require the assent of the other 27 EU national leaders, so one can only surmise that Mr Tusk has done his homework and canvassed the opinions of said national leaders.

What then the odds of a lengthy extension to Article 50 (thereby assumedly committing the UK to taking part in EU Parliamentary elections in May)? At this stage, virtually nothing has emerged from the discussions between the PM and Jeremy Corbyn, despite tweets

from some MPs (e.g., Caroline Lucas of the Greens) suggesting that the PM is still highly resistant to the notion of a public vote on any withdrawal agreement.

Corbyn for his part continues to come under intense pressure from members of his Shadow Cabinet (e.g., Emily Thornberry, Tom Watson), MPs and the wider Labour Party membership to make any agreement with Theresa conditional on the proviso that a public vote be held on the withdrawal agreement, with Remain as an option on the ballot paper.

Talks continue today, though none appear planned for the weekend; taking us into next week, when by April 10th the PM will be obliged to present the case for the UK to an emergency meeting of the said European Council.

At the risk of crystal ball-gazing, I think it is rather unlikely that May and Corbyn will be able to hammer out any “compromise” agreement. The PM has been rather obstinate in resisting calls to embrace a Customs Union, or membership of the Single Market (or close alignment to thereof) and another referendum remains anathema to her.

Expect to see both sides “agree to disagree” and thus pave the way for a series of votes in the Commons early next week to shore up a Brexit option that could command a majority in Parliament – which unlike the last two series of “indicative” votes (of which none managed to gain majority support), the PM has promised to abide by.

Just what this would look like remains to be seen but in the event of this, we could expect to see the PM’s withdrawal agreement put forward as one of the options – in effect a “Meaningful Vote” 4.0. Indeed, it could be argued that this is another attempt by the PM to scare Brexiteers into voting for her deal by offering up the spectre of the Labour Leader in effect dictating Brexit policy – or worse, no Brexit at all.

To reiterate the “never never never” mind-set that key Brexiteers such as Mark Francois and Steve Baker and the DUP continue to exhibit, compromising to May’s deal seems to be the last thing on their mind.

Rather, they hold out in the hope that No Deal could yet happen by default, given that we are now 2 seconds from midnight.

Possible then is that Parliament will actually coalesce around a softer Brexit such as Customs Union and Single Market (“Common Market 2.0) but with the proviso that another public vote (with Revoking Article 50 as an option) actually be held. This would certainly require a longer extension of the type that Tusk is holding out, and participating in EU Parliamentary elections.

Interesting then is a recent poll (March 28th) conducted by Opinium (commissioned by *the Observer*) which asked some 2,000 respondents that “if the UK were to participate in the 2019 European Parliament elections which party would you vote for to be your MEP?” The breakdown of the % of respondents that stated they would vote for a party (i.e., excluding the 354 “don’t knows” and 249 “would not vote”) is shown in the table below.

| Party | UK Share | North | Midlands | London | South | Wales | Scotland |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Labour | 30% | 38% | 32% | 38% | 28% | 29% | 18% |
| Tory | 24% | 27% | 26% | 18% | 24% | 14% | 18% |
| UKIP | 18% | 16% | 24% | 14% | 18% | 22% | 14% |
| Lib Dem | 10% | 11% | 7% | 8% | 12% | 13% | 4% |
| Green | 8% | 6% | 4% | 17% | 11% | 3% | 4% |
| Other | 5% | 2% | 7% | 3% | 6% | 1% | 6% |
| SNP | 4% | 1% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 38% |
| Plaid | 1% | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 19% | 0% |

Source: <https://www.opinium.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VI-28-03-2019-Full-Data-Tables.xlsx>

In contrast to the notion (or fears of other EU leaders maybe) that the UK electorate would return an angry pro-Brexit mob, if this is any guide then UK voters would return a majority-progressive cohort of MEPs. Where this would leave Nigel Farage's new "Brexit Party" is most likely out in the cold, as one would assume they would split the UKIP vote.

Only in the Midlands and Wales, it would appear, is UKIP continuing to vie with the main parties. The Midlands, of course, had the highest Leave vote share of any part of the UK.

Indeed, given the concerns over right-wing populism across Europe expressed by those such as French President, Emmanuel Macron, depending on your point of view, the UK could end up returning a "voice of reason" cohort of MEPs; rather ironic given the current Brexit situation – and a long way removed from the "awkward squad" that Jacob Rees-Mogg demands as the price for a long Article 50 extension.

Should this be surprising then, if current polls continue to predict a swing towards remaining in the EU as a majority option by the public? We shall have to wait and see.