

# Was it David Miliband who brought us to Brexit?

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Now we are, technically, in a post-Brexit landscape, it is probably worth asking how we managed to get here. Fifteen years ago, perhaps, such an outcome might have been considered highly unlikely. It might still have happened, but perhaps not as soon as it has.

It's my judgement that, more often than not, big political change can happen as much by accident as design; as much by dint of unpredictable chaos than clear ideological drive.

It is also often by means of a series of unconnected, completely unrelated decisions made by individual politicians and others, and with no intention by them to set in train events that come out as they eventually do. Chaos theory applies more often in politics than politicians are aware, and the single flap of a butterfly wing in one part of the system can ultimately result in a tsunami elsewhere.

And it is my contention that in these complex circumstances, David Miliband is as significant as David Cameron in lighting the blue Brexit touchpaper.

The great British novelist Paul Scott developed a notion of truth he termed the 'concatenation', and explored it throughout his great 'The Raj Quartet' series of novels. Any one event is inextricably related to a complex web of other events and human experiences, however unconnected and apparently unrelated.

Understanding the truth of any event or moment can only be through its place in a much wider concatenation of others. So while *The Jewel in the Crown* (the first novel of the four) begins with the rape of Daphne Manners (and the story seems to then explore it through the history, economics and politics of Britain in India, and India in Britain ) over 2000 pages later, its contexts, events and truth are so complex a

concatenation that the initial event of the rape becomes a lost, and barely remembered event, and in the saga it was meant to enable us to understand.

And so with the lengthy Brexit Quartet, a non-fiction series: stranger, indeed, than fiction.

If we only take a recent snapshot of those most responsible (take them as witting or unwitting heroes or villains, depending on your view of Brexit) for where we are with actual Brexit, we might notice that those who most wanted to prevent Brexit itself, or enable it to be as soft as possible, can now be seen as the ironic handmaidens of the actual fact of Brexit, and the likelihood of it still becoming as hard-as-steel a Brexit.

A Brexit in name only might well have occurred instead had, for example, Theresa May been left where she was, had her withdrawal agreement got through. Might she have received the subsequent gratitude of the electorate? Possibly not.

Did the later series of attempts to take control of the order paper and the subsequent Benn act all but ultimately ensure the Hard Brexit at the end of this year and may see signalled in June?

Was Speaker Bercow in his undoubted novations into our parliamentary constitution the most recent handmaiden?

Were the LibDems, and Jo Swinson in particular, the unwitting authors of both their own political destruction and the hardest of Brexits by failing to allow an alternative government to form under Corbyn or N.E. Other? To have enabled some alternative Corbyn Brexit for which he might have got some credit. Might voters seeing Corbyn actually in Number 10, have taken a different subsequent view of him?

Did the opposition more widely, and strongly pro-Remain Labour MPs and members in particular, give Boris exactly what he wanted? That is – no Brexit before a general election?

As I pointed out in my [November blog](#), he really was hoping all along to have a Brexit Election. That's what he got. Had his Withdrawal

Agreement received Royal Assent in November he would have been distraught. And he may not have subsequently retained the premiership.

He wanted, needed, and planned all along (with Dominic Cummings, of course) for an election in which he could promise to deliver Brexit unleashed, rather than asking for credit for having delivered it. The British electorate rarely reward P.M.s. I doubt Boris would have got the majority he eventually got, if one at all, had he already delivered Brexit.

In the week before the December 12<sup>th</sup> General Election I overheard conversations between workers at my local B&Q, which presaged what was going to happen. It went something like this:

“I’ve never voted Conservative....ever.” said one.

“Neither have I. But you want Brexit done now?” said the other.

“Yes...definitely!” came the reply.

“Well you need to just ***lend*** Boris your vote, just this time, then you can go back next time.”

Had Boris delivered Brexit by this election this conversation would never have happened. He also rightly acknowledged the position of the loan of votes almost immediately on the 13<sup>th</sup> December.

Clearly David Cameron is seen by most as the most recent, most responsible, player in delivering Brexit. But I would suggest that it was not necessarily calling the referendum as such, but calling it in the context of still searing austerity. The outcome of the referendum was so close that the unbalanced impact of 6 years of austerity hit hard in the minds of many crucial referendum voters. But this was especially so in left-behind, what might be called countrypolitan and coastalpolitan areas in the midlands and north, Wales and the South West.

And for many also the LibDems are in that austerity concatenation all the way back to 2010. Thus their DNA remains embedded in the referendum result. In particular, Sir Nick Clegg is without doubt one of

the ironic chief architects of the likely hard Brexit. And of him more later.

Had Cameron announced on the steps of Downing Street in 2015 that Austerity was now done, though a necessary step, and that the spending taps were back on, especially in local government, then the 2016 referendum might just have taken place in a slightly different enough context to have brought a different result. So George Osborne is obviously up in the ranks of the enablers, too.

Ed Miliband's and Labour's failure to unseat Cameron as P.M. in 2015 (and indeed handing him an unexpected working majority) was also a pivotal moment in the complex saga and gives him a place in the pantheon of irony.

As might his decision to enable the sudden temporary expansion of the membership of the Labour Party (a process which unintentionally endured) to enable massively wider participation in Labour Leadership elections – which fundamentally changed the Party to become a suddenly strongly left wing selectorate. This paved the way for a shift to the (ironically, Eurosceptic) Corbyn and the resurgence of the left. MPs who also lent their votes to get Corbyn on the ballot at the last minute self identify now as ironic enablers.

But actually it could be said that his brother David Miliband had a greater hand in Brexit and, in his own way, firing the Brexit starting gun. Like many others in this saga he left the field.

The General Elections of 2010 and 2015, the referendum of 2016 and the General Elections of 2017 and 2019 were combined electoral concatenations of epic proportions. But the fall-out from, and the lead up to, the General Election of 2010 are, I would argue, where the Brexit steamroller was first sent downhill. And brother David Miliband and Nick Clegg effectively and unwittingly released the handbrake.

We are in the realm of alternative political universes and what-ifs, obviously, here. But what if, and what of Brexit, if David Miliband had, as had been widely expected by even his closest allies, resigned from Gordon Brown's cabinet shortly after the apparently Stage One resignation on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2009 of James Purnell from that cabinet? What if, indeed?

Even prior to Purnell, two cabinet ministers, Jacqui Smith and Hazel Blears had resigned in the previous two days. The day after Purnell's resignation John Hutton the defence secretary quit. The local election results were awful. The transport secretary Geoff Hoon resigned.

So...it was expected that, in a rather Heseltine moment, Miliband would depart the cabinet (he had laid out his vision for Britain's future a year before) and the series of further resignations would force Gordon Brown's resignation; and shortly thereafter Miliband senior would sweep to victory in the party and become Britain's new Prime Minister.

And yet. And yet.

Instead a deal was done organised by another arch-European Peter Mandelson and he stayed his hand. The rest is history.

How differently might that 2010 election (or an earlier one, indeed) have gone then? And how might the next 10 years have gone differently? Whither then Brexit?

One of the reasons Ed beat David eventually (and narrowly) in September 2010 was a lingering belief by enough in the party that David should have got the party out of a hole and he could have won the 2010 election for the party and himself. He had his chance and he declined it, and harm had been done.

In the aftermath of the 2010 General Election came the horsetrading and haggling which eventually led to the Tory LibDem Coalition, which itself led to the Fixed Term Parliament Act. Had that (what most people now regard as a dreadful) statute not been there in 2019, again, how might events have turned?

What also came out of the Coalition agreement was a referendum – one on Proportional Representation, or rather on the Alternative Vote system. That referendum took place and was lost. Had A.V. been instituted, I doubt very much whether we would have been talking about any kind of Brexit this week.

But what is frequently disregarded is that while difficult, an alternative was laid before Nick Clegg and the LibDems in the horsetrading and

haggling before Gordon Brown eventually walked out of Downing Street. Coalition with Cameron's Conservatives was a clear choice, not an inevitability.

Ed Balls and the Labour negotiating team in 2010 were offering a rainbow coalition with terms which if Nick Clegg and the LibDems had taken, would likely have ultimately prevented Brexit.

It strikes me that the biggest error Clegg made, from the LibDems and Europe's point of view (and with hindsight an even more colossal error) was to turn down the offer made during negotiations with Labour in 2010 of getting PR without a referendum if they went with Labour. If the LibDems had insisted on replacing Brown, as had been mooted also, a swift leadership election might have led to Miliband senior being in place.

The Labour rainbow coalition could have delivered P.R. without the referendum and probably not the alternative vote system. Again, how different would have the next 10 years have been had all subsequent elections been fought on P.R.? (Possibly Farage might have entered Parliament with quite a cohort, admittedly.)

Instead, senior Labour politicians themselves like John Reid, Jack Straw and David Blunkett cautioned against any deal and pulled the rug under Ed Balls and others, warning that what the party needed instead was to be out of office for a while. It would do it good. That out of office for a while led to 10 years of austerity and Brexit.

And instead also Clegg opted for the disastrous A.V. referendum route: he risked one of the most significant asks of his party and its predecessors for a century and more on the whims of what we now know are unpredictable U.K. referendums.

There have been many handmaidens of Brexit. David Cameron was there at the start of the birth, but at its conception were David Miliband and Nick Clegg.

So there you have it. The Scottish concatenation of political chaos and individual decisions thrown to the political gods and fates over the last 10 years has produced a great saga. There could, though, have been many other saga endings.

But the crescendo, the denouement, the conclusion that emerges this week as its climax, an actual Brexit, was not inevitable.

**Disclaimer: This blog is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of Centre for Brexit Studies and Birmingham City University.**