

The return of Oliver's Army?

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As every day goes by, it becomes abundantly apparent that the prospects of the UK leaving the EU on 31st October with 'no-deal' are increasing. This is particularly so after the last of the Tory party leadership hustings that occurred on Monday evening for The Sun/talkRADIO made it clear that both of the contenders believe that one of the fundamental parts of the withdrawal agreement (WA that was negotiated between Theresa May and her representatives) with the so called 'backstop', is dead.

Right from David Cameron's announcement that there would be a referendum held to decide on continued membership of the EU, to fulfil a pledge made in the 2015 Conservative manifesto as a sop to the Eurosceptic element of his party, a number of commentators, myself included, recognised the inherent dangers that such a poll could pose for the continued operation of the Good Friday Agreement. It's significant that the potential consequences that the decision of voters to leave is due to what historians will regard as 'cock up' as opposed to conspiracy.

Cameron believed that following the election in 2015, there would be another coalition government with the Liberal Democrat party and that their price would be to jettison the promise of a referendum. Not for the first time, the judgement of politicians who are expected to know better was found to be suspect. Having held the poll, Cameron who campaigned for remain, felt that there was no more he could do and promptly resigned to be replaced by Theresa May who proudly proclaimed her intention to do something to make the lot of those 'just about managing' (JAMs) better.

As we are discovering, promises made in the run-up to national polls can be somewhat malleable. Nonetheless, had the Liberal Democrats not been so unpopular due to their more than tacit support for the austerity policies implemented to deal with national debt arising from the Global Financial Crisis (caused by bailing the banks out), as well as supporting the trebling of university fees to £9,000 per year –

despite promising to abandon them in their 2015 election manifesto – we might not be in the current crisis.

And crisis is what this country is in.

David Cameron, as many now believe, foolishly and naively believed he could, as the good public relations professional he'd been after leaving Oxford and before entering politics, spin the debate to produce a majority in favour to remain – effectively silencing Eurosceptics within his party and, he hoped, neutralising the threat from the UK Independence Party then led by Nigel Farage. What Cameron misunderstood was that austerity had made not just the poor and disadvantaged feel worse off, but those in work but who felt squeezed by higher bills that needed to be paid from stagnating wages.

The background to the 2015 referendum provided a 'perfect storm', allowing the likes of UKIP and elements within the Conservative Party – the curiously named and overtly partisan European Research Group (ERG). They shamelessly milked the sense of hopelessness felt by many and, with typical aplomb as the politicians they are, offered all sorts of blandishments as to the benefits of casting a vote to leave. The fact that UKIP leader Farage and leaders of Vote Leave, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, were acknowledging the importance of maintenance of effective trade indicated that the consequences of leaving the EU were not seen as being especially negative or difficult, quite the contrary.

Over three years on from the June 2016 referendum, and despite the vast amount of evidence presented by the sort of 'experts' so derided by Michael Gove as being too pessimistic and part of 'Project Fear', we are in a situation in which no-deal is now widely seen as the only effective way to fulfil the wishes of the people who voted to leave. The narrative has shifted to the extent that even those who campaigned to leave but now argue that leaving with no-deal would be catastrophic are regarded as being insufficiently patriotic.

Worse, those arguing that leaving the EU is a huge mistake from which there will be no benefit and significant diminution of economic and political standing and that we should revoke Article 50 are perceived by Brexiteers and their cheerleaders in the likes of *The*

Telegraph and *Daily Mail* as being akin to traitors. Brexit has opened up divisions that, as history demonstrates, can produce the sort of instability in less stable countries than the UK that results in civil war.

Whilst England has been free of civil war since the seventeenth century when Parliamentarians led by Oliver Cromwell, the “Roundheads” engaged with Royalists led by Charles I and Charles II, “Cavaliers”, primarily over the nature of what constituted legitimacy in governing England, that cannot be said of the UK as a whole. The UK consists of England, Scotland Wales and, of course, Northern Ireland which during the period 1969 to 1997 experienced what was known as ‘the troubles’ which was the euphemism used for what looked to outsiders to be a *de facto* civil war.

The origins of conflict in the six counties of Ulster that make up the state of Northern Ireland that was created in 1922, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan were excluded as the number of Catholics would not have produced the dominance by Protestants than unionists wanted in order to achieve an in-built majority, are well known. After almost three decades during which, in totality over 3,530 people lost their lives and well over 47,500 were injured, the conflict was resolved by painstaking negotiation between the major political parties including representatives of paramilitary groups from Irish republicans and Loyalist groups.

Had it not been for his ill-judged involvement in the American-led invasion of Iraq, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement by then Prime Minister Tony Blair would likely have been seen as his greatest legacy. Though Blair has regularly warned of the dangers that lie in the UK leaving the EU, particularly if it undermines the principles that are critical to the agreement, his message is somewhat undermined by what his both critic and even admirers perceive to be his toxicity.

Blair gets much credit for managing to achieve what many had, only a few years prior to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement as inconceivable – ardent Irish republicans accepting the state of Northern Ireland and agreeing that the future should be decided by elected politicians. However, his immediate predecessor as Prime Minister, John Major, persevered with the quest for peace despite the regularity of atrocities and experienced a mortar attack on No 10 Downing Street whilst chairing a cabinet meeting in 1991.

For those who've never read the Good Friday Agreement it is remarkably short at 35 pages. Though regarded by some as having been far less specific than it might ideally have been, explicitly 'constructively ambiguous', it deals with the arrangements for a multi-party agreement by most of Northern Ireland's political parties (the Multi-Party Agreement). Significantly, the main political grouping not to sign the Good Friday Agreement was the Democratic Unionist Party who have been engaged in providing support for the Conservative Party since the 2017 general election.

The Good Friday Agreement also dealt with arrangements between the British and Irish governments (the British–Irish Agreement). Additionally, the Good Friday Agreement dealt with the status and system of government of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom (Strand 1), the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Strand 2) and the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom (Strand 3).

At the time of signing the notion that one of these countries would be considering leaving the EU would have seemed inconceivable. However, in any conflict there are not just the political arrangements to be considered but the messy and controversial aspects that result from internecine conflict between two communities some of whom, even 21 years on, remain implacably opposed to each other requiring 'peace walls' in Belfast.

Accordingly, matters such as civil and cultural rights were considered including policing (the Royal Ulster Constabulary becoming the Police Service of Northern Ireland). However, the areas that were most difficult to resolve was demilitarisation by the British army that was utterly resented by nationalist communities, voluntary decommissioning of weapons so that there was no perception of surrender and, most controversial of all, the release of prisoners, some of whom were involved in what are still regarded as the most heinous of crimes.

These last areas, though benefiting loyalists as much as Irish republicans, have been components of the Good Friday Agreement that mean that many within the unionist community loathe it. It's worth noting that leave campaigner MP Michael Gove, who was recently eliminated as a contender for leadership of what is, to give it its full

name, the Conservative and Unionist Party, wrote in 2000 in a pamphlet *The Price of Peace* published by right-wing think tank the Centre for Policy Studies that it represented a “Trojan horse”.

Gove also stated that the agreement represented a “denial of our national integrity” and “enshrines a vision of human rights which privileges contending minorities at the expense of the democratic majority” and was a “rigged referendum”, a “mortal stain” and “a humiliation of our army, police and parliament”. In comments that, were the history not so dreadful and immediate prospects so delicately fragile would be laughable, Gove compared the agreement to the appeasement of the Nazis in the 1930s and the condoning of the desires of paedophiles.

Sadly, it seems, in the desire to play to whatever gallery he thinks will give him greatest gratification, putative PM Boris Johnson appears unable and/or unwilling to accept that the principles of the Good Friday Agreement are enshrined in law and protected by international agreement. To claim that his alternative approach to negotiation will force the other 27 EU members to capitulate is palpably nonsensical.

The EU’s continued ability to operate is vested in consensus. To do otherwise would be to effectively undermine everything the organisation has struggled so long and so hard to achieve as an economic and political entity. Besides, if the EU were to cave in and suddenly agree to terms even more generous than May was able to achieve, and which constitutional expert Professor Vernon Bogdanor stated at the Centre for Brexit’s annual conference in London on 29th March, to be far better than the UK should have hoped to attain, it would possibly create a ‘domino effect’ of other EU members wishing to follow the example of the UK in leaving but maintaining significant benefits.

Even assuming that Johnson could achieve some alteration in the Withdrawal Agreement, which must include arrangements for maintenance of the Good Friday Agreement. If only one member does not agree, such as, in particular, the Republic of Ireland, there can be no change.

Writing on the *InFacts* Website on Tuesday afternoon, Nick Kent in an article titled ‘Johnson and Hunt say backstop is dead. But for how

long?’ examines why the backstop was originally proposed, in order to ensure there is no return to a ‘hard border’ in Ireland but has “bedevilled the Brexit process” Kent neatly sums up the current stance of Johnson and Hunt as a “shabby exercise in macho posturing” based on making “increasingly more extreme promises in order to attract the votes of their Brexit Party supporting membership”

As Kent concludes:

“However much the backstop is disliked, it has not been replaced because of the lack of a credible alternative. Hunt and Johnson can declare it dead but that doesn’t solve the problem it was created to address. And crashing out without a deal would, by empowering the men of violence, risk replacing one problem on the border with another. The winning Tory leadership candidate may find himself trying to resurrect the backstop before the year is out.”

For everyone’s sake let’s hope that some sanity the sort of considered and careful thinking displayed by the likes of John Major is exhibited by whoever becomes the next PM. The last thing we want is the return of Oliver’s Army, the title of the 1979 single brilliant songwriter Elvis Costello who, having witnessed the troubles first-hand in Belfast wanted to send a message that conflict may create jobs for the security forces but brings misery to the local population.