

It [could] be the end of the [political] world as we know it

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As 'excitement' at Thursday's elections to the European Parliament rises, so too does tension and argument within the two leading political parties. For the Conservatives, the party currently in government, there is anger that Theresa May has not delivered the UK's withdrawal from the EU by the 29th March (as was expected within two years of Parliament having triggered Article 50). For Labour there is increasing exasperation at leader Jeremy Corbyn's unwillingness to be clear as to precisely what the party's stance on Brexit is and whether it will actively campaign for another referendum.

That Thursday is unlikely to deliver good news for the Conservative and Labour parties is something of an understatement as both are widely expected to see have their share of the vote reduced. Thursday's election, which were not intended to occur because it was expected that the UK would have left the EU by now, are likely to be regarded as a *de facto* opportunity for voters to show how they feel about the UK's membership of the EU almost three years after the referendum in June 2016. Consequently, a great deal of attention is being focused on the results.

Though, in the past, opinion polls for some elections have been notoriously inaccurate, the overall message is pretty consistent; that the Brexit Party led by former leader of UKIP, Nigel Farage, and which has been in existence for only a few months, will do well from voters disgruntled with the Conservative and Labour Party on Brexit. Latest averaged polls suggest that the Brexit Party is expected to win 32% of the votes, followed by Labour (21%), Lib Dems (15%), Conservatives (11%), Greens (7%), Change UK (4%) and UKIP (3%).

It's widely believed that aspiring politicians in the UK do not generally see representing the UK in the European Parliament as top of their list of desires. Rather, it's assumed, any politician, even if they commence at local level, will see the pinnacle of their career in

becoming an MP. Beyond this a few can dream of being offered a Cabinet portfolio and taking responsibility for a government department. Then you get a red despatch box and, for a lucky few, the chance to be chauffeured around in a car provided.

Though it is desperately unfair, being a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), has none of the kudos of being an MP in the 'Mother of all Parliaments'. As such, those elected effectively disappeared for five years and as to what they got up to their or the decisions they were involved in, remained something of a mystery to the vast majority of the public. Apart from occasional skirmishes, proceedings in the European Parliament rarely attracted news coverage.

In the past results from the elections to the European Parliament, which we've been engaged in since 1979, have been treated with a mixture of indifference and disdain. Despite joining the then EEC in January 1973 under Ted Heath's Conservative government and, following a Labour victory under Harold Wilson, confirming this decision via referendum in 1975, representation in the European Parliament has not been seen as important.

Though being a member of the European Economic Community (EEC) attracted some early interest, this quickly dissipated. Instead the focus shifted to what many commentators, especially those in the right-wing press, saw as profligacy caused by overweening bureaucracy on the part of those who, it was argued, really ran affairs in the EEC (and later EU); the unelected commissioners.

From the beginning of the UK's membership of the EEC, there were many within both main parties who were ill-disposed to being part of the greater European 'family'. Within Labour reluctance to join the EEC was based on a left-wing view that the institution was too dedicated to propagation of the interests of big business. Conservative scepticism was more complex and based on both simple nationalism as well as suspicion that the UK was being seduced into an institution attempting to achieve a federal arrangement in which Britain's Parliamentary sovereignty was likely to be usurped.

The signing of the Treaty on European Union (commonly known as 'The Maastricht Treaty') by all EEC members in February 1992, including the UK under PM John Major, was effectively the catalyst for the events we are currently experiencing. 'Maastricht', in which the European Union was formally established as well as increasing the scope of what its remit would be, including the intention to create a single European currency (the euro) confirmed the worst suspicions of many within the Conservative Party who were collectively known as 'Eurosceptics'.

Shifts in political ideology don't occur by accident. There is a need for a constant supply of notions that feed preconceived beliefs. Such was the case with Euroscepticism. A number of right-wing journalists were only too happy to engage in putting the boot into Europe. Given current events, it's worth noting the name of one such Brussels-based journalist working for *The Telegraph* who regularly pilloried the EU; Boris Johnson.

As the expression goes, all things are fair in love and war. Boris Johnson has been criticised during his career for not always subscribing to the importance of veracity; a characteristic that has not always endeared him to colleagues. This was certainly the case when he was a journalist reporting on the European Commission between 1989 and 1994.

Many other journalists were unhappy with the way that Johnson used his position to promulgate stories containing untruths intended to undermine the work of the European Commission by their appeal to readers whose affinity to Europe was largely non-existent. Chris Patten who, under John Major became Chairman of the Conservative Party and is now in the House of Lords has described Johnson as "one of the greatest exponents of fake journalism."

Johnson, an individual who has never suffered from shame, is undoubtedly pleased with the way in which his articles gave succour to those who passionately believed that the UK's place in the world was not best served by being in the EU. Quite the contrary. It's interesting to note that one of his biographers, Sonia Purnell, and who had been his deputy in Brussels, claims that he ensured that Euroscepticism has become "an attractive and emotionally resonant cause for the Right."

Between the early 1990s when Maastricht was signed and the present – quite apart from Johnson’s rise to prominence as a widely recognised politician who is known by his first name, like Madonna – Euroscepticism has become firmly established within the Tories. The right-wing of the Conservative Party happily embraced its tenets and, as John Major discovered, can make life miserable. Major famously referred to Eurosceptics within his party as “Bastards”. More recently, a senior advisor to a subsequent leader of the Conservatives and Prime Minister, claimed that they were regarded as “swivel-eyed loons”.

If Eurosceptics has remained an irritating element within the Tory party nothing much would have changed. What created the shift that may potentially lead to devastatingly bad results for the two main parties in Thursday’s elections to the European Parliament was the formation of UKIP (UK Independence Party) in 1991 by historian and academic Alan Sked.

Following the 1997 general election, comprehensively won by Labour’s Tony Blair who was a committed Europhile, leadership of UKIP was taken over by the party’s most successful politician: Nigel Farage. He established it as a spiritual home for those who felt that the leadership of the Conservative Party remained too inclined towards being part of the EU.

UKIP’s ability to achieve defections by Conservative MPs created headlines but could be ignored. What could not be ignored was the fact that support for the Conservatives at elections was being undermined by UKIP. Continued membership of the EU was becoming a question that David Cameron felt could not be ignored and led to his decision in the 2015 to promise a referendum if his party won.

That Cameron did not expect to win outright and believed that he would once again be forced to engage in a coalition with the LibDems, who he felt would never have agreed to such a referendum, is not a mere footnote in history. In the event, the Eurosceptics got their chance and, despite criticism of the way in which the ‘leave’ campaign was run, achieved their cherished goal when a majority of voters agreed that the UK should leave the EU. Nigel Farage’s work was done and UKIP would become irrelevant once we left the EU.

Thursday's election to the EU are an unintended consequence of Parliament's inability to agree on a deal that will ensure compliance with the wishes of majority of those who voted to leave three years ago. Arguments about what leaving would mean and what people actually understood on the basis of a binary decision have been part of the often febrile and acrimonious debate that has raged over the last couple of years.

Theresa May's failure to achieve Parliament's approval for the withdrawal agreement painstakingly negotiated with the EU has led to the re-emergence of Nigel Farage as leader of a party dedicated to departure. The Brexit Party (based on subscription) is one that, within a few months of its formation, is threatening to radically alter British politics in a way not seen for over a century and is causing understandable consternation amongst the leadership within the two major parties.

Current predictions are that on Thursday Farage's Brexit Party is likely to achieve 32% of the vote. This is way ahead of the other established parties. According to such predictions, the Tories' 11% of the vote would be their lowest share in a national election since the party was formed in 1834.

Parties explicitly stating the importance of remaining within the EU are also predicted to do well. The Lib Dems are likely to win in the region of 15% of the vote. As Labour leaders recognise, traditional supporters of its party who are disillusioned at its stance are likely to switch their vote to them. One senior source within Labour claims to be exasperated at the fact that a party so widely reviled because of its willingness to enter coalition with the Conservatives and support austerity as well as going back on an election manifesto promise to abandon student fees is being detoxified because of Brexit.

Dublin-based betting company Star Spreads, is predicting that the number of seats Farage's party could win may be 27. They predict that Labour should expect to win 14, a reduction of 6 on the 20 achieved in 2014. In what would be a humiliation for Theresa May, Star Spreads suggest the Conservatives who should anticipate winning only 7 seats. The 'true' remain parties, the Greens and Liberal Democrats, will do well according to Star Spreads winning 6 and 12 seats respectively.

Whatever happens on Thursday, attention will switch to the merits of a revised EU withdrawal agreement bill. The belief, apparently, is that by offering compromise on a range of items, including the vexed matter of belonging to a customs union, the government will achieve agreement when a vote is taken in the first week in June allowing the UK to leave the EU.

Failure to achieve approval for the revised withdrawal agreement bill will lead to a summer of uncertainty and the prospect of the UK leaving on the deadline imposed by the EU of 31st October with no arrangements in place. Leaving with no deal, an outcome Chancellor Philip Hammond considers to be disastrous would be to “hijack the result of the referendum,” because he believes, those who support this would “knowingly to inflict damage on our economy and our living standards.”

Such a view, from the cabinet’s leading pro-European is not shared by the person tipped to assume leadership of the Conservatives once Theresa May reigns which she’s promised to do if her revised withdrawal agreement bill fails and Nigel Farage.

One way to resolve the threat of a no deal is via another referendum by which the people of the UK decide what their fate should be. This is likely to be strenuously resisted by Brexiters who fear their goal of leaving the EU may slip from their grasp if people decide that leaving with no deal is, as many economists and politicians, including elder statesman Lord Heseltine, who has even stated his intention to vote Lib Dem on Thursday, is too risky.

Another option may be for whoever becomes PM to call an election. However, the latest polling shows by YouGov (see below) shows that this will result in the emergence of the Brexit Party as a potential coalition partner for the Conservatives who would not win sufficient seats to have a majority in power.

For Brexiters within the Conservative Party this is probably regarded as not such a bad outcome. For those who regard themselves as traditional ‘One Nation’ Tories committed to close ties to Europe, and who view the possibility of Boris becoming leader with increasing alarm, sharing power with someone they perceive to be an irritating upstart would be unthinkable.

Such an outcome could lead to a split within the Conservatives that would be an epoch-defining moment for British politics. Though some speculate on the possibility of a split in the Labour Party, given the fortunes of labour MPs who left to form Change UK, it is not as likely.

What is apparent is that Nigel Farage see his Brexit Party, one that has no published policies beyond leaving the EU without a Withdrawal Agreement, as following the model of Five Star in Italy. As last year's General Election there demonstrated, small parties dedicated to radical politics based on populism and overthrow of the establishment can attract significant support.

Writing in *The Guardian* today, journalist Darren Loucaides in his article 'Building the Brexit party: how Nigel Farage copied Italy's digital populists' describes the way in which he believes what has been achieved by Italian populist party Five Star can be emulated by his party:

"In Milan, Farage was struck by how [Gianroberto] Casaleggio was using social media and the internet to create a new model for political communications. Five Star members were discussing and voting on policy and nominating and electing each other to run for office while being steeped in party propaganda, all on a single online platform. This made supporters feel as if the movement's identity was emerging organically from their online interactions, while Casaleggio and Grillo could guide those interactions with messaging from above. What's more, the "movement" was dominated by a private company owned by Casaleggio. Five Star was in many ways less like a political party than a publicly traded company in which members were voting shareholders, but Casaleggio had the controlling stake."

Brexit once again demonstrates that it has engendered its ability to have consequences way beyond anything that would have been immediately contemplated in the aftermath of the 2016 UE referendum. Leaving the EU with no deal, with all the attendant economic devastation that would result is still a possibility. This is something that would be facilitated by a hard Brexiter taking over from Theresa May as PM.

However, it now seems equally possible that a politician whose role in creating the circumstances that led to Brexit occurring, and had been

considered by many to be a 'has been' may cause the political world as we know it in the UK to end. What would emerge in its place could be as frightening as what awaits us on Halloween this year if we crash out of the EU with no deal.