

Only the Impotent are Pure

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As the House of Commons seeks to plot a way forward through the current Brexit debacle, one theme is becoming prevalent above all others: many MPs are demonstrating a distinct unwillingness to compromise. Perhaps this is a function of our political system, which systematically rewards the largest political parties and punishes the smaller ones. Whilst this often (but far from always, as recent experiences have shown) delivers an outright 'result', it also tends to encourage partisanship and rewards tribal loyalty.

Compromise is therefore all-too-often a dirty word in British political lexicon. Those perceived as "strong" leaders are rewarded, whilst compromises are derided as 'u-turns'. "This lady is not for turning" is, after all, seen as a successful political speech rather than evidence of an inflexible and dogmatic attitude towards policymaking. Yet this political tradition now blocks progress on Brexit.

Many of the most ardent Brexiter MPs have voted against the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Theresa May's government and the EU time and again. Given that they *know* the proclivity of the vast majority of MPs is for a considerably softer Brexit than that which would be plausible (particularly with one of their own installed as Prime Minister) following the passage of the Withdrawal Agreement. They thus appear prepared to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in order to maintain ideological purity.

The cost of this purity is impotence. Far from taking St Augustine's maxim, "Lord make me chaste – but not yet", Brexiters embrace purity *now*, but by failing to pass the Withdrawal Agreement, they have lost the opportunity to shape the UK's future relationship with the EU. It is a supreme irony that by their "no, no, no"^[1] they have given the ability to shape policy to Jeremy Corbyn – their *bête noire* – and threaten the UK's future ability to do as Thatcher did and block proposals they dislike.

These MPs appear to object to being in a customs union with the EU, yet where were these objections during the Thatcher years? After all,

the UK had aligned its customs duties with the European Economic Community's (EEC) Common External Tariff by 1978. Why, then, was this desire to leave the Customs Union not articulated 30 years ago? The same critique could be made of Lord Lawson, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer under Margaret Thatcher in the mid-to-late 1980s.

The only logical argument that they can put forward in this regard is that Northern Ireland might be treated differently from Great Britain were the provisions of the backstop to come into effect. Yet Northern Ireland *already* significantly diverges from Great Britain in several important respects. Moreover, the UK government would have some control over the extent of divergence as it would retain the right to voluntarily align relevant standards in Great Britain with those in Northern Ireland.

For many, the ratification of the Maastricht treaty appears to have been a turning point, with individuals such as Bill Cash, Liam Fox, Bernard Jenkin and Iain Duncan Smith all rebelling against the Major Government in some form. It should come as no surprise to see many of these names amongst prominent Brexiters today^[2]. Once again, however, this does not explain their aversion to the implementation of a customs union.

What is just as astonishing is that this impotence via ideological purity appears to be becoming prevalent amongst their most ardent opponents – the most vociferous Remainers in the House of Commons. This was perhaps most obvious in Monday's indicative votes. In spite of using a system of voting – approval voting – that dissuades tactical voting (the procedure was designed to 'rule in' options rather than rule them out), ideological purity trumped pragmatism once again.

It is clear that for many, although not all, staunch Remainder MPs a second referendum which overturns the result of the first is an ideal result. This certainly appears to be the position of The Independent Group (TIG) of MPs, as well as the Liberal Democrats and a number of Labour rebels. It is also the preferred position of the SNP. For all of these groups, there is a very clear second-best option: namely remaining within the Single Market (whether via the European Economic Area or some other mechanism) and the EU Customs

Union. Both Plaid Cymru and the SNP voted in favour of this proposal on Monday (although both abstained on Kenneth Clarke's narrower proposal for a customs union). My own view is that, whatever one thinks of their political positions, this willingness to compromise is commendable.

Yet both TIG, four Liberal Democrat MPs and Parliament's sole Green MP all voted *against* the Common Market 2.0 proposal. This is in spite of the fact that I have heard at least one TIG MP openly advocate a near-identical plan (admittedly when they were members of a different political party) in the days before a second referendum seemed a likely possibility. Yet, remarkably, both the proposal for a customs union and the 'Common Market 2.0' suggestion were voted down thanks to the votes of these groups. TIG alone provided sufficient votes, had they switched sides, to pass the Common Market 2.0 proposal.

Just as with the Conservative Brexiters, their pursuit of ideological purity has given away influence and rendered policies they dislike *more* likely to pass rather than less. Only the impotent are pure.

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-27053536/euro-moments-thatcher-says-no-no-no-to-europe>

[2] As an historical footnote, two interesting absences from this list are David Davis and Jacob Rees-Mogg. The former was a government whip under John Major and actually voted *for* the Maastricht Treaty, becoming Europe Minister in 1994. As a new graduate, the latter was working for Rothschilds, although his father – Lord William Rees-Mogg launched legal action attempting to frustrate the Major Government's ratification of the Treaty.