Could Brexit Break the Tories?

The Conservative Party in the UK is one of the most successful election-winning machines in history. It survived the effective destruction of the Whigs (the Liberal Party) and the concomitant rise of the Labour Party in the early 20th century. Indeed, it has spent most of the past century in power (making effective use of coalitions where expedient, in order to effectively neuter political opposition).

Throughout its long history, however, it has faced numerous challenges and crises. Some have been existential – the split over the Corn Laws during the 1840s, for example. Other challenges have been broader but less severe, with the Attlee reforms of the 1940s leading to the emergence of so-called “one nation” Toryism. In this vein, it is noteworthy that Ireland has represented a consistent challenge to the Conservative Party over the past 150 years. Indeed, its full name – the Conservative and Unionist Party – indicates why this is the case.

During the 1800s, the Tories consistently opposed home rule in Ireland, seeking to avoid any dilution to the Acts of Union of 1800. Ultimately, the Irish War of Independence scuppered this desire to retain ongoing an ongoing union with all of Ireland. During the 20th century, and particularly since The Troubles, the relationship between the Conservative Party and Northern Ireland has been complex.

As such, it is perhaps not surprising that it is once again the issue of Ireland that is now posing another existential threat to the Conservatives. The great irony is that Ireland itself is not central to the issue at stake: it is merely that the complex relationship between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has so complicated the process of leaving the EU that resolution is elusive.

Today, Brexit is the issue that threatens to break the Conservative Party asunder. Since the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s, the Conservative Party has been split between Eurosceptics and those who are more pro-European. Opposition to Maastricht centred over the political centralisation that it heralded. It is therefore a deep irony that many of the issues that so motivated the Maastricht rebels have proven to be a thorn in the side of the EU not

because of excessive centralisation but because member states have jealously guarded control over them. The absence of fiscal union in the Eurozone is perhaps the standout example, but many other areas are also stretching the bonds of EU nations (for example the absence of a common asylum policy during the 2015 migrant ‘crisis’ and Germany’s unilateral response to this).

The Maastricht negotiations were a diplomatic triumph for the Major Government. The British gained opt-outs to a variety of areas that they objected to – including economic and monetary union – and the social chapter was removed from the body of the treaty. The British likewise obtained an opt-out from this. Nevertheless, these disagreements have festered within Tory ranks.

With Maastricht as the trigger, the Conservative Party effectively cleaved in two over the issue. At the time, the bulk of the parliamentary party remained stoutly European, following Mrs Thatcher in supporting the creation of the Single Market. Nevertheless, the Eurosceptic rump were hugely effective in augmenting their influence with the active support of some within the print media.

After 1997 the Tories became increasingly Eurosceptic, driven by two main factors. Firstly the parliamentary party was decimated by the crushing defeat inflicted by Tony Blair’s Labour Party in 1997. The rump that remained (if you’ll pardon the pun) was somewhat more Eurosceptic. This, combined with being dazzled by Blair’s youth and “star quality” alongside the rather cynical alliance between arch-Europhile Kenneth Clarke and arch-Eurosceptic John Redwood (likened by some to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact!) led to the election of the Eurosceptic William Hague as leader. As a footnote, his disastrous 2001 election campaign centred on the “Save the Pound” slogan clearly backfired. Inconveniently, the pound is still with us almost 20 years later and doesn’t appear to be going anywhere.

The second major factor driving Conservative Euroscepticism was the (somewhat esoteric) change to the party’s internal election rules in 1998. As a result, the party membership (typically older, greyer and much more Eurosceptic than either the UK as a whole or the parliamentary party) hold a great deal of sway over leadership and thus the future direction of Tory Party policy. The end result is that the

Tory Party today is considerably more Eurosceptic than in previous years.

The events leading up to the EU Referendum have been widely covered and need not be rehashed here. Suffice it to say that a combination of the UKIP insurgency and a desire to appease the Eurosceptic wing of his party led David Cameron to promise a referendum he never expected to have to implement. In spite of all of these things, a majority of the parliamentary party supported remaining in the EU in 2016.

A large minority, however, did not – particularly prominent examples include both longstanding Brexiters such as Redwood, but also more recent (and, dare I suggest, opportunistic) “converts” to the cause, most notably Boris Johnson. Ultimately the 2016 EU Referendum was unexpectedly won by the Leave campaign, triggering the course of events that have brought us to today. Far from uniting his party as hoped, in my opinion erroneously, by David Cameron, the Conservative Party remains more divided than ever on the question of Europe.

The present situation poses an existential threat to the Conservatives. We have a Cabinet that has to be assiduously balanced between Leavers and Remainers, alongside a parliamentary party split into factions. Whilst the existing split has thus far been contained (with just 3 MPs leaving for the newly formed ‘Independent Group’), there is a very clear risk it will become a yawning chasm that threatens to match the Grand Canyon in scope.

The bulk of the parliamentary party have been coerced into voting for the Withdrawal Agreement. If this can somehow be passed, Theresa May stands a reasonable chance of keeping the Conservative Party whole, although there is a risk of losing certain individual MPs at the edges. The challenge in this event will come if the newly-formed Independent Group (potentially in conjunction with the near-defunct Liberal Democrats) emerge as a serious centrist (pro-European) challenge to ‘politics as usual’. Nevertheless, the powerful Conservative electoral machine will be difficult to defeat.

The existential threat will come if Theresa May is unable to ram the Withdrawal Agreement through parliament. In this event, the UK will

either need to ask the EU for a much longer extension to Article 50 (potentially predicated on a second referendum, although a much softer Brexit vision in conjunction with the Labour Party is an unlikely second possibility) or leave without a Withdrawal Agreement in place. In either case, enough Conservative MPs will be outraged to effectively split the party. Whether the challenge is internal or external is, to a large extent, irrelevant. Ultimately, a steep electoral price will end up being paid.

In spite of all of this, the Conservatives have developed an uncanny knack of arising phoenix-like out of the ashes of defeat. Only a fool would truly bet against them doing so again. Nevertheless, the winds of change are blowing once more and structures that we have hitherto taken for granted will not automatically avoid being swept away.