

Beyond Satire: the UK's Brexit Crisis Staggers On

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After a catastrophic election, Theresa May, could be found, three days later, pretending it was business as usual as she re-appointed ministers to her cabinet, having swiftly thrown her two key advisers over board.

The UK now faces a minority Conservative government in alliance with the hard-line, pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) offering a 'confidence and supply' deal. According to one newspaper, the DUP want UKIP's Nigel Farage to have a role in the Brexit talks (the UKIP vote having collapsed in the election, and the party now with no MPs in parliament).

Sinn Fein for their part have said they think such a deal would contravene the Good Friday Agreement. For sure, it won't make it any easier to solve the political crisis in Northern Ireland which has left it without its own government for months. The Irish government has expressed concern at the lack of any nationalist voices at Westminster (the Social Democratic and Labour party having lost its seats and Sinn Fein never take theirs up).

With Northern Ireland one of the EU27's first three top priorities for the Brexit talks – before engaging at all on a future trade deal – it looks messy indeed. Yet this is reality not satire.

Softer Brexit on the cards?

Theresa May's days as prime minister are certainly numbered, the only dispute being whether she might last 5 days, 5 weeks or 5 months. And Jeremy Corbyn's success in rallying younger and 'Remain' voters to the Labour side, increasing the number of Labour MPs at Westminster by 30, means he lost the election but has come out the political winner, much strengthened within the Labour party and at Westminster.

Meanwhile, one of the most pro-EU voices in the UK – Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon – is still reeling from her own loss of 21 MPs, taking the SNP down to 35 MPs and a vote share under 37%. In pro-EU Scotland, unlike the rest of the UK, the Tories rebounded, one more of many ironies of the election.

Many are now predicting that a softer Brexit will somehow emerge out of this political chaos. Corbyn says he wants a 'jobs-first' Brexit – but that does not seem to mean staying in the EU's single market. And on Sunday he called May's planned Great Repeal bill 'history'.

More right-wing Labour MPs, such as former minister Yvette Cooper, are suggesting a cross-party approach to Brexit is needed while some commentators (including appropriately the comedian Armando Iannucci) have gone as far as to suggest a government of national unity is needed (thinking perhaps, amidst the confusion, that the UK is at war). Many of these 'national consensus' proponents seem to have a rather rosey understanding of what Brexit options are likely to be acceptable to the EU27 and how they might be negotiated.

Corbyn was anyway, of course, always fairly eurosceptic – his advisers and close entourage even more so. For now, Corbyn's strategy looks to be focused, unsurprisingly, on opposing and destabilising the already unstable minority Tory

government not on forging a Brexit consensus with Theresa May (or her successor). By Sunday – three days after the election – opinion polls suggested the British public finally see Corbyn at least as desirable for Prime Minister as May. Corbyn is on the ascendant.

And Corbyn, in power, would want an interventionist industrial strategy unconstrained by the EU. So the days of Labour MPs voting with the Tories for Article 50 seem over – they will not be voting for any Tory Great Repeal bill, vital if Brexit is to stay on track.

Nor is Theresa May any longer in charge ('in office but not in power', the old Norman Lamont quip is back in use). She is, for the first time, essentially dependent on her cabinet and other key Tory figures for strategic decisions. Consultations have begun hurriedly with UK business leaders and organisations. Might a Tory (DUP-backed) soft Brexit emerge?

For now this is quite unclear – and the DUP are not a soft Brexit party. Business leaders would certainly want a much more open migration policy than May was promising, many would want to stay in the single market. But predicting what could get through the House of Commons is another question. There are still plenty of Tory hard Brexit MPs (who would even see a Canada-style deal as soft) though equally there are some Tory soft Brexit MPs like Anna Soubry who want May to go and an EEA Brexit. On the Labour side, some MPs would support a single market approach too – but would they defy a newly strengthened Corbyn's whip?

Of course, the government doesn't have to have a vote in the Commons on its Brexit strategy until it returns with a deal in autumn 2018 (a timescale that no UK politicians are currently thinking about at all). But the sort of strategy the minority government adopts – membership of the European Economic Area or a Canada-style trade deal but EEA transition (or some other variant) – will determine what sort of Great Repeal bill (turning EU law into UK law) it needs to get through the Commons and Lords. It will also need new trade policies, new agriculture and fisheries policies – all of these having serious implications for the UK-EU27 talks (and vice versa). And the government may soon enough – and more than once – face a no confidence vote.

The chances of Conservative and DUP MPs all staying on board as the extraordinarily challenging process of getting new laws, policies and regulatory structures through parliament must be very low indeed. With a Tory leadership election likely before long, the very tight timetable for Brexit talks will soon start to look all but impossible to achieve. A second general election (which the Tories will avoid as long as they can fearing they would now lose to Corbyn) would take Brexit talks even further off track but must be very likely in the next two years.

Some hope the EU27 would allow an extension to talks – but it's not at all obvious why they would do that, and especially not why they would do it at this point. If it looks like a strategic intervention from the EU27 (Merkel perhaps?) could tip the UK back towards either the EU or the EEA, it might come – but Merkel or other EU leaders would choose their timing very carefully, not wanting to strengthen the wrong leader or the wrong policy.

For now, the UK is lurching from crisis to chaos and back again. If the EU27 wanted Brexit outcomes to discourage others, and show there is a price to pay for leaving the EU, they can relax. Who would want to follow the UK's rapid descent into laughable but also deeply serious political instability?

But how the UK will emerge from this political turmoil, with the public still deeply divided – over Brexit, over the sort of UK they want – and with Scotland's future direction, as well as Northern Ireland's, also quite unclear, no one knows. It is perhaps heroic to assume that the chaos will lead happily in the direction of a soft or no Brexit, though it might. Amidst all this, Donald Trump announced he was cancelling his UK state visit – a brighter spark amidst the upheaval.

But, in the end, the EU27's interests do not lie in the UK's continued instability. For now, the question is when and how that instability will end.