

## The UK's Brexit Chaos: Where Next?

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The UK's Brexit chaos continues. Theresa May is a Prime Minister whose last vestiges of power are leaking away. The main debate in the Conservative party is simply when to hold the leadership election – some want it now, some in October, others still cling to the idea that a powerless Prime Minister can oversee the huge challenges of Brexit for a year or more.

Meanwhile, the Brexit clock is ticking. This week May will bring the Repeal Bill to Westminster – to bring EU laws into UK law ahead of the UK's departure from the EU in March 2019. It will have a rough ride through Westminster – both the Commons and Lords, and the devolved parliaments too including in Scotland. But Labour are still backing Brexit, so the bill may eventually go through.

Jeremy Corbyn's main aim for now appears to be to push for an early general election – Labour going eight percentage points ahead in recent polls. The Tories will, of course, aim to avoid this, which will depend on their deal holding with the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) to prop up the minority Tory government. This deal is also now being challenged in the courts as contravening the Good Friday Agreement.

### Will Brexit happen?

In the last week, the suggestion that Brexit might not happen has started to gain some currency where previously most treated it as a position of die-hard 'remoaniacs'. Before, most of the erstwhile 'pro-EU' voices were – and continue – to push for a 'soft' Brexit, but now some media and commentators, even some politicians like the LibDems' Vince Cable, are wondering aloud whether it might just not happen.

Some opinion polls suggest a possible shift in views on Brexit – with five to eight percentage point leads for 'Remain' in two different polls. Business has started to put its head above the parapet a little – though to push for a 'soft' Brexit not for no Brexit. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has argued for a transition period where the UK would stay both in the single market and in the customs union. Many Tory MPs are still highly resistant to this, though the line may be softening a little for some.

But amidst these changes, the inward-looking focus of the UK debate continues. The fact that the European Parliament and European Commission have both indicated any transition should be short and fully respect EU laws and oversight, is mostly ignored as different members of the cabinet argue in public about the type and length of transition, as if whoever wins that debate will then determine the outcome. Some in Brussels think there is no time anyway to negotiate a bespoke transition deal – it is European Economic Area or nothing. But this view is barely mentioned in the UK debate.

Labour retains its fudged, fuzzy and illogical position that it wants a Brexit deal that will give all the benefits of the single market and customs union but that might somehow not involve being in the single market and customs union – 'function not form' incants Labour's Keir Starmer. Likewise for the transition. Yet one recent poll suggested that almost 80% of Labour voters at the election this June now support 'Remain'. Labour are not at all reflecting their voters' views on Brexit for now. And if they did win an early general election, they would inherit the poisoned chalice of Brexit.

For now, the possibility of Brexit not happening is just that – a possibility. It is one that lacks any serious political voice or leadership, even the LibDems still arguing for a second EU referendum once the exit deal has been negotiated, rather than arguing to stop Brexit now. But the UK is in flux. Its politics is chaotic, its economy is slowing. Political and constitutional challenges of negotiating Brexit, and passing the relevant legislation ahead of March 2019, abound.

If public opinion in favour of staying in the EU were to continue to strengthen then maybe, belatedly, some politicians might find their courage and their voice to argue to halt Brexit. How Brexit would or could be halted is an open question. Some argue it would have to be through a second referendum to

gain legitimacy, others argue Westminster could do it. Some pro-Brexit voices talk about political upheaval, even riots, if Brexit is stopped. There is no question but that UK politics is in a dark period.

And again, little attention for now is paid to the EU27's views on reversing the Brexit process. It may be possible legally to withdraw Article 50, though some would contest that, but EU27 politics would be centre-stage at such a moment. Merkel and Macron have said the UK can change its mind – but time is running on. If the UK changed its mind now, that might be manageable politically but in a year or 18 months it could look much more tricky. Some key Brussels voices can be heard already muttering that Brexit is irreversible. And unless UK opinion shifts in a very strong and sustained way towards remaining in the EU – with clear, strong political leadership to manage that – the EU27 will surely not want a divided, fractious, unstable UK simply remaining after all.

### **Where now?**

For now, Brexit still looks more likely than not. Unless Labour shifts its position, the politics of halting Brexit looks difficult. The UK government still looks set on a hard Brexit – outside the single market and customs union, although the Treasury is pushing an approach of staying in the EU's customs union for goods, and the UK then negotiating its own service trade deals separately.

Unless that customs union covers agriculture and fisheries too, there will be problems for the Ireland/Northern Ireland border – something that Michael Gove's grandstanding on fisheries has not taken account of either. And outside the single market, there will likewise be border challenges and non-tariff barriers too. Trade deals for services are notoriously difficult and often require linked deals on goods – something that does not seem to have penetrated the UK's obscure debate.

There is surprisingly little mention of democratic issues in all these swirling UK Brexit debates. The CBI calls for the UK to stay in the single market and customs union for an indefinite transition period but, in the subsequent debate on that, there is almost no mention of the fact that the UK would lose its voice and vote over EU trade deals, regulations and laws while still being bound by them.

The results of the UK's general election, combined with the extraordinary upending of UK economic, social and political life that Brexit entails, continue to reverberate. What will come next out of this chaotic and damaging political theatre is unclear. But this play looks to have many acts – and we are still quite near the start.

