

Brexit Never Rains, But It Pours

Written by Russell Foster

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RUSSELL FOSTER, MAR 29 2019

Theresa May's Brexit deal has been defeated in the House of Commons again. This time, by only 58 votes. Compared to the crushing defeats of 230 votes on January 15th, and 149 votes on March 12th, a mere 58 is not too bad. Perhaps even an improvement. But a defeat is a defeat, and defeats are even more devastating for a minority government which has repeatedly, and consistently, shown that it does not command the support of the House. The only thing keeping Theresa May in power is a widespread dislike of her Conservative rivals – the backstabbing Michael Gove and the incompetent Boris Johnson – and a national contempt for Jeremy Corbyn, whose Brexit flipflopping and appalling mismanagement of the antisemitism crisis leaves the Leader of her Majesty's Opposition even less popular than the most reviled government since the Duke of Wellington's ultra-Tories in 1832. But with the third defeat of the Government's Brexit bill in as many months, a general election is all but inevitable.

Mrs May, and the country she ostensibly leads, faces some deeply unpleasant choices. She could of course bring the bill back for a fourth vote, hoping that the pattern of increasing support will eventually spill over into the narrowest of victories. This is unlikely but not impossible. Before March 2019, no British government had brought the same bill to vote thrice, after two defeats, since Lord North's administration during the American War of Independence. If Mrs May brings her vote back for a fourth vote, it will likely be the first time that a British government has pursued the same policy four times since the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the late 1600s – early 1700s. And like America, the Dutch wars didn't work out too well for the British. History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

An equally fringe possibility is that Mrs May resigns, and hands over the reins to Michael Gove or Boris Johnson. But given the contempt in which both are widely held, and given the fact that Theresa May has repeatedly refused to step down until Brexit is resolved, one way or another, this is unlikely.

A second referendum remains a possibility, despite the agonising arguments over how many options will be on the ballot paper, whether holding a second referendum is in-keeping with the spirit of democracy, and whether a second referendum sets a precedent for a third. Or a fourth. But given that a referendum will take a year to arrange, this possibility is long-term.

A third option is that Mrs May simply revokes Article 50, which the European Court of Justice has confirmed is entirely legal. She could easily cite the recent London march and the five million signatures calling for revocation, tell Brussels she's withdrawing it, then scuttle away into retirement like David Cameron and leave someone else to clean up the mess. But this is not in her character, and unilaterally cancelling Brexit without a popular vote would pave the way for the extreme right to march into Downing Street. The British population's faith in democracy is at rock-bottom, and cancelling the most democratic vote in British history would not do much to remedy mass contempt for the House of Commons, the British state, and democracy itself. And while cancelling Article 50 might be met with sighs of relief in Europe, millions of eurosceptic voters, who are possibly soon to be given a boost by a coming recession, would seize upon it as proof of their belief that the EU is at best uncaring, at worst a totalitarian bully.

This leaves the most likely option – a general election. After the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, the general election of 2015, Brexit in 2016, another general election in 2017, and endless votes in parliament which have completely taken over the day-to-day business of the British state, the population is exhausted by elections. And there is very little evidence to suggest that an election would resolve anything. Corbyn, whose popularity is

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plunging once more, is haemorrhaging voters who are tired of his inability to formulate any sort of Brexit plan besides meaningless claims that a veteran Eurosceptic who cannot even manage his own party, can magically negotiate a perfect exit deal. The Conservatives, now in their ninth year of government and suffering from the political entropy which any long-term government endures, would be led into battle by a candidate who would admittedly be more charismatic than May, but who would command little respect. With the Liberal Democrats relegated once more to the fringes and being elbowed out of the centre by the newly-named Change UK Party, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party snapping at the Tories' heels, and the Scottish Nationalists openly invoking the spectre of IndyRef2, the coming general election will be a chaotic, poorly-planned mess in which all factions will lose, returning another hung parliament or minority government forced to either try and resuscitate May's deal, or go begging for a new one from an EU which has far bigger problems on the horizon than the British. And given the febrile atmosphere of toxicity, poison, exhaustion, and disillusionment which now characterises British politics, the coming 2019 General Election will be the nastiest to date.

For three years the British have squabbled, screamed, and denounced neighbours and loved ones as traitors or heretics. For three years, British government has been at a standstill while the EU has grown more and more weary, frustrated, and fractious. So, after three exhausting and poisonous years we are not approaching the end – we have barely finished the beginning.

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Dr Russell Foster is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in European Studies at King's College London. Prior to this he was a Marie-Curie International Fellow in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Russell studied History at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; International Relations and Human Geography at Newcastle University, UK; and he was a Visiting Scholar in European Studies at Virginia Tech, USA. His research interests include nationalism, identity, the EU as empire, and the emergence of new identities in Europe. His first book, *Mapping European Empire*, was published in 2015. He is currently researching the emergence of the New Right in Europe, the changing nature of white identities and masculinity in the West, the role of symbols and icons in shaping Western identities, and the relationship between politics and fiction. His website is www.russellfoster.com.