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Do We Know What Kind Of Brexit Theresa May Really Wants?

by John Palmer on 5 May 2017



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The first contacts between the lead European Commission Brexit negotiators and the UK prime minister Theresa May appear to have got off to a disastrous start. There is some speculation that the entire Brexit negotiations could break down before they have really begun.

On this scenario, the UK could be heading for the kind of catastrophic 'over the cliff' hard Brexit that the UK government has always refused to rule out. Some in the City financial sector and in big business have reacted with horror as has the opposition Labour Party.

This *maybe* May's intention. Many commentators even believe that a radical break with the EU is what she has always intended. They are convinced that this is why she has broken the usual rules for a fixed-term Parliament and has called a sudden general election, years before her election mandate runs out. They believe that a bigger Parliamentary majority would ensure the opposition could not reject a 'hard Brexit' outcome.

But might the commentators, many of the prime ministers' most zealous supporters and even some in the EU, have misunderstood the real reason why May is so desperate to boost her already comfortable majority in the British House of Commons? Might the assumption that she is seeking a mandate for a hard Brexit or even no agreement at all prove not to be the case?

The prime minister regularly repeats the mantra '*no deal would be better than a bad deal.*' This has encouraged some of her senior ministers to speculate openly about the delights that await a post-hard Brexit UK in negotiating bountiful trade deals across the globe.

Other EU government leaders have pointed out that May and her colleagues are deluding themselves in thinking they are going to be able to bludgeon their way to a deal giving the UK all the privileges of EU membership with none of its obligations. The Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has understandably reacted to this notion as the UK seeming to live '*in another galaxy.*'

Certainly, the swaggeringly 'devil may care' attitude being displayed by May in approaching the Brexit negotiations is popular with her party and many of the Conservative and UKIP voters that she wants to rally in support of her 'strong and stable government.' If the opinion polls are to be believed – and it may be a bigger IF than many pundits assume – the Conservatives are heading for a massive election victory. Some forecasts predict a possible Tory majority in the House of Commons not of 17 MPs as at present – but of well over 100.

Break-Up Of Britain

When Mrs May talks about the need to reinforce her negotiating mandate with a big majority, she really means securing her grip on power against any attempt by opposition parties to undermine her authority by rejecting any eventual deal. This is very odd at first sight. The opposition parties in the House of Commons do not have any majority to do that now even when joined by a tiny number of pro-EU Tory MPs.

There is, however, a quite different reading of her seemingly perplexing decision to call a general election years before her term expires. That is not because she has any intention of going for a hard Brexit. Rather, it is that – contrary to appearances – she knows that this would be a catastrophic option economically and politically for her government and the UK state. It could hasten the possibility of the UK breaking up, and, with the demand for Scottish independence and talk of eventual unification of Ireland, this could turn into a full-blown constitutional crisis.

Assuming May's election strategy works, we may hear less and less talk about a hard Brexit or 'going over the cliff' with no deal at all.

Once the election result is known, the emphasis will switch to language of ‘compromise’ and ‘patience’.

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This, we will be told, will be necessary to get as close as possible to some kind of eventual free trade arrangement with the EU.

Of course, the UK government will have to accept not only a very high ‘divorce settlement’ payment to the European Union for past financial commitments it entered into when it was a member. It will also have to accept an important continuing role for EU law and the European Court of Justice in arbitrating on issues in dispute between the UK and the EU, as well as continuing payments to the EU budget for participating in areas such a scientific research, the fight again crime and education.

Back To Square One

Although the government has talked tough about ‘*taking back control of our borders*’, in practice the application of EU free movement of workers to the UK may only be marginally changed. This may have more to do with adjustment to UK domestic social security arrangements than any attempt to shut the door on what remains an absolutely essential source of labour for vital sectors of the British economy.

When this all becomes clear, Mrs May’s hard-line Europhobic supporters, not only in UKIP, but also in the Conservative party, will not be pleased. We might expect the political atmosphere to be charged with talk of ‘*treachery*’ and ‘*betrayal*’. If pro-EU Tory MPs have proved unwilling to rock the boat in Parliament, anti-EU zealots will display no such inhibition. After all they undermined John Major’s government without compunction in the 1980s.

This is far more likely to be why Mrs May is so anxious to bolster her grip on Parliament now. She also knows that UK economic growth is slowing, inflation is rising rapidly thanks to the massive de facto devaluation of sterling, and real living standards for many people – already lower than they were a decade ago – are falling again.

Of course, in pursuing this ambiguous and contradictory strategy, things *could* all go badly wrong, very quickly. An unintended final rupture might become irreversible. Perhaps a more serious threat to May's entire project is that her final compromise which leaves the UK half In and half Out of the EU gets rejected by Parliament thanks to a combined vote of Labour, Liberal, nationalist and other pro-EU MPs and hard line Tory Euro-sceptics.

In which case the government might either have to call a second referendum. Or, if time did not allow for further negotiations, withdraw Article 50 (as is legally possible), accept the justified anger of our EU partners and seek instead to reform and democratise the future path of European integration.