A U-turn on a hard Brexit should not be entirely disregarded

Britain's recent General Election and its unanticipated outcome marks the latest chapter in the political turbulence that has characterised the last twelve months since the EU referendum. ***Tim Oliver*** *argues that the election was not in fact about Brexit, although it does now leave the timing of Brexit in flux.*

Much ink has been spilt explaining one of the most unexpected and unpredictable elections in British history. Suffice to say that little went according to plan for many involved, not least for those expecting it to be an 'Elexit', a general election in which Brexit would be at the forefront of debate.

Brexit was of course debated, but the underlying drivers behind why people voted as they did lay more in domestic politics than the question of Europe.

It's a reminder of how the referendum itself was not simply about Britain's place in the EU. As I asked in a January 2015 article for International Affairs, 'To be or not to be in Europe: is that the question?' The short answer: no, because the question of Europe in British politics is multifaceted, connects to so many aspects of British life, and – as is often the case with referendums – it became a vote on a whole host of issues.

The Elexit that never was therefore leaves two questions overhanging British politics and Brexit.

A PM on Political Death Row?

How long can May's government survive? Losing the majority she inherited from David Cameron – thanks to one of the Conservative party's worst ever election campaigns – has left May a dead woman walking. However, with no immediate obvious replacement from within the Conservative party, she is stuck on political death row in 10 Downing Street.

Immediately after the election she was forced to lose her two closest advisers, both widely blamed for the disastrous campaign. Demands for their departure also reflected anger that had been building within the Conservative party – including amongst ministers – at their and May's arrogant, highhanded and controlling approach to running government.

Such an approach might have worked when May was in charge of the Home Office, a department notorious for problems and high-profile mistakes. As prime minister, however, it has been a recipe for building resentment and policy mistakes, such as the disastrous policy on care for the elderly on which May was forced to perform a U-turn mid-campaign.

She now appears unfit to run a government and a country where compromise and consensus building will be crucial. Rumours abound that negotiations to secure the support of the Northern Ireland DUP have been strained by May's – and, it musty be said, some Conservative cabinet ministers' – arrogance and indifference to compromise in negotiations.

A Prime Minister once lauded as not being one for the bars of Westminster and rising above the cliquey politics of Cameronites or Blairites, now finds herself without a core group of supporters as she begins the most difficult negotiations the UK has ever undertaken in peacetime.

This then is a government set to struggle to get domestic and Brexit legislation through parliament, to say nothing of the challenge to reach agreement with other power centres such as the Scottish Government and the City of London. It was hardly surprising that the Queen's Speech was bereft of much that the Conservative party had set out in its election manifesto.

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Britain, it should be remembered, can be a country where big projects and ideas run into massive political and administrative obstacles. For example, despite repeated attempts and never-ending debates, in its 40 years of EU membership Britain has only managed to build one new airport runway (in Manchester in the 1990s).

The prospect of another election then is very real, despite a desire by all – and not least by sections of a weary British public – to avoid one. Labour sense they might make a break through and hence are likely to back the necessary parliamentary votes required to call an election.

It means calculations about domestic politics dominate proceedings, not least those surrounding internal party politics, leaders' strengths and weaknesses, and the situation in Scotland or Northern Ireland. Brexit risks becoming for some an irritating background factor they would rather ignore.

Brexit on Political Death Row?

Where then does this leave Brexit? For the time being, HM Government remains committed to the Brexit that May set out in a speech in January 2017. Her much derided statement that 'Brexit means Brexit' was actually a clear statement of her intent: the UK would leave the EU with no ifs or buts about it.

All that was to exist following the exit was a free trade agreement and practical but limited arrangements in areas such as security and data sharing. EEA membership or some sort of 'soft Brexit' was not on the table, except perhaps as a small part of a transitional deal.

While this remains formal government policy, parliamentary arithmetic means that debates and decisions about Brexit can no longer be confined to the Conservative party. Labour's position and that of other opposition parties, the behaviour of the House of Lords (where no party has held a majority since 1999) and the views of other power centres such as the Scottish Parliament now matter far more than they did before the 9 June, or usually do in UK politics.

It means that Parliament – and more specifically the House of Commons – is confronted with the unenviable task of trying to decipher what it was the British people voted for in a referendum which, as already noted, was not entirely about Britain's membership of the EU.

Let us not forget that the referendum was called to settle tensions within the Conservative party, tensions also found in other parties including Labour. So too was the general election called by May in order to secure a mandate for her interpretation of what the British people had voted for, thus ensuring that Parliament – and some of her more pro-European backbenchers – could not change or challenge this.

But the British people have not spoken clearly on the matter and British politicians remain paralysed over what to do about it. Such is the level of confusion and inability amongst the political elite to face the choices ahead that the Centre for European Reform recently called on the rest of the EU to help Britain along by confronting its politicians and public with the Brexit choices they refuse to face.

Such a situation might seem absurd to the rest of Europe. The despair and angst at a 'hung parliament' expressed by some in the UK can sound bizarre when across Europe and large swathes of the democratic world a hung parliament is perfectly normal. But here we hit on a problem underlying the whole situation: Britain's tradition of majoritarian politics.

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Deeply embedded in Britain's political psyche is an obsession with one party winning a majority in the House of Commons, almost always on a minority of the vote thanks to the First Past the Post electoral system.

The domination of politics and government that emerges does not mean the governing party ignores parliament and goes about governing without any checks on its powers. Consultation and dialogue are frequent, albeit often hidden from view. Constitutional change also means that such political actors as devolved parliaments, the Supreme Court, and the Mayor of London have to be taken into account.

It does, however, mean the system struggles when faced with the need for public consensus and united leadership. Despite the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the idea of coalition remains a difficult one. Most Britons have never heard of such arrangements as Germany's grand coalitions and would struggle to believe they really happen.

Brexit might have led to repeated calls for some form of unified way forward. Even the leading Leave campaigner Michael Gove, speaking the day after the EU referendum, called for such an approach. Other ideas include a cross-party commission.

Any such consensus looks unlikely in a system geared to public confrontation, especially when the Conservatives and Labour have abandoned the middle ground of British politics in favour of extremes on the right and left.

That does not mean consensus building might not happen. The election result means May's approach of defining Brexit according to what she wanted has been checked, but it is not checkmate. Reversing Brexit remains a very difficult and unlikely outcome.

However the suggestion of a U-turn on Brexit should not be entirely disregarded; the volatile state of British, European and Western politics means we simply cannot dismiss such a possibility. That said, were such an eventuality to occur, it would require either a referendum or another general election in which a new government is elected with a clear mandate to reverse – or at least try to reverse – Article 50.

What the rest of the EU faces is the possibility of more flexibility on the UK's part in the three sets of UK-EU Brexit negotiations: over the UK's exit, a transition, and the new UK-EU relationship. As things stand, the most likely outcome might be a soft transition to a hard Brexit. How long that will actually take remains uncertain.

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None of this changes what in Britain is often the most overlooked side of the negotiations: securing the agreement of the other 27 EU member states and EU institutions. Britain's politicians and public have struggled to debate what they want Brexit to mean. They have paid next to no attention to what the rest of the EU might agree to.

This article first appeared on the Dahrendorf Forum blog and it gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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