

The UK is edging closer to a People's Vote



*The Chequers plan exposed the impossibility of Brexit. Current government proposals force the UK to adhere to the EU's rules, without any capacity to influence them. In consequence, Parliament and the UK public are edging closer to a People's Vote, writes **Michael Cottakis (LSE)**.*

The UK Government has told us for months that Brexit may only be Hard: only by exiting the European Single Market and customs union, by shedding the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, by stopping payments into the EU's budget, and by ending free movement of people into the UK would Brexit be. Anything else, we were told, and the country would be left in a limbo arrangement far worse than membership – it would be a 'vassal state', a European 'colony', condemned to a peripheral role in European affairs. It would be forced to adhere to the EU's economic rules, without any capacity to influence them. The most ardent Brexiteers understood well this danger: Hard Brexit was thus the only viable Brexit.

Except that Hard Brexit was never possible. The depth of the UK's ties with, indeed dependence on, EU trade for its economic vitality has proven to be too great. Imports and exports are a crucial component of the UK economy – and over 50% of these involve the EU. By imposing barriers on trade with the UK's largest market, Parliament would be inflicting a negative supply shock upon the economy, with ruinous effects for incomes, living costs, and the competitiveness of business. Many Brexiteers insist this would propel the UK to invest in markets further afield – but it is an economic fantasy, detached from the realities of geography, supply and demand.



People's Vote march

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In the meantime, the question of Northern Ireland has become crucial. The imposition of a Northern Irish backstop and maintenance of an open border will require significant regulatory alignment with the EU, tariff-free trade and the continuance of (some degree of) free movement. All are incompatible with a Hard Brexit. The territorial integrity of the UK and the fragile Irish peace process would be thrown into great uncertainty. Hard Brexiteers argue for a technological fix: automatic checks as the border is crossed. But this technology does not exist, nor is it likely to be developed anytime soon. The alternative – to impose border checks and tariffs – is a red line the EU will not cross for fear of angering the Republic of Ireland – a key member state. The memory of the Troubles – the most recent incidence of violent cross-border conflict in western Europe – is as fresh as it is painful. The majority of parliamentarians would not dare to disturb the peace.

This leaves various degrees of soft Brexit. These range from a facilitated customs arrangement to full participation in the customs union; from full European Economic Area membership to Single Market access in narrow areas, each subject to its own bilateral treaty, akin to the EU-Switzerland agreement.

These options are more palatable to Parliament than Hard Brexit is. However, the Prime Minister will struggle to unify the Commons around any kind of Brexit. The European Research Group will revolt. Labour will likely oppose the government for electoral reasons. Jeremy Corbyn, aware of the Conservative government's weakness, is angling for early elections. Moreover, a Soft Brexit is a poor outcome for the UK. Whichever version of Soft Brexit it pursues, payments will still be made, the ECJ will continue to arbitrate, and concessions on freedom of movement will be required. In other words, vassalage – at least as the Brexiteers understand it – will beckon.

What then is the alternative? In the interest of addressing their own internal expediencies, the major parties have explained neither the unattainability of a Hard Brexit nor the destructiveness to the UK's international influence of its various softer alternatives. Though rarely mentioned publicly, the truth is common knowledge among the majority of MPs: no success may be made of Brexit. Therefore, the possibility of No Brexit, via a second referendum, must be put back on the table.

Parliament backing for a People's Vote is growing. Many Labour and Conservative Remainers had ruled out support for such an initiative, considering it unattainable, however desirable. As the Brexit train jerks out of control, a few of these will now publicly support a second referendum. Justine Greening and Nicki Morgan are the latest. Many more will harbour private sympathies for the cause, meaning that when the day of reckoning arrives – i.e. the Brexit deal is presented before Parliament – the Remain majority in the House will play a key role. A strong rejection of the deal would apply pressure on the Prime Minister to end the deadlock by putting the question back to the people, by which time clamour for a second referendum will be greatly increased.

A People's Vote may produce the same result as in 2016. This time, however, it should be a vote grounded in facts, with a clear roadmap and end goal. The failure to pursue the possibility, given what is at stake, would be a historic error.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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