

EDITORIAL

‘Brexit means Brexit’ may be off the table but that’s no bad thing

AFTER what even members of her own Conservative party described as a shambolic campaign, British Prime Minister Theresa May has emerged badly bruised from the UK’s general election last week, which she had called three years before it was due.

Instead of getting the substantially larger parliamentary majority on which she had gambled and which would supposedly give her a stronger mandate to negotiate Britain’s exit from the European Union (EU), she has ended up losing her majority altogether and witnessed the unlikely rise of a radical-left-led Labour Party.

To remain in power, she has been forced to seek the support of the ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, which has an agenda that is of questionable compatibility with that of the Conservatives.

But while she will continue in her job, Mrs May’s position as prime minister cannot be said to be secure. Although, for now, she has the support of some senior members of her party, including Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, a number of backbenchers and former ministers have made clear that they have lost confidence in her leadership.

This then is the sordid political backdrop against which Britain will start its negotiations on Brexit with the EU on June 19: a weakened prime minister with a wafer-thin, cobbled-together majority, a revolt brewing within the ruling party, the possibility of another election in the not-too-distant future and a resurgent Labour party waiting in the wings.

In the Brexit talks to come, Mrs May will be negotiating from a position of weakness. But there are other complications. The biggest is that there is now even less clarity on Britain’s position vis-a-vis Brexit than before. Earlier there was at least the commitment to a so-called “hard Brexit” – which was assumed to mean a clean break from the EU’s customs union, no obligations on immigration and a negotiation for “the best possible deal” from a blank slate. But now, it would seem – or it is so assumed – that the British electorate has rejected the “hard Brexit” platform championed by Mrs May. The Labour Party, which is the second largest in Parliament, has not signed up to a clean break from the EU (although it has not clearly spelt out its own Brexit strategy). The influential Scottish conservatives (and a good number of English Conservatives) do not favour a hard Brexit either. In any event, Mrs May does not have a strong enough mandate to easily push through anything as controversial as a clean break from the EU. What seems likely then is some version of a “softer Brexit” which retains elements of what membership of the EU entails.

There are some guiding options here – for example those adopted by members of the European Economic Area such as Norway, which allow retention of market access, require conformity with most EU laws, involve some budgetary contributions but permit no voting rights – although the UK and the EU would surely negotiate a bespoke deal that works for both.

Mrs May had earlier rejected outright such “halfway house” arrangements, asserting that “Brexit means Brexit”. But now, in this changed political landscape, more flexible approaches could be back on the table. This might be no bad thing. The downside, however, is that the negotiations will take place amid great political uncertainty in the UK and possibly also in the EU, where Germany will go to the polls in September.



In last week’s general election, the British people have said an emphatic “No” to the English nationalism of the UK Independence Party and the *Daily Mail-Telegraph* media clique. North of the border, Scottish nationalism has also been dealt a blow. PHOTO: AFP

And now, the battle to save Britain (from Brexit)

It is time for a new democratic campaign to defend core British rights and interests which cannot be enhanced by leaving the Single Market and Customs Union. **BY DENIS MACSHANE**

REJOICE! Rejoice! The battle of Downing Street is over. Now the battle for Britain begins. Like lions rising from slumber, the British people have risen and dealt a mighty blow to the Leave Liars.

A Conservative Party fighting on the most isolationist manifesto in its history and a prime minister who gave in across the board to the xenophobic UKIP-style hate of Europeans have been repudiated by British democracy.

Seventy-three years ago, as the democratic world rose up to save the Continent from the ravages of extreme nationalism, British soldiers stormed the beaches of Normandy jointly with American, Commonwealth and European armies and units. Now the British people have said an emphatic “No” to the English nationalism of the UKIP (UK Independence Party) and the *Daily Mail-Telegraph* media clique. And north of the border, Scottish nationalism has also been dealt a blow, as Scots booted out the Scottish National Party (SNP) leader in the House of Commons, Angus Robertson, and the SNP supremacist, Alex Salmond.

Before we exult too much in Prime Minister Theresa May’s humiliation, let us not forget that the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn also bought in to core Brexit ideas. The Labour manifesto proposed imposing immigration controls on fellow Europeans, which would have been incompatible with membership of the European Single Market (ESM). According to Anatole Kaletsky, chair of the Best for Britain board, the YouGov poll of 1,875 voters he commissioned showed that most Brexit voters including Tory voters and over 65-year-olds support staying in the ESM.

Another question the poll asked: “Do you think our government should offer EU (European Union) citizens the right to travel, work, study or retire in Britain, in exchange for EU countries giving British citizens the same rights?” Sixty-two per cent agreed that keeping EU travel, work and retirement rights for British citizens should be a negotiating priority. This compares to 17 per cent in favour of immigration controls applied to all EU citizens, includ-

ing British passport holders, while 21 per cent are “don’t knows”.

A final question combining the question of the ESM and free movement asked: “Do you think our government should or should not allow free movement of people between Britain and EU countries in exchange for the EU allowing British businesses full access to the European Single Market?” Forty-three per cent supported such a deal, 31 per cent rejected it and 26 per cent were unsure.

This is part of the concrete evidence that shows the Tory-Labour election manifestos may have been too quick in surrendering to the line that voters last June voted to quit the ESM and the European Union Customs Union (EUCU), as well as give up the right to retire in Spain, France and Greece or live and work in Europe without any obstacles as if living at home in Britain.

Napoleon Bonaparte famously sneered at the Britain as a “nation of shopkeepers”. It is deep in the instincts of the average British citizen that we do well when markets and frontiers are open to British commerce, citizens and ideas. This should be the line of argument in the opening rounds of the battle for Britain now that the battle of Downing Street is over.

LARGER MAJORITY

It should also not be forgotten that in June of last year there was a clear majority of “Remain” MPs in the House of Commons, in the two-thirds range. If anything, that majority has now gotten larger, as quite a few venomously anti-EU Tories got defeated at the polls.

Moreover, Members of Parliament (MPs) from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (other than Unionist supremacists) were all opposed to amputating the United Kingdom from Europe. So too were most Labour MPs and more than half of Conservative MPs. MPs should stand back and consider the wider national interest rather than look over their shoulders. “It’s economics, stupid.”

As British voters slowly wake up to the massive economic damage of leaving the ESM and EUCU would do to jobs, it is high time for

politicians to take a fresh look. There is also a need for a serious debate inside the Labour Party. It is clear that adopting a Brexit line on the ESM and the rights of British and Europeans citizens to work and live in each other’s nations has made Labour largely indistinguishable from the Tories on Brexit.

Mr Corbyn must recognise that, despite his personal political triumph (which is especially impressive in view of the establishment onslaught directed at him), he largely won a protest vote. He stood up against public-sector cuts, inequality, and no wage increases for a decade. It was thus largely his opting for a much softer Britain that gave him his 40 per cent voting share. In addition, Labour did best in London where its MPs campaigned against leaving the ESM and EUCU and against adopting internal migration controls.

Last year, just five very rich men provided 61 per cent of the funds for the “Leave” campaign. Are there no men and women ready to bankroll a serious campaign to defend Britain and its citizens from the isolationists and the economic amputationists? As David Davis, Prime Minister May’s Brexit minister, himself says: “A democracy that cannot change its mind ceases to be a democracy.”

It is time for a new democratic campaign to defend core British rights and interests which cannot be enhanced by leaving the ESM and EUCU. The plebiscite win for the Leave Liars last year is not the last word. Parliament must once again be the centre of national debate. In particular, pro-European Tories such as Amber Rudd need to encourage ministers such as Philip Hammond and others who have serious doubts about Brexit.

A pivotal battle was lost last June and a battle was won on Thursday. But we need to train and find resources for a longer campaign to save Britain for the 21st century by keeping our great country part of the community of EU nations.

■ The writer is former UK minister for Europe under prime minister Tony Blair and a contributing editor to *The Globalist*, an online portal on international issues, where this article first appeared. For more information, please visit [www.theglobalist.com](http://www.theglobalist.com).

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Beijing should return to Deng’s ‘one country, two systems’



By Frank Ching

The best way that China can get Hong Kong people and the international community to “set their hearts at ease” ... is for Beijing to reiterate its plans for “one country, two systems” in the future now that 20 years have passed.

TWENTY years ago, on July 1, 1997, Britain turned Hong Kong over to China under the Sino-British Joint Declaration which provided that the territory would be largely autonomous under the “one country, two systems” formula devised by then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping.

By and large, for the last two decades, rule of law has been upheld in the former British colony, and rights and freedoms protected. And yet, as the 20th anniversary of the handover nears, there is a general feeling of unease that the situation is deteriorating and may get worse.

This is because, for the last few years, there has been a perceptible shift in China’s attitude. Instead of emphasising “two systems”, the focus now is on “one country”. Since 2014, Beijing has asserted repeatedly its “comprehensive jurisdiction” over Hong Kong.

The problem – as seen from Hong Kong – is Beijing’s unwillingness to allow democracy in the election of the chief executive, despite previous promises. However, from China’s viewpoint, it has abided by the letter of the law in setting out rules under which universal suffrage elections can be conducted. There is now a deadlock, and no sign of a possible breakthrough.

Last week, the US State Department released a review that it had conducted on Hong Kong. The review highly praised “Hong Kong’s highly developed rule of law, independent judiciary and respect for individual rights” and said that these were made possible by the high degree of autonomy. It also gave credit to the central government which, it said, “publicly and frequently reiterated its commitment to the ‘one country, two systems’ framework over the past year, and it has continued to adopt positive measures to support Hong Kong’s economic growth”.

But then the review cited other actions by Beijing that “appear to be inconsistent with its stated commitments to Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy”, including an interpretation of the Basic Law by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee on the taking of oaths of office at a time when a Hong Kong court was about to issue its judgment on an actual case. This created the impression that the Hong Kong court was being told how to rule by Beijing.

The review also mentioned some highly publicised incidents in recent years, such as the disappearance of five booksellers and their reappearance in the mainland under control of the security authorities. One particular case,

Lee Bo, involved a British national who was evidently abducted in Hong Kong and taken to the mainland illegally.

However, while regretting “certain actions” by Beijing that “appear inconsistent with China’s commitment in the Basic Law to allow Hong Kong to exercise a high degree of autonomy”, the review concluded that Hong Kong retained more than sufficient autonomy for it to be treated as a special entity under US law for bilateral agreements and programs.

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

The following day, June 8, the Chinese Foreign Ministry, in a response, insisted that the “one country, two systems” policy has been effectively implemented and that that the Chinese government would continue to carry it forward. The spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, cautioned the US “to speak and act cautiously on Hong Kong-related issues” and not to make “irresponsible remarks”.

The best way that China can get Hong Kong people and the international community to “set their hearts at ease”, in the words of Mr Deng, is for Beijing to reiterate its plans for “one country, two systems” in the future now that 20 years have passed and to add one element: That the

democratic election of the chief executive will develop step by step in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress.

Such an announcement, made by Chinese President Xi Jinping when he visits Hong Kong to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the handover and to swear in the new chief executive, Carrie Lam, will have a dramatic effect both in Hong Kong and within the international community.

The Chinese leader has been moving higher and higher up the world stage since he assumed office in 2012. His pace has quickened in recent months with pronouncements on globalisation and climate change.

Hong Kong now offers him another chance to make his political presence and his creative policies felt in the world. After all, Mr Deng had famously said that “one country, two systems” could be used to solve not only the Hong Kong problem but other international issues as well.

Mr Xi can now show the world at least how “one country, two systems,” which had provided for a smooth transition 20 years ago, can continue to solve knotty political problems in Hong Kong.

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