

What is the current state of play regarding Brexit?

The current state of play regarding Brexit in the United Kingdom is definitely focused towards the general election. It has been called by the Tory party in order to unlock Parliament with regard to Brexit, to try to get around the stalemate and to overcome the fact that they have had no majority and to try to “get Brexit done” in their own words.

What do you think about the recent flexextension granted by the European Union with the cut-off date of the 31st of January?

Everyone was quite surprised that Prime Minister Boris Johnson managed to get a deal in the first place and then, he was forced to get the extension. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the general election, because of course the Tories' main priority has always been, ‘we are leaving by October 31st,’ and now given the fact that it has not occurred, will that harm them in any way in the election?

If the Conservatives win, as the polls indicate, what will be the impacts?

If the Conservatives win and they have a greater majority than they currently have now, then they will try to get Brexit through as quickly as possible, and they will have quite a lot of confidence in that, seeing as it has already passed the second reading and, the only thing stopping them was the parliamentary arithmetic. If Labour party were to get in, then they say that they are going to go straight to Brussels in order to renegotiate a new deal - one which would be much softer than the current deal - and that then they would return to the people and offer a second referendum. And that second referendum would be based on the question of ‘Do we stay in the EU or do we leave on the Labour’s new terms?’ The problem with that is that that would demand, almost certainly, another extension.

Would the European Union agree with such an extension?

I think they would. I think Europe’s position is not to frustrate and not to antagonize the United Kingdom. As long as the United Kingdom can show that it is moving forwards, and a consensus is emerging around a particular position on Brexit - whether it is leave or remain or second referendum - then they are going to follow in those footsteps.

If Labour party won the snap elections, do you think that the European Union would try to prevent Brexit from happening?

No, not actively, but I think they would give the UK more time in order to facilitate the time needed to hold a second referendum. I think that would be in their best interest and also it would follow suit with their quite diplomatic perspective on Brexit. I think they have been quite fair, which is quickly forgotten in the UK.

Do you think there is any other force in the UK which could influence the process apart from Labour and Conservative parties, for example the Lib-Dems, the UP or the British judiciary?

I think the main political force to look out for would be the Lib-Dems. They will, almost certainly, not win an outright majority and be the leaders of our country, but they are becoming the only proper centrist voice in the UK and they are also one of two parties, along with the Scottish National Party, to say that, if they did get into power, they would revoke Article 50 outright. Now, of course, there is lots of democratic problems that might emerge by doing something like that and the likelihood of that happening is very slim, but they do offer a very clear alternative and I think that this is one for Labour party to watch out for. Secondly, the Lib-Dems have been capturing defectors from both the Tories and Labour party in recent months, so they are getting support.

If there was another referendum on Brexit now, what would be the result?

I am still convinced that people would vote to leave. At this stage, politics is so disjointed in Britain that it is hard to imagine taking a different course. People have some appetite for some version of leaving, but there is such a strong unwillingness to completely overturn democracy by switching course completely and not carrying that out that transcends Leavers and Remainers. There are quite a lot of people who voted to remain and who are deeply unhappy about leaving the EU, but they realize that they cannot just turn the clock back and re-do it all.

If Brexit happens, what effects could it have on the internal unity of the Kingdom, in particular regarding the Northern Ireland and Scotland it possible that these parts will try again to strengthen some separatist tendencies?

Being Scottish myself, I can certainly see that happening already in Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish National Party have been waiting for an opportunity, since they failed the first time, to get the independence referendum back into the picture and Brexit is giving them the perfect excuse, and I know lots of people – friends, family, colleagues – who voted to remain part of the Kingdom originally, but now – after Brexit – they are less convinced. I would certainly be less convinced that, if we were to hold an independence referendum tomorrow in Scotland, that we would vote to remain still, because I think there is a growing disillusion with Westminster. There is this growing idea that we might be better off out of the Kingdom. Second thing to add would be that there is also less appetite on the English side to keep us now.

What does the current withdrawal agreement state concerning the Irish border? What will be the regime after Brexit, if it is approved?

The main thing is that the idea of the Irish backstop has been removed, which is somewhat

unimaginable given it has been in the centre of negotiations for three years. Both sides were under the impression that it was kind of the only way forward. The current vision of the regime on the Irish border is still very vague. It is relying on an idea of technological solutions to trade and commerce that have not been tried and tested yet, and certainly not tried and tested in such a historically significant region, and one which is about to experience such dramatic change as one side comes out of the European Union, one of the biggest economic interconnected entities we have in the world, and another side, the Republic of Ireland, remains in. But ultimately we have to remember that this is just the withdrawal agreement--the technical aspects will be worked out at a later date. It is almost impossible to say whether it will actually work or not in practice and there is still a great deal of fear in the UK that it just will not. Therefore, I am not sure, beyond the politics of it, how much is actually being resolved.

With regard to the trade area, the withdrawal agreement which is on the table, according to some commentators, seems to be quite close to one of the versions that Theresa May put forward. Who do you think is satisfied the most with the withdrawal agreement and who is satisfied the least?

Europe will think they have got a good deal on this, but in my opinion the current deal looks more appealing to proper Leavers than Theresa May's attempts ever did. I think the Conservative party will be broadly happy with the deal and ultimately, at this stage, they are delighted because it has passed – it has gotten further than Theresa May's ever did. And a party like Labour completely dislikes it, but that is not to say that that is because they want to remain, it is because they have a completely different vision of how that withdrawal agreement would look. They would want more provisions for trade, customs union, protection of workers' rights, freedom of movement, and that sort of ideas.

What do you think about the impacts of Brexit on internal politics of the UK, in particular considering the fact that Brexit now overshadows all of the day-to-day policy business? Is Brexit not only about Brexit itself but also about what is being neglected due to its domination over policy discussions?

In the lead up to this general election, in terms of polling of, 'what's the biggest issue in UK voters' minds?' is now Brexit and Europe and it has overtaken the NHS, which is unprecedented. This definitely shows a deeper trend of how neglected these other issues have been. It almost feels bizarre in parliamentary proceedings during the week when a politician or a party tries to put something else on the agenda, it just feels so out of place because we have not had a deep conversation about any of it.

Can Brexit dismantle the traditional bipartisan system of Labour and Conservatives? Could both parties implode, leading to an emergence of new parties?

The stable two-party system that the UK has enjoyed for decades is gone. We now have a party like the Brexit party who has just one issue, one goal, one thing on the agenda, one thing in their manifesto and that is to leave the EU by hook or by crook. We have a resurgence of Lib-Dems again, who are not going to challenge Tory and Labour numbers over night but they are back and people take them seriously as a party again. So I think we are moving quickly to a new era of British politics. The problem is that the big parties have spent far too much time orienting themselves to their respective peripheries. Conservatives have moved further towards the right to try to counter far-right forces – the Brexit party and these sort of groups – and Labour have moved much further towards the left to try to include more identities and social movements, which has left a huge void in the centre – void that can be filled by other parties.

What is the lesson that Europe and the UK should take from Brexit?

The biggest lesson learned for the UK is to be careful what you wish for. And that is both a lesson for the Tory party, who I reckon many would regret ordering a referendum on the basis of internal Tory party politics, and a related lesson would be do not take things for granted, because that is what I think the Remain side definitely did do – perhaps even myself included. There was the idea that there is no way people are going to vote to leave; we do not need to extoll the virtues of what we get from the EU, the benefits are clear for everyone to see, this will just be a token referendum to appease part of the Tory party and we can get on with life. Clearly that is not how it has worked out. What I would say about Europe is that the EU rests far too much on the idea that its citizens have an idea of what Europe and the EU is and by extension what Europe and the EU does on a day-to-day basis, and that is just not the case. People do not have a clue what happens. I think the fact that we frequently shorthand Europe and the EU as ‘Brussels’ tells us a lot of the problem: while the EU has decentralized ambition, it is still very much a centralized project, and that does not translate well to voters.