

What Now? Time to Prepare for a People's Vote

Speech by Tony Blair at a People's Vote event at the British Academy

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First – to state the obvious – the country is in crisis. And we are suffering. The Government is preoccupied by Brexit to the exclusion of all else when so much else requires urgent attention. Investors are losing confidence. Our reputation as the repository of that great British virtue, common sense, is evaporating. The nation is bitterly divided.

But Europe, to a degree also has a Brexit crisis.

Reflect for an instant on the bizarre nature of the European Council. 28 Leaders of modern developed nations. Plus Commission officials all long steeped in experience of every variety of European challenge.

Everyone, to a man or woman, believing that they are obliged to facilitate something which everyone thinks is a bad idea, for Europe and for Britain. Not one believing this course is better than Britain staying in Europe. All of them recognise that in years to come this decision will be regretted by future generations. Each of them is aware that in a changing world Brexit will make Europe weaker and our values, never mind our interests, harder to protect. Yet all feeling a strange compulsion to carry on; not regardless, because all have regard to the consequences, but helpless because it seems it must be so.

Things do not need to be like this. We are not hypnotised to do this. We can assume consciousness. We have free will. It is past time to exercise it.

There is a tendency in many quarters, not least Downing St., to treat Brexit as some form of natural disaster, something which has come about through 'force majeure', dictated by Fate.

Brexit is man-made. It can be unmade by man. We simply must discover the will to change.

This is directed not only to politicians here at home but to those of Europe.

Between now and 21st January we should see whether it is possible to find a majority consensus for any form of Brexit in Parliament. In the meantime, we should prepare for the eventuality that there isn't such a consensus. Politicians should debate and discuss the different options. Europe should prepare for the possibility now morphing into the near probability that Britain will require an extension of time to the article 50 process, either to negotiate further or more likely to conduct a new referendum.

Our present situation is unique in modern British politics. The Government is not in control, not of the agenda, not of events and certainly not of the outcome. What is stranger, is that they're not positioning themselves to take control. Instead, they are saying it is this May deal or no deal, when it is clear there is a consensus against the first and equally a consensus to avoid the second.

In politics, the flipside of a politician's strength is usually their weakness. There is sincere admiration for the doggedness of the Prime Minister in keeping on keeping on, despite all the shenanigans. But at a moment when we need imagination and creativity to find a way through

which accepts the original plan may be unobtainable, there is a curious purblind reluctance even to consider one.

Therefore, it is outside the normal processes of Government where we must seek a solution.

One unlooked for benefit of Brexit is that many Members of Parliament irrespective of Party, are talking with each other, working with each other and discussing all possibilities with a genuine desire to find an answer not an advantage.

One sensible thing the PM has done is to allow for the possibility of throwing the matter forward to late January and so permit discussion without the prospect of an immediate vote forcing people off their various fences.

This is positive.

There may emerge out of this a consensus or at least a majority. But there has been one fixed pattern to the Brexit debate so far. Every potential solution has had its moment in the sun, but then things have clouded over. The Norway model is latest to succumb, precisely because it has all the drawbacks of the May deal making us a rule taker and more so.

Over the last 30 months it has become apparent that the 45 years of British membership of the EU has intertwined us with Europe in ways which make disentangling ourselves, hideously complex.

Thus, we have ended up with the 'Painful vs Pointless' Brexit Dilemma which has haunted the negotiation.

To begin with, seemingly in ignorance of the technical and political realities, the Government thought it could pursue a 'cake and eat it' strategy. David Davis promised we would secure a deal which took us out of the Single Market but with the 'exact same benefits' as being in it.

Once it became clear that either we stayed in step with Europe's Single Market rules to minimise economic disruption i.e. become rule takers not rule makers, pointless Brexit, or broke away to make our own rules but therefore with such disruption, painful Brexit, and that this choice was essentially binary, the PM plumped for pointless with the Chequers proposal.

The Irish question is an additional and fundamental problem. But it is really another manifestation of the same Dilemma. A frictionless border between North and South in Ireland is only possible if the two are part of the same trading system i.e. the Single Market and Customs Union. Such a border was not a concession by the British Government. It started as a demand. Europe said yes. Ireland naturally said yes. And rightly, Europe has said it will stand by that decision and so should we.

But it completely undermines the other negotiating objectives of the Government.

It is not clear if the Chequers proposal is extant. But what has been revealed by the whole negotiation process is that all the Brexit options have significant drawbacks compared with staying in the EU.

This pursuit of incompatible ends through inept means has led us to the present impasse.

I do not believe the impasse is resolvable by agreement on the form of Brexit.

Because neither pointless nor painful is attractive. One or other part of the Conservative Party will rebel; and the Labour Party will oppose.

However, let us try. Let's see if a majority consensus develops.

If it doesn't then the choice is between going back to the people and no deal.

But surely this much is plain: whatever is the proper interpretation of the mandate of June 2016, it cannot seriously be said to be 'no deal'. And Parliament has rightly set its face against such an outcome.

Therefore, to insist that we crash out with all the disastrous implications of such a thing, rather than put the matter back to the people, would be an extraordinary dereliction of duty. I don't see it happening for that reason; which is why it is completely perverse to spend time – Europe and the UK Government - in preparation for 'no deal' rather than a new vote.

There are still many who argue that such a vote would be undemocratic; others that it would be divisive without being decisive.

These are important arguments which need to be dealt with.

I argued for a final say referendum back in October 2016 on the basis that such a huge decision required the right to reconsider once the negotiation proceeded to a clear deal.

But the argument today is infinitely more compelling.

We have had 30 months of negotiation. Universally it is accepted that this negotiation has been massively more fraught than anyone ever imagined. Read the speeches of Government Ministers in the first flush of post referendum excitement and now.

Survey the political wreckage of the past weeks. Ministers resigning. The Brexit deal derided by those who most vehemently campaigned for Brexit. Unable to put the deal to a vote, the PM herself put to the vote. Surviving but barely, back to Europe for words that no one seriously believes will rescue her cause. Several different versions of Brexit but none able to command a Parliamentary majority. Chaos, the character of the process; and no viable solution in sight. The clock which should never have been set ticking now ticking ever louder as we approach the midnight hour.

All of this while domestically, in the last 24 hours alone, we have seen reports of 12 hour waits for beds in A&E having doubled, the highest level of knife and weapons offences since 2010 and a 120% rise in rough sleeping.

How can it be said that in these circumstances, given the riot of confusion we find ourselves in, it is wrong to go back to the people and ask that they clarify whether they wish now, in the light of all this, to stay or leave?

In what other decision of consequence in our lives, when there is a stipulated time between our original decision and its due date, when we have had 30 months of brutal education of reality, when our knowledge of the consequence is a world greater than when we took the decision, would we refuse the right to reconsider, refuse even to contemplate a change of mind, indeed regard discussion of such change, a betrayal of principle?

Would we take such an attitude towards the time between engagement and marriage, if that time was as hapless as ours has been since the referendum of June 2016 and the state of the nation today? Or towards the time between accepting the job offer and taking it up? Or the time between deciding to move to a new home and the reality of inspecting it? If our knowledge of reality changed would we really abhor reconsideration?

Given all that has happened, the undemocratic thing is to deny people a final say.

Of course, there is discussion of the precise question a referendum would pose; but the difference between now and June 2016 is really about context.

In a new referendum both sides will be able to make their case in the context of the experience of the Brexit negotiation, and what we have learned through it.

Who can seriously argue that we do not know more today than in June 2016?

Today we know – let me be fair to the Brexiteers – that there was not a recession following the vote; unemployment has carried on falling and wages have risen slightly. On the other hand, we know our currency has been severely devalued, investment and growth have been badly affected and no one can credibly stick £350m extra for the NHS on the bus next time. We know that since the referendum European migration is down, we understand much more about what such migrants do, and immigration from the rest of the world is up.

The point is claim and counter claim will be influenced by fact.

As for the charge that such a new referendum will divide the country, or produce an explosion of popular anger, I say we're divided now. And are people really going to be angry to be asked to give an answer when Parliament cannot?

So far from being a source of disunity, if, as I suggest, both sides make a formal agreement that the decision is final, no matter how narrow, it will bring what all sides now crave which is closure. Go ahead without such a final say, especially on the terms of the May deal, and for a certainty both ardent Brexiteers and Remainers will feel angry and betrayed; and because of the deliberate ambiguity of the deal the argument will continue not abate.

So, what seemed a few months ago unlikely is now I would say above a 50% likelihood. We will go back to the people. Ultimately, this could even make sense to the PM, who could perfectly legitimately say, 'I did my best, my deal was rejected by Parliament, and you the people must give direction that Parliament cannot.'

There are two important pieces of polling relevant here. A year ago, support for the PV was not above 30%; today it is the most supported outcome and growing in strength. And as the negotiation has gone on its wild and wacky way, the numbers believing that the original decision is sensible has declined.

European leadership must catch up with these developments and begin preparation. If Britain were to choose to have a new referendum, we would need Article 50 to be extended. We would need a solution to the European Parliament elections issue, though adequate precedent is available.

Above all, Europe would need to decide whether to take an historic opportunity and set out a new offer to the British people which also answers the concerns of citizens across Europe particularly on Immigration and the Freedom of Movement principle, the control of Europe's borders; and the acceptance that those in the Euro zone will integrate differently from those outside it.

Such an offer would itself add justification to the case for a People's Vote; but more than that it would show that the political leadership of Europe and Britain had listened to the underlying concerns of those who voted Brexit, not disrespecting the concerns but meeting them in a way which is not damaging.

Any Remain campaign in Britain could underline such a point by advocating measures directed at assisting those people and communities who after the long years of austerity, need support.

Europe may say but how do we do this if your Government won't cooperate? I say to them: I understand but put it out there; let British politics respond. Cease to be passive spectators in the debate which after all impacts your interests not just ours. Tell Britain you want us to stay. Set the agenda of what could happen if we do.

We are now entering a new phase of Brexit. Government has lost the initiative. Parliament has taken it. We know the options for Brexit. Parliament will have to decide on one of them. If Parliament can't then it should decide to go back to the people.

Now should be the time of preparation – Parliament to make sure it can canvas the options in sensible manner, one by one, to reach agreement on an option or a referendum; Europe to ensure that if Britain is ready to think again, Europe is ready also to think again.

All that is necessary is for leadership: in Parliament if not in Government, and in Europe where despite all the myriad of challenges European Leaders have, they should understand that changing Brexit would be the greatest boost to Europe's economy and politics and that therefore, they need to focus on the part they can play and play it.

Our fate is in our hands. Think of what is right. Think of future generations. Think of why we came into politics. Think through what is necessary to do; and then do it!