

## With Brexit, the new normal recognises no deadlines

Monday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2019

In parliament, the new normal continues unabated. Last week, the PM had flown to Brussels with her Withdrawal Agreement to gain more unspecified concessions that were not available. She fired the same bullet she's tried to fire half a dozen times before, having found it was a blank the first time she pulled the trigger. They said, "what do you want?", she said, "I don't know" and they were as accommodating as they could have been in the circumstances, putting her back on a plane to Heathrow.

After she returned to parliament for a second time with her Withdrawal Agreement, and it had been rejected by the fourth biggest margin in history, the Prime Minister again stated that MPs should have voted for her deal because they really should have. She claimed to hear "the people" and blamed MPs for failing to select the right answer even when she had narrowed the number of choices down to one. It was the day that she finally succeeded in uniting the majority of MPs. Admittedly it was around a common disdain for the government, but in the British democracy a majority is a majority so that represented a form of progress, albeit not of the kind she had in mind. The people raised their voice too, with a million marching for a second referendum and millions signing a petition to revoke Article 50.

Despite the cross-party outcry and the people's new-found voice, the PM redoubled her efforts. She planned to bring the same Agreement back a third and fourth time, repeating the procedure until MPs caved in at the last minute when hard up against the immovable date of 29<sup>th</sup> March.

It is a strategy that still might just work, but a few days ago we saw the Speaker's coup, based on early Seventeenth Century conventions. In a bid to stop the groundhog day of repeated identical votes, he barred it. In a fit of flexibility, the PM returned to Brussels with a request for a new Brexit date. Caught off guard by a specific request, the EU gave her two.

That makes a current total of three, as the original date has not been changed by parliament yet. Legal confusion reigns about the relative statutory merits of each. It is possible that the wrong procedure has been activated and the Brexit delay we thought we had does not have sufficient legal force. It would be ironic if it is the European Court of Justice that determines that we left the EU by mistake.

Meanwhile, the Brexiteers are still egging on the Prime Minister to come up with "alternative arrangements to the NI backstop". After three years, none of them has managed to think of an alternative arrangement but their position is based on the wish that there were one. If there isn't, it must be the EU's fault.

Whilst they work on this, the Brexiteer ERG has been forced into a short extension. They'd like to crash out at the end of this month but they'll do their best ensure no further delay happens. To achieve this they may even support the Withdrawal Agreement they said they would never support, but the Brexiteer DUP have decided the opposite – not to support the deal they said they might support, and push for a long delay instead.

The Brexiteer vote is split, as is the Remainer vote, with the dealers, the delayers and the revokers still pressing their cause. Later this week, after a series of 'indicative votes' for the types of Brexit that MPs wish were on offer, the PM has stated that she will ignore them anyway and revert to the original deal, revelling in the two new weeks she now has to repeat the process. The leaders of the other factions and the other parties are keeping their heads down, not being particularly consistent, imaginative or helpful.

As a result, we will sail past the original Brexit date of 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019 with precisely the same range of choices that we had three years ago, the day after the referendum vote. The new normal does not recognise deadlines.

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