

After three years we still don't know what Brexit means or when Brexit is

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After a tumultuous week of nightly votes in parliament, the path of Brexit may be a little clearer but not enough to inform any proper planning. Jeremy Corbyn has been leading the charge - with the Tories split it seems he's been calling the shots, with surprisingly few of his Members following his own long-standing commitment of ignoring the leadership.

On Tuesday Theresa May's war of attrition continued, with her deal presented for a second time. It was supported by the Attorney General's legal opinion on the alleged changes, which turned out to be only alleged. He was briefed to come up with an entirely new interpretation of how impermanent the backstop is, but he surprised his boss by saying it still wasn't. The ERG is still arguing for "new arrangements" but have spent the last 3 years failing to come up with a single new arrangement that might work. MPs were underwhelmed with confidence and voted the deal down. Some MPs succumbed and voted for it this time, leaving it only the fourth biggest government defeat in history, a huge improvement on the previous week's outright record.

Undeterred, May is looking for a third attempt but that's not strictly allowed. The same motion shouldn't be put to the House twice unless it's materially different. The Speaker may or may not allow it - technically he shouldn't allow it but in the past he's been known for doing things he shouldn't do. There's already talk of a fourth attempt if the third attempt doesn't work. Which would be even less allowed.

On Wednesday, May became happy to rule out a No Deal on 29 March and was confident enough to offer a free vote whilst saying the government would support it (well, at least the part she still runs). She was ambushed by an amendment that ruled out a No Deal for all time. The Sponsor presented the amendment and then withdrew it but the Seconder withdraw the withdrawal and it passed. May then changed her mind on the main vote but forgot to tell the Whips. They whipped themselves the wrong way by mistake, some thinking they were supporting the government as they walked into the wrong lobby. The government lost. May came down with a sore throat and tried to give a speech. There was nothing left to fall off the wall.

Few were impressed by the Malthouse Amendment so the less said about that the better. May still can't explain what "Brexit means Brexit" means.

On Thursday the debacle continued. The government put forward a motion to delay Brexit from the end of March. The Brexit Secretary made the case and commended the motion to the House. He then strolled across the lobby to vote against himself. MPs were a little baffled but voted to postpone the end of March until at least mid-summer. This doesn't mean that Brexit is delayed - just that they wish it was.

If/when asked, the EU must agree to the delay, but they are insisting on conditions that May can't currently meet - they want to see a proper plan, which doesn't exist. With a deal agreed, the delay might be 3 months. Without a deal they may say a year, or that there is no point in delaying at all as long as there is no plan. They have had enough of asking "what do you want?" and being told "we don't know". The chances of us winning the Eurovision Song Contest are now negligible.

This leaves May desperately relying on the Speaker to allow the next vote. If that doesn't happen, she can of course reset the whole process and cancel Article 50 for now. But she is pathologically unable to contemplate that as it's her "sacred duty" to deliver Brexit and respect democracy. I'm not sure how much respect democracy has in itself currently - if it does, it may be alone.

Finally, MPs voted against a second referendum, on the advice of People's Vote (the organisation set up to promote a second referendum), seeking to retain parliamentary responsibility for the process. Very shortly after that, they got cold feet and voted not to take over the Brexit process, leaving the Prime Minister in charge. Surely that was a pyrrhic victory for May. Maybe this time she'll take Donald Trump's advice, which is to "sue the EU into a better relationship". She still seems unwilling to talk to anyone about her problems. She only asks Corbyn when she thinks he'll say no and he only asks her when he thinks he's safe from having to voice an actual opinion.

May does still have the option of calling a general election. If that happens (due to the Fixed Term Parliament Act) she will need the approval of her peers. On the other side, Corbyn has the option of calling a No Confidence motion. The Labour front bench would be onside but I suspect that the Tories would be fearful of losing their minority and Labour would be fearful of Prime Minister Corbyn, so ultimately they could conspire to keep May in her purgatory. Even now it's hard to see her resigning until she gets to some destination or other. Wherever that turns out to be, surely then she'll have had enough?

So all in all, we are little clearer than when we started the week – every conceivable option is still technically possible. Expect more of the same next week, and maybe the week after. Still no one knows what Brexit means or when Brexit is.

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