

# Brexit Will Never, Ever End

Even if Britain's opposing parties agree on a plan to leave the EU, national unity will be nowhere in sight.



An EU flag with one of the stars symbolically cut out in front of the Houses of Parliament shortly after British Prime Minister Theresa May announced to the House of Commons that Article 50 had been triggered in London on March 29, 2017. (Oli Scharff/AFP/Getty Images)

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Nothing is quite right in British politics these days, but Prime Minister Theresa May's latest turn, her surprise decision announced this week to work with Jeremy Corbyn and strike a cross-party compromise on Brexit, has been a sure step in the right direction. There are plenty of reasons not to expect the collaboration between the Conservative and Labour leaders to be successful—broad unpopularity for every measure in Parliament, backbenchers who will defy the whip, and long-standing animosity between May and Corbyn themselves. But there is at least some reason to expect it might work. And at this point, after May's deal has been rejected three times and Parliament has failed twice to agree on an alternative, that's more than can be said about anything else.

That's the good news. The bad news is what comes next. Should May and Corbyn manage to reach a deal, any deal, they will quickly learn just how unpopular their success will be.

Nearly three years after the British public split 52 to 48 percent to leave the European Union, few people have changed their stances, and many have dug in. The consequence now is that Remainers will reject leaving the EU, Leavers will reject remaining in the EU, and both will reject striking a compromise.

"I think no matter what form of Brexit goes ahead," said Thomas Cole, the head of policy for the People's Vote campaign, "the debate will continue in the U.K." On his side, this attitude makes sense. The coalition that has cropped up around demanding a second referendum—People's Vote, For Our Future's Sake, Open Britain, Britain for Europe, and more—has enjoyed remarkable momentum since

the Brexit vote and has little reason to slow down now.

The “Remainiacs”—those Remainers who never relented—have continued to grow in strength and numbers, converted members of Parliament, catalyzed the creation of the Independent Group, and paved the way for a “final say” to be Labour’s official position. Hundreds of thousands of people have rallied to their cause, millions have signed their parliamentary petition, and, most important, more members of Parliament have backed a second referendum in indicative voting than any other measure. Sure, Britain “might crash out by mistake” in the coming weeks, Cole said, but that shouldn’t put off plans for a vote in the coming months.

While the People’s Vote will continue to fight Brexit until it happens, it does not seem poised to let the fight end when it does. “Even if the U.K. does leave the EU,” Cole said, “I can see this going on for a long time.”

A no-deal exit and its consequences—a financial crisis, a food crisis, a border crisis, and even, perhaps, a toilet paper crisis—are certainly expected to keep calls alive for a second referendum. But the softer Brexit that many reformed Remainers are now advocating will do that, too, Cole said. “If you have Common Market 2.0,” the closely aligned arrangement sometimes referred to as the Norway model in which the U.K. would pay to be a member of the European Economic Area and agree to follow the EU’s laws and regulations, “people will continue to ask themselves: ‘Why did we leave?’”

In the event of such a soft Brexit, few partisans on either side of the issue will be able to offer an honest answer to that question. In fact, those furthest from Cole’s position might be the ones likeliest to agree with his message. After all, Common Market 2.0 or the customs union plan would amount to “Brexit in Name Only,” or BRINO, and would not be something Brexiteers would allow.

“When I was voting,” one woman who had come down from Scotland to London for last week’s March to Leave rally told FP, “the question was in or out. There was nothing about a deal.” Another Brexiteer donning a “Make Britain Great Again” hat who had come up from Ramsgate was even more insistent. “If they don’t give us our Brexit,” he warned, “we’ll make the poll tax riots look like a walk in the park.”

These feelings of betrayal by the prime minister and disdain for her deal are not

isolated to the fringe. In Britain, one of the few figures lower than May's 27 percent approval rating, already among the weakest in the Western world, is the 22 percent approval rating for her deal. And with more than half of her own party opposed to or undecided on what she has put forward, there is little indication that her unpopular deal's unlikely success would ever put the issue to rest—neither with Leavers nor with Remainers. Moreover, one would expect that the even softer Brexit that might now come from her collaboration with Corbyn will fare no better.

"It's the one thing they agree on," said Kris Hicks, the communications director for the UK Independence Party (UKIP). "The major parties don't want a full and total Brexit. They don't want what the people want."

It is for that reason—what he and those who chant "Leave Means Leave" see as Parliament's abdication of its democratic duty—that UKIP is gearing up for a fight. "We've been preparing," Hicks said. "We've been signing up candidates, vetting them, and raising money. If European Parliament elections or a general election come, we will put up record numbers of candidates."

That pledge ought to be taken seriously. For a nation that is split far more between Leave and Remain than Labour and Tory, where only 8 percent of voters strongly affiliate with a political party but some 40 percent strongly affiliate with a Brexit position, the consequences of the parties' expected Brexit concessions are real. Not only would a hard, no-deal exit reinvigorate the desires of 50 percent of the population to stay in the EU, and not only would an unexpected revocation of Article 50 incense the 50 percent of the population that voted to leave the EU, a soft Brexit compromise—an outcome that few, if any, had in mind in the voting booth—would leave all parties dissatisfied. And given that this is only the first phase of Brexit, and that the entire future relationship still must be negotiated, those feelings of dissatisfaction and the ability to "keep fighting," as both Cole and Hicks said, will not go away.

In attempting to speak for everyone in Britain, May, Corbyn, and their intended compromise would ultimately speak for no one. A resolution, should one ever emerge, cannot be expected to resolve much. As Britain enters the second stage of negotiations later this year, as the key pressure groups of People's Vote and UKIP continue to drive the narrative, and as political identities continue to be defined by Brexit, Leave and Remain will be hard bonds to break. In fact, they will

likely not be broken at all.

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