

The UK Euro-Elections a Perspective

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The UK voted for Brexit in June 2016 and has been dealing with the issue of how to actually leave without heavily damaging the UK economy and its vital trading links with Europe ever since. The process has been all about divisions in the Conservative party over Europe and how to do a deal with the European Union that can keep both sides of the Conservative Party happy and also formulate a deal that can get through the UK Parliament as well. Theresa May has made several critical errors, she famously drew some crucial red lines for her negotiation with the EU - out of the single market and out of the customs union. This meant that any package she was likely to negotiate with the EU would be extremely limited and, of course, meant the real possibility of a border in Ireland since being out of the customs union means the need to

impose tariffs and could lead to regulatory divergences that were not acceptable to the EU. She then ran a disastrous election campaign in June 2017 that meant she lost her majority and became dependent on the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland to have a working majority in Parliament.

After agreeing terms of the financial settlement with the EU which will be approximately £39 billion, she then set about trying to negotiate a Withdrawal Agreement with the European Union. The end product did not go down well in the Houses of Parliament where it has been rejected by large majorities on an unprecedented 3 occasions. Parliament also made it clear by a large majority that it would not countenance a “no deal” Brexit. The net result was that the UK government was forced to ask the EU for an extension of its membership which was duly granted until October 31 and a condition for this extension was that the UK would participate in the forthcoming EU elections.

The Conservative Party remains heavily divided on the issue of Europe, the vast majority of its 100,000 members want a “no deal” Brexit with the UK resorting to dealing with Europe on World Trading Organisation (WTO) terms. Meanwhile its Conservative MPs are heavily divided between those that want to leave the EU but retain a very close trading relationship and a more vociferous grouping of hard Brexiteers that want a hard Brexit with the UK trading with the EU on WTO terms. The Labour Party has itself been heavily divided on Europe, many of its voters come from areas of the country where there was a high voter leave majority and its leader Jeremy Corbyn has what is best described as an “International Marxist” perspective on the European Union, regarding it as a capitalist club and restricting what a prospective future Labour government could do if it came to power. However, the vast majority of labour members and Labour MPs would like a second referendum, as they consider that the damage to the UK economy would particularly adversely impact upon its supporters standard of living and jobs. So its current position is that it will only support a significantly modified version Theresa May’s deal if it is put to a second referendum or so called “Peoples Vote”. However, if there was another General election that it won, then it would prefer to proceed to leave the EU but negotiate a deal that would at least keep the UK in the Customs Union and parts of the Single Market.

Then there is the Liberal Party which under its leader Vince Cable is strongly in favour of the UK remaining in the European Union and also on reversing the Brexit vote via a second referendum. The latest development has been the newly formed Brexit Party set up by Nigel Farage a key player in the original Brexit referendum. His Brexit Party want to leave the European Union as quickly as possible,

ideally with a free trade deal that will mean the UK leaves the European Union and without a deal if necessary. There a few other parties involved, there is the Democratic Unionist Party that is generally happy with a hard Brexit but does not want a deal with the EU whereby Northern Ireland has an open border with Southern Ireland but then risks trade barriers being put between itself and the rest of the UK. Neither does it want to be following EU rules to keep the Irish border open while the rest of the UK sets its own laws that differ from those operating in Northern Ireland. In the view of the DUP this would be the beginning of the end of the Union with the rest of the UK and could even lead to the eventual unification of Ireland both of which they strongly oppose. The Green Party is generally in favour of the EU as is the Scottish National Party with the latter arguing that there was a majority vote for remain in the case of Scotland in the referendum. Finally there is the UK Independence Party (UKIP) that wants the UK to leave the EU at all costs and is particularly anti-immigration and generally viewed as being to the far right of British Politics.

In the absence of a Second Referendum, the European Elections will be viewed by many as an important proxy for one. The interesting thing is that the Brexit Party is doing very well in the opinion polls with over 30%, the Labour Party is on about 22% and the Conservative Party vote has collapsed to around 12% with the Liberal Party doing rather well on 17%. Many traditionally Conservative Party voters who want a hard Brexit are switching to the Brexit Party for the European elections while other that are pro-EU may well vote for the Liberal Party or even the Green Party. Many pro-EU Labour Party voters might also vote for the Liberal Party to send a message to the Labour Party leadership that it must come out unambiguously in favour of a second referendum. It will also be interesting to see the voter turnout figures, usually European elections attract only a 20% -30% of the electorate turning out to vote, it will be interesting if there is a much higher turnout this time given the current strong divisions in the UK between Remainers and Leavers. The results will undoubtedly be very bad news for Theresa May and spell the end of her premiership. The voting patterns might also have a strong influence on who becomes the next Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister. Will the vote mean that the Conservatives decide to vote for Boris Johnson who is in favour of a much tougher negotiating stance with the EU and who is not too concerned with a “no deal Brexit”? Or will the Conservatives look to a leader with a more pro EU stance and even be prepared to consider a Second Referendum as a means of finally resolving the Brexit crisis as a method of ending the threat from Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party?

One thing is clear, these are without doubt the most important European elections to ever take place in the UK. They will be of vital interest to those who are both keen to leave EU and those that are keen to Remain in the EU. It will be difficult to really discern what the results mean as it is only a proxy for a second referendum and turnout is likely to be far less than that what would occur if a Second referendum were to actually take place. Regardless of the result, it is becoming clearer over time that the only way to properly democratically resolve the issue of Brexit is, in fact, a real second referendum with a clear choice being a hard Brexit on WTO terms or Remain.

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