

Leaving Party: Theresa May's Tories and Europe

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The Conservative Party is now profoundly divided ideologically, into 'hyperglobalisers' and the more mercantilist pragmatists. Theresa May enjoyed a unique window of power when she first became PM to fashion a clear vision of the form of Brexit that 'reluctant' Tory Remainers like herself would favour. But May chose 'safety first', trying to balance the Remain and Leave camps in her party, while focusing on wiping out UKIP as a threat to the Tory vote.

The atmosphere at this year's Tory Party conference in Birmingham was euphoric bordering on delusional. Brexit meant Brexit. The economy was waving not drowning. The EU needed us more than we needed the EU and countries outside it couldn't wait to do trade deals with us. Yes, we really could have our cake and eat it. All was for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds.

This was all a little odd. Given that, in the run up to the referendum, the majority of Tory MPs had come out in support of David Cameron's effort to keep us in the European Union, and given that surveys of the party membership suggested that by no means every grassroots Tory was a hard-line Leaver, then there must have been at least a few Remainers wandering around Birmingham dazed and confused. But if there were, nearly all of them were keeping very quiet about it. This was France after the liberation: nobody had collaborated; everyone had fought for the resistance.

Well, not quite everyone. There were a few brave souls willing to risk a tar and feathering by making it clear a) that they still thought leaving the EU was an unrivalled act of national self-harm and b) that they were now determined, if not to reverse it, then to limit the damage by calling out the Leavers on their empty and broken promises and by campaigning for as soft and smooth a Brexit as possible.

Yet those willing to raise their heads above the proverbial parapet – people like ex-ministers Anna Soubry and Nicky Morgan, and Chair of the Commons Education Select Committee, Neil Carmichael – could be counted on fewer than the fingers of one hand. And, when they weren't being dismissed as sore losers, they were accused of talking down the country rather than telling some valuable home truths. Not surprising, then, that Soubry's hopes of getting colleagues to elect her to the Commons Brexit Committee were quickly dashed. Indeed, only two of the ten picked to serve by Conservative MPs turned out to be Remainers

They and the handful of Tory pro-Europeans perhaps best personified by the former MP and Chair of the European Movement, Laura Sandys, also face a strategic dilemma eerily familiar to anyone on the left of British politics. Are they best off deciding, since there's seemingly no chance of stopping the Brexit bandwagon, to focus on helping their Conservative colleagues to make the best of a bad job? Or should they refuse to let go, on the grounds that doing so might at least help prevent Brexit's centre of gravity getting dragged remorselessly to the hard end of the spectrum? What to do if a bill on Article 50 does have to be taken through parliament, crystallising their quandary: do they pursue amendments designed to move May towards a softer or at least a better-scrutinised Brexit; or do they try (most obviously in the Lords) to delay or even scupper it altogether?

That's not of course to suggest that all is cosy consensus among those at the very top of the Conservative Party charged with developing and then implementing what passes for the UK's negotiating position. Tensions abound. It is easy (indeed, perfectly reasonable) to see these tensions at the top as essentially personal. May, the so-called 'reluctant Remainer', has appointed the 'Three Brexiteers' to positions where they will have responsibility for negotiating Brexit and what will come after. Each has his own interpretation of what leaving should mean, each has an embryonic empire to build, each has his turf to defend, not just against the others but against that perennial pantomime-villain, the Treasury. The latter is headed up by 'spreadsheet Phil' Hammond – apparently an even more reluctant Remainer than the PM herself.

But this time, of course, it's not just personal. There are underlying ideological differences between Conservative 'hyperglobalisers' and the more mercantilist pragmatists.

The former see Brexit as a chance to unshackle us from what they've long argued is a corpse – a bloated, over-regulated, corporatist, corrupt and deeply undemocratic customs union that has prevented Britain from fulfilling its true destiny as a global free-trader able to lower its tax rates and liberate its labour markets so as to compete and do business with the world's fastest growing economic powers.

The latter can see some advantages but they don't believe in leaving everything to the market or letting the devil take the hindmost, not least because there's little or no sign that the British electorate really want to see us become the Hong Kong or Singapore of Europe. To them risk is something to be minimised rather than embraced. And so, of course, is immigration – with the referendum, if it mandated anything beyond Brexit itself, being interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as a clear signal that the public, for good or ill, want the government to prioritise border control over wealth creation. Recent polling may suggest that, if the economy were to run into trouble, then voters might re-think that equation; but it also shows that things would have to get very, very bad indeed before 'Bregret' would stand any chance of sparking widespread demands for a second referendum.

All of which is a reminder, as if one were needed, that, for the Conservative Party at least, electoral considerations are always part of the calculus. May has clearly decided that the referendum result represents a once-in-a-generation chance to get rid of UKIP, at least as a threat to the Tories, if not to Labour. How else does one explain the Prime Minister's 1950s nostalgia project – grammar schools, British doctors for British patients, pulling up the drawbridge, hard Brexit, and the like?

Whether going back to the future works in the long term has to be a moot point: there might still be a niche, even in First-Past-the-Post Britain, for a populist radical right party, especially one prepared not just to hold the government's feet to the fire on Brexit and immigration but to tap, like its continental counterparts, into what are depressingly high (and some claim rising) levels of xenophobia and Islamophobia. But in the short term – while UKIP is consumed by infighting and incompetence – it seems a fairly safe bet that the Tories will be able to persuade enough of Farage's 2015 voters to come back home to significantly boost their chances in a swathe of marginal seats which Labour managed to hang onto in 2010 and 2015. This is especially true while Labour remains (at least in Tory eyes) the funniest joke in town.

It could have been different, of course. Theresa May won the Conservative leadership, and hence the premiership, because there was literally no other credible candidate for the job. As such, she was – for a few precious weeks anyway – in a position to do almost anything she liked had she only seized the moment. She could have faced down the 'headbangers', making it clear that the referendum

meant we would be leaving the EU, not crashing out of it. She could have insisted that this was what her government – one that really didn't need to bring blasts from the past back from the dead – was intent on negotiating. And she could have called an immediate election on that basis, daring the hard-Brexit crew to disavow a Tory manifesto and doubling, tripling, even quadrupling her majority and bringing into the Commons a bunch of MPs who owed their seats and therefore their loyalty to her.

But by her appointments, and by the way she conducted herself and allowed those appointees to conduct themselves at the Birmingham Conference, Theresa May showed she was intent on going home rather than going big. She's still odds-on to win the next election easily. But that doesn't mean she won't reap the Brexit whirlwind too.

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