

# Britain's impossible futures

 mondediplo.com/2019/02/01/brexit

1 février 2019

February 2019

Brexit deadlock as countdown continues

The UK parliament is at an impasse, the latest vote producing a majority for a renegotiation of its departure from Europe that the EU cannot grant. Both main parties risk fracture. So does the UK.

by Paul Mason

Britain's impossible futures



PAUL ELLIS · AFP · Getty Images

A woman harasses Brazilian skateboarders on a London street, demanding they stop speaking 'Brazilian'. The confrontation, emblematic in its stupidity, goes viral on Twitter on 29 January. The chief executives of major supermarkets, plus McDonalds and KFC, warn of significant supply disruptions if there is a No Deal Brexit. The government admits on 27 January that it has contingency plans to introduce martial law to avoid 'death in the event of food and medical shortages'. On the night of 29 January, Britain's parliament votes for something it cannot enact: Conservatives, Ulster Unionists and a few opposed to

immigration from the right of the Labour party combine to demand that the EU make changes to a deal the British government had agreed last November. EU leaders immediately emphasise that no eleventh-hour renegotiation is possible.

If a hostile power had scripted Brexit, this is how they would have written its final act. Unfortunately, the British people have scripted it for themselves (1).

How did we get to this pinnacle of unreality? Because the UK's political class has fragmented over issues that are too fundamental to be contained by the party system, and because much of the ideological glue that held British civil society together for two generations no longer sticks.

The UK's political class has fragmented over issues that are too fundamental to be contained by the party system, and the ideological glue that held British civil society together for two generations no longer sticks

For the Conservative party, the relationship with Europe has been a chronic psychosis. It split Margaret Thatcher's cabinet in the 1980s, destabilised John Major's government in the 1990s, then kept the party out of office for 13 years, crashed David Cameron's premiership, and has now destroyed the credibility of almost every politician associated with the May administration.

The sources of Euroscepticism have changed over time. In the early 1970s, there was still nostalgia for the days of empire. By the time of Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech in September 1988 (2), it had become a project to restrain the Franco-German impulse towards political union, while maintaining the then EEC (European Economic Community) as a liberalised market in which the British business class could lead a low-wage 'race to the bottom'.

Thirty years on, the business class has itself changed shape. The globalisation of manufacturing, with the financialisation of the world, has produced separate business elites in Britain: a managerial class overseeing the locally based plants of stock-market listed companies such as Nissan, Honda, Airbus and BAE Systems; and a class of money managers, commercial lawyers and property developers who represent the interests of global finance and (unofficially) of corrupt oligarchic power.

During the crisis of neoliberalism, the second group called the shots, not just within the Conservative party but through, and across, the media. The relationship was symbolised by the £250,000 annual salary once paid by the owners of the anti-EU *Telegraph* newspaper to Boris Johnson, before he became May's foreign secretary, for writing one column a week. After 2008, the money men began to conceive of Britain's future as primarily a supplier of business, technology and financial services to emerging markets such as China and India, and as the financial manager of the world. A project of ever closer European union wasn't necessary for that future.

## Doctrine of 'global reach'

However, British conservatism is never simply the sum of the intentions of the elite. It has also to incorporate ideas formed in the bars of suburban golf clubs, and in the tearooms of

seaside resorts full of retirees. From the mid-2000s, sentiment here became hostile to the restraint Europe-wide regulations imposed on a low-wage, low-regulation capitalism, and intensely hostile to migration.

Only one underlying myth could hold together the golfers, the small-town van drivers and the British hedge fund guys domiciled in Dubai: the myth of empire. After the Conservatives took power in 2010, the place to study the evolution of this myth was defence policy.

Out of nowhere, and almost without scrutiny, the Conservatives introduced the doctrine of 'global reach' that same year: in addition to all its NATO commitments, Britain would build a 'war-fighting division optimised for high intensity combat operations' (3). Military planners became obsessed with the idea that, as Britain is a major importing country, its defence must begin with a naval presence in the Singapore Strait.

Since austerity had depleted the armed forces, commentators assumed global reach was a political conceit. Its true meaning was revealed once the political programme of the Conservative right emerged in the Brexit referendum, with the European Research Group (ERG) led by Jacob Rees-Mogg.

In one vision, Britain would become the guarantor of globalisation in the abstract, and its embodiment

The section of the elite oriented to global finance — including managing the money of oligarchs via a network of offshore institutions — intends metaphorically to abandon Britain's real economy, together with its ties to Europe, and to erase the institutional muscle memory generated through decades of operation as an EU member. It wants Britain's armed forces to police the world, but not in order to impose favourable trade terms on poor countries, as in the 19th century. In this vision Britain would become the guarantor of globalisation in the abstract, and its embodiment.

One form of the fantasy is 'CANZUK' — a revival of a white, Christian, trading empire including Britain's former settler colonies in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. In another form, Britain becomes an enlarged version of Singapore. For a Trump-supporting faction on the right, Britain would be a glorified airstrip for the US in a larger game of great power rivalry. None of it makes sense, but all of it can be pushed to the public, via rightwing media, as a new imperialist ideology.

As a result, neo-imperialist fantasies have filled the imagination of conservative-minded voters. In a poll in January, 31% favoured a No Deal Brexit if May's deal were to fail in parliament: among Conservative voters this rose to 57%. Only around 17 out of 317 Conservative MPs were prepared to vote in parliament for a motion delaying Article 50 to rule out a catastrophic exit.

If there were already a serious liberal centrist party, capable of limiting the damage, those engaged in British-based business would switch to it en masse. Instead, the only alternative is Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party.



Dan Kitwood · Getty Images

## Labour's dilemma

---

Opposition to membership of the European Union has a long history inside Labour. The alternative economic strategy of the Labour left in the 1980s involved capital controls, tariffs and leaving the EEC. But that is not primarily what is behind Corbyn's lukewarm opposition to Brexit. Instead it is the moral authority of the referendum's Leave vote in the working class areas Labour needs to win to gain power. Labour campaigners, including me, tried internationalist arguments on the doorstep during the 2016 campaign and found them ineffective. What persuaded large numbers of Leave supporters to vote Labour in 2017's general election was the assurance that Corbyn would honour the referendum result.

This strategy of satisfying Brexit voters and trying to move on ran into a big problem in November 2018, when it became clear no possible form of Brexit was acceptable to all Brexiteers. If the Conservatives could not make Brexit happen, any deal that passed through parliament would have to rely on the votes of rebel Labour MPs.

Suddenly, a section of English Labour MPs were in stark opposition to the desires of their membership and voting base; this opened a crisis of direction within Corbynism itself. This was never a single ideology, but an alliance of the old, statist left and the younger generation oriented to social justice movements.

A polling analysis commissioned by trade unions from the anti-racism advocacy group Hope Not Hate shows that overall the electorate has swung against Brexit, with 55% now saying they want to remain in the EU. The analysis claims that if Labour were to go into a snap election promising to enact Brexit, it would lose, not gain, seats, and it needs at least 31 additional seats even to form a minority government.



According to this poll, it would lose five out of seven seats in Scotland, where the working class is strongly pro-EU, and up to 14 seats in London and the southeast, where educated, young, globally focused, Labour voters might desert Corbyn for the LibDems or Greens. By contrast, even if Labour supported Brexit, it would gain no seats at all in Brexit-supporting areas, where the politics of English nationalism and xenophobia are out-shouting traditional concerns over jobs, wages and public services.

The problem for Labour is that in England and Wales, Brexit had been (to borrow an economic term) 'priced in' to politics. It was assumed that prime minister Theresa May would deliver Brexit, Labour would vote against her proposal, and two-party politics as usual would be resumed. As this began to look impossible, Corbyn faced competing demands.

Among Labour's members, according to this same poll, 87% are pro-Remain, while 65% of those who voted Labour in the last election want Remain. In September 2018, the membership committed the party to opposing May's Brexit deal, fighting instead for a customs union plus alignment with the single market, triggering a general election and, if that failed, supporting a second referendum. But by late December, in the face of the party's official position and despite the polling evidence, both left and centre Labour MPs had begun to rebel against this strategy.

Individual members of the Corbyn parliamentary team, including education spokeswoman Angela Rayner and party chair Ian Lavery, expressed concerns about a second referendum, claiming it could be seen as a betrayal of the first. This emboldened those on the traditionalist right of the party to contemplate voting for a version of May's deal.

The unstated fear of a far-right rebellion has begun subtly to shape the actions of both main parties

As the crisis intensified in December, divisions over the second referendum question became so strong within Corbyn's inner circle that shadow ministers on both sides of the argument threatened resignation. Corbyn should have been riding high on the disarray of Theresa May, but instead his popularity plummeted. Just before Christmas, his approval rating fell to an all-time low of 19% (4).

This explains why seven Labour MPs voted with May's Tories on 29 January for the fantasy renegotiation strategy, and 14 rebelled against the party line on delaying Article 50, helping to cancel the votes of 17 pro-EU rebels on the Tory side.

## Brexit now the only topic

---

To understand where Britain goes next, you have to understand how visceral is the plebeian passion that has been stirred up by parliament's failure — in the pubs, at the school gates and on increasingly emotion-driven talk radio shows.

Only in November 2018 did Brexit become the key issue for the electorate. The realisation that May's deal was doomed pushed the issue from 30% naming it as their top issue to 65% and rising (5). In the week May lost the vote on her original deal in parliament (15 January), that figure rocketed to 86%: Brits were talking about Brexit and almost nothing

else (6). Simultaneously, the public became aware that after years of discussion, Brexit might at last be about to happen, and the government might irremediably split while still in office; an anti-politics mood favouring neither party seemed to be growing.

In a working-class community, if Brexit is a minor issue, then the far right has very little leverage to set the agenda. If 86% consider it the number one issue, and think mainstream politicians have messed it up, there is a big opening for rightwing populism. Fear of this has been a leading driver of compromise with Brexit among Labour MPs on the right and left.

Though the left is active and visible in working-class communities where pro-Brexit sentiment is high, it has neither the appetite nor the resources for a head-to-head fight with a far-right movement. As one activist in the English Midlands told me, 'people come into the Labour party to stop the closure of their local maternity ward, not to be chased down the street by fascists in MAGA hats, claiming they are traitors.'

That is how the unstated fear of a far-right rebellion has begun subtly to shape the actions of both main parties, and is being talked up by some on the right as a threat, though it is not yet a reality and with luck may not happen.



Richard Baker · Getty Images

## The left at a crossroads

---

By the end of February it is likely that May's attempt to renegotiate Brexit will fail, stockpiling of food and medicines will increase, and sterling and growth will fall sharply. In an atmosphere of crisis, May's bluff will be called. It is unlikely that all her cabinet members would remain in office if she sets her sights towards the finishing line of a No Deal Brexit.

To prevent No Deal, the cabinet is going to have to pull the plug on Article 50, or on May herself. For either May or her replacement, the option then would be to embrace Labour's

proposal of a customs union plus single market alignment, to get Brexit through with Labour votes. That would split British conservatism strategically, probably for decades.

Behind all the hashtags, anger and parliamentary manoeuvring is the existential crisis of a ruling class. Britain is ruled by a super-rich elite with scant material interest in operations in the UK. If necessary it will form an alliance with people in poor, white, low-skilled communities to disrupt the multilateral order.

Corbynism was always an alliance of two main social groups: urban, educated, networked youth and the survivors of the class struggles of the 1980s

This 'alliance of elite and mob', which Hannah Arendt recognised as the material basis of fascism (Z), does not need to become fascist. It only needs to defeat and demoralise the forces of globalism and social liberalism, imposing a decade of uncertainty. What this alliance wants is best described as 'Thatcherism in one country', a form of nationalist neoliberalism. If it succeeds, in the coming decade there will be an acrimonious breakup of the UK, with Scotland seeking a second independence referendum, while resurgent English nationalists fight rhetorical wars with the EU, from which it will take its rules.

The left is at a crossroads. Corbynism was always an alliance of two main social groups: urban, educated, networked youth and the survivors of the class struggles of the 1980s. As one of those survivors, I know they include many who have fought to commit the party to a second referendum and to Remain. But their organic link to the communities in thrall to English nationalism has blinded them to the danger the Corbyn project faces. The danger, made clear by the Hope Not Hate research, is that a new centrist party will emerge, committed to rejoining the EU, and that a section of Labour voters will go with it. And that Corbyn will look like 'just another politician' who has triangulated between his own principles and the prejudices of voters.

The tragedy is that Labour went into this with a clear strategy, endorsed unanimously by its membership through a conference vote. But on the crucial day of 29 January, Labour's parliamentary group included – not for the first time in history – too few with the courage to stand by what the membership wanted.

It is still possible that parliamentary deadlock will produce a government collapse and a second referendum; 60% of voters say they want it in that case, and 55% say they would vote Remain. That outcome would destroy the project of the neo-Thatcherites forever, which is why they are risking economic collapse to avoid it. Those are the stakes.

Paul Mason

Paul Mason is a writer and journalist. His forthcoming book *Clear Bright Future: a radical defence of the human being* will be published by Allen Lane in May 2019.

LMD English edition exclusive

Support LMD

---

(2) See 'How Thatcher's Bruges speech put Britain on the road to Brexit', *Financial Times*, 31 August 2018.

(3) 'A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, London, November 2015.

(4) Wikipedia Leadership Approval Opinion Polling, updated on 27 January 2019.

(5) See Paul Mason, 'A Country in a critical situation', *New Statesman*, London, 21 November 2018.

(6) Populus poll, January 2019.

(7) See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, 1951.

(3) 'A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, London, November 2015.

Tanzania's port out of Africa

Jean-Christophe Servant, February 2019