

# Confusion and chaos

The Conservative MP Sir Nicholas Soames said recently that he didn't think that in all his 35 years as an MP he had "ever known such a truly unpleasant and deeply uncertain time in the house" following the publication of the Government's Brexit white paper. Michael Fabricant, the author of the hyperlinked piece, claimed that Sir Nicholas' memory is playing tricks on him and that the battles over the Maastricht Treaty were worse. My colleague Robert Oulds from the Bruges Group agrees – threats of both physical violence and blackmail were used by the whips of John Major's government. We haven't quite got to that point – yet.

Even so, the atmosphere in Parliament is one of confusion and chaos. "We really don't know what is going on" said one MP. He is not the only one. A spate of ministerial resignations has been followed by the submission of a letter by Philip Davies, the MP, to the Prime Minister stating that he has "lost trust" in her ability to deliver the EU referendum result.

Mrs May is likely to cling on until the recess next Tuesday, unless firm evidence can be found which will confirm that the current impasse is something she has created deliberately and that she doesn't want us to achieve a successful break from the EU. Her unsuccessful attempt to bring the recess forward was defeated by MPs – and unsurprisingly, as it gave the impression of a Prime Minister wanting to run away. Even if she does make it to next Tuesday, however, it is going to be a torrid time and Tory MPs can expect no respite when they return to their constituencies. Locals activists are incensed over what they see as a sell-out.

So what might happen? It would be a brave man to predict the outcome. Essentially, there are four possibilities: firstly, Mrs May manages to achieve a nominal Brexit based on something

like the Chequers plan, but no doubt with a few more concessions thrown in. Secondly, the government falls and a general election is called. Thirdly, a second referendum may be offered to the people. Fourthly, Mrs May is ousted and a new Brexit strategy is devised by a new team.

Of the four options, the first would destroy the Conservative Party at the polls and could cause a split within the party itself. Given that the European Research group of Tory MPs led by Jacob Rees-Mogg has stated that it will vote against it, such an outcome would only be possible by relying on the Labour, Lib Dem and Scottish Nationalist parties. Labour is in a serious mess itself. Besides the deepening divisions within the party over antisemitism allegations, the party is disunited over Brexit. A minority of MPs support Brexit. Some, such as Chuka Umunna, see stopping Brexit as their main priority whereas the Corbynites are much more interested in seeing a general election called.

It is the fear of Jeremy Corbyn ending up in No. 10 which Mrs May's team is using as a weapon against dissidents on both sides of her party. The effectiveness of this argument is questionable. However disunited the Tories may be over Brexit, the last thing any of them want is another General Election, not to mention that the Brexit clock would continue to tick during the campaign period, as it did during last year's election. This is in no one's interests.

A second referendum was recently proposed by Justine Greening, suggesting three options be put to the electorate – accept the Chequers deal, leave without a deal or abandon Brexit and stay in the EU. The proposal was dismissed by Mrs May, although it is by no means an impossibility. There are nonetheless several reasons why it is unlikely. Firstly, it reflects very badly on Parliament. In effect, MPs would be saying “You gave us a mandate. We can't deliver it so we're throwing it back in your court.” Such a move would undermine the very authority of Parliament, although the Conservatives, as the party of

government, would be the biggest losers electorally. Secondly, it would be cruel. There is no groundswell among the general public for another referendum. The message MPs have been receiving from their constituents has been simple – “just get on with it.” Unlike the 2016 referendum, it isn’t wanted and what is more, it would reopen wounds which have largely been healed. Given the febrile atmosphere in Parliament, a second referendum would be fought in a terribly heated, bitter atmosphere which would tear communities and families apart. No sane MP could possibly want to inflict such pain on their fellow countrymen. There is also once again the ticking clock. The necessary legislation would have to complete its passage through Parliament and then a decent amount of time would need to be set aside for a serious campaign. With Brexit Day only just over eight months away, there just isn’t long enough. Furthermore, why just these three options? There are others, including EFTA, which have some support.

So the most likely option is a new Brexit strategy. Time is short and would be shortened further by the time taken up with the inevitable leadership contest. Joining EFTA next March to give us a breathing space wouldn’t satisfy everyone, including some regular readers of this blog, but other options are running out. Even if a WTO-type exit were feasible (which some of us doubt), it would need time to prepare for it and that time just isn’t available. It also wouldn’t command a majority in Parliament. Joining the EEC was a complex business too; the government gave clear, detailed advice to business for over a year beforehand to ensure a smooth transition. There is no reason to suppose that the task of disentangling the accumulated complexities through Brexit would be any less.

Two years have been wasted. We are not going to achieve the Brexit we hoped for. Given the present chaos, if we achieve a smooth but genuine Brexit via the EFTA route, leaving some unfinished business for the period after March 2019, (such as negotiating a looser long-term relationship), most supporters

of leaving the EU could heave a guarded sigh of relief.