

When turkeys really do vote for Christmas

“Don’t worry, Rupert,” said the backbench MP I was having tea with, “turkeys don’t vote for Christmas.”

The “turkeys” in question were the House of Lords, and the “Christmas” was the idea that they would seek to block Brexit by undermining Article 50 Bill.

Well, we now know that the Lords have voted to defeat the government on the rights of EU citizens in the UK – and by doing so have thrown UK citizens in the EU to the wolves. Given the size of the rebel majority, it now looks likely that the Lords will inflict other defeats on the government on this Bill.

This should not come as a surprise. There have been many instances in the past when turkeys have voted for Christmas. As a rule, this happens when the turkeys have managed to convince themselves that they are voting for Easter, not for Christmas. They ignore the gathering storm clouds heavy with the snows and blizzards of winter, and instead see only the narrow gleam of sunlight that they think heralds spring and so rush eagerly forwards seeking chocolate eggs.

Perhaps I am taking this analogy too far.

Let me give you some examples.

In 1785 the government of France faced bankruptcy. King Louis XVI brought in the financial guru Jacques Necker to solve the problem. Necker looked at the hideously unfair tax system by which poor peasants were highly taxed, but wealthy nobles lived largely tax-free. He proposed a new tax system under which the nobles and the Church paid their fair share of taxes. The nobles were appalled and forced Louis to sack

Necker, bringing in a more compliant finance minister who scrapped the idea of taxing the nobles. The noble turkeys thought that they had voted for chocolate eggs at Easter, but instead had voted for Christmas in the form of the French Revolution that followed. Many of their heads fell on the guillotine as a result.

On 5th December 1648 the English Parliament voted to accept a proposal from King Charles I that put forward a new settlement to end the Civil War that had been raging since 1642. They had forgotten that the army leaders no longer trusted Charles and would accept no deal that saw him returned to power. The next day, the army arrived at Parliament in the shape of Colonel Thomas Pride with two regiments of armed soldiers. He arrested 45 MPs and threw them into prison, while another 300 fled. Only 151 MPs were allowed to take their seats, and they did so under the guns of the soldiers. The MPs had convinced themselves that they were voting for peace, plenty and the rule of law. Instead they had precipitated a military dictatorship headed by army commander Oliver Cromwell.

In 1221 the Governor of Merv, then one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the world, ordered the execution of some merchants. The pretext was that they had broken a rule on trading, but in reality it was because he wanted to confiscate their goods. It was, possibly, the most disastrous decision in history. The merchants were the envoys of Genghis Khan, ruler of the Mongols. Genghis Khan dropped everything to avenge the insult. He arrived at Merv with an army of around 50,000 men, stormed the poorly defended city and massacred the entire population. It is thought that over a million people were killed. The governor had thought he was voting for Easter in the form of a haul of treasure, but he actually played the role of a turkey at Christmas, as did the entire population of his city.

And so to today. The Lords believe that they can thumb their noses to the government and to the people. They think that

they are voting for Easter in the form of flagrant virtue signalling and feeling smug over their smart dinner parties, while seeking to undermine Brexit.

It remains to be seen if they have voted for Easter or for Christmas.