

Expect plenty of spin before a possible third vote on the Agreement

The government is proceeding as if there will be a third vote on the Withdrawal Agreement on Monday. They will of course need to persuade the Speaker that something meaningful has changed from the previous version they put to the Commons, which lost by 149 votes.

The government approach to get MPs to vote for the Agreement depends on which MP they are talking to. Leave supporting MPs I hear are told there will be a long delay to Brexit or no Brexit if they do not vote for the Agreement. Remain voting MPs are told there would be a no deal Brexit on 29 March. As all this has appeared in the press, the two sides can see that at least one side is not getting the truth. The danger for the government is both sides may choose not to believe the government, knowing it faces different ways.

There are some Conservative Leave inclining MPs who switched votes between the first vote on the Agreement and the second. They were mainly won over to what they still regard as a very bad Agreement by the worry that maybe the alternative was a long delay. Now the government has revealed its hand to the European Council and has not even asked for a long delay, some of them may switch back to opposing the Agreement as the worry they were told about has not yet materialised.

The DUP have always taken a principled stance on this matter. Their simple red line is they cannot accept anything which gives different treatment to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. They deeply resent the EU attempt to create a new country called UK (NI) which would have different laws and customs arrangements from the rest of the UK. The difficulties for them lie in the Agreement text itself, with many pages creating island of Ireland solutions where the DUP want UK solutions. It is difficult to see how they can be persuaded to change their vote. Press briefing about making more payments to Northern Ireland went down very badly with the DUP who were not proposing any such deal.

Meanwhile Remain MPs cannot accept the Agreement either because its vagueness on what shape the future partnership will take gives them no legal or bankable guarantees of the close relationship including customs union membership, EU environmental and employment laws and single market rules that they want. They are very concerned that if the UK did sign the Agreement we could end up with a very bad deal not including the features of the EU they most wish to protect. Mrs May's insistence that the UK will be leaving the Customs union and the single market, necessary to keep to her Manifesto, alienates the opposition parties and a handful of Conservatives. To Remain the Withdrawal Agreement is nowhere near as good as staying in. They want the PM to tear it up and try again. They want as Labour sets out at the very least a customs union membership with close convergence of legislation.

In summary it is a very bad deal for the UK as a whole. It upsets both sides

for different reasons, but Remain and Leave do agree by a big majority that this Agreement is not the way forward. The next few days will be crucial for both the government and for Brexit. Labour sense that the government is very unstable and are likely to see this as a good opportunity to maximise opposition to a very unpopular deal to build their case against the government generally.

No point in delay until 12 April

The government should not try to delay an answer until 12 April. It would require difficult Parliamentary processes for no obvious gain.

Why would MPs vote for the Agreement after March 29 when they have not been willing to vote for it before March 29?

Mrs May should have asked for a free trade deal tonight and told them she cannot get the Withdrawal Agreement through, given the large defeats, the dislike of the deal by the public and the reluctance of most MPs to change their minds on it.

Troubled families

The government has reviewed its troubled families programme. This is a policy to offer more support and staff time to help families prone to difficulties in order to reduce the incidence of adult and juvenile crime, family break up, joblessness and other problems.

The report suggests that every pound spent on the troubled families programme has saved more than that in other government expenditures. By looking at the group of families in the programme and a control group not in it, they conclude that the programme has reduced youth and adult crime and kept more children living at home.

We do need to help families that have difficulty in looking after their children and keeping them out of trouble.

[The Prime Minister's letter to Mr Tusk](#)

The faltering and badly drafted letter to Mr Tusk is unacceptable, asking as it does for a delay of three months in our exit from the EU.

188 Conservative MPs made clear our opposition to any delay last Thursday in the vote, with another 12 unable to support the Prime Minister's motion to delay. Our actions, allied to Cabinet dissent, has persuaded the Prime Minister to drop the idea of a long delay for no stated purpose which I characterised here as the phantom option.

The Prime Minister has decided to appeal to Labour and SNP MPs to vote for a short delay were she to be granted one by the EU. The letter both says she could not take the same deal back to the Commons for a vote this week under the Speaker's ruling, and says she will bring the same Agreement back next week after the Council for a third vote. It does not explain how this happens. The suggestion is getting Council endorsement for the documents Parliament has already considered somehow makes a difference. The letter asks for the extension to Article 50 only to pass consequential legislation following approval of the Agreement. The letter is silent on what happens if the Agreement is voted down again or not voted on at all, though it implies we leave on 29 March with no extension.

What should the EU make of this? Many of them will feel the Prime Minister has told them before she can speak for Parliament and will get her deal through, but is still 149 votes short of a majority at last count. She has told them she would meet the timetable, only now to have to confess she cannot. They will doubtless want her to answer questions about why she wants the extension, how she would use the time, and above all why should they believe this time is different and the Agreement will go through.

They would also be wise to ask her how sure she is she could pass delay through the Commons, given the strong hostility of two thirds of her party to any such proposal. She would need to demonstrate she had a clear and reliable understanding with the Leader of the Opposition that he would provide enough MPs to offset the 200 Conservative MPs known to be against delay. This cannot be done by even a large Labour backbench rebellion but would need the Leader of the Opposition to take joint responsibility with the Prime Minister for delaying Brexit and whip accordingly. This seems unlikely, as there is little in it for Mr Corbyn to enter coalition with the PM over Brexit when any firm position on the subject splits his own party more.

[The Prime Minister's 8 pm Statement is](#)

delayed

Does this mean they are rewriting it? Can it be different from what she and the Brexit Ministers told the Commons this afternoon?