

Brexit end game?

As we listen to the ticking clock we are assured by the PM we will leave on 29 March this year. The question remains how.

It sounds from the government line and the line of Mrs May's helpers that they want to get Parliament to reconsider the Withdrawal Agreement which Remainers and Leavers united to defeat. They seem to think they can pose Remain MPs with the choice of no deal versus the Agreement where they might prefer the Agreement, whilst saying to Leave MPs it is Withdrawal Agreement versus No Brexit. The problem with this approach, as tried last time, is it is contradictory. The threat of No Deal issued to Remain supporters is exactly what many Leave voters now want.

It is not credible to say to Leave MPs Brexit will be cancelled if the Withdrawal Agreement is rejected again. The government would have to propose rescinding the Article 50 letter and embark on the repeal of the EU Withdrawal Act. Many MPs would realise this would destroy the trust of electors. It would lead to the loss of many seats as Labour and Conservative MPs who had won in 2017 on a clear promise to implement Brexit faced retribution from angry voters at the following election. It is difficult to see how Mrs May's leadership would survive any such attempted U turn on such an important issue, and questionable whether DUP support for the government could last either. There is every reason for MPs to stay loyal to the Conservative or Labour Manifesto and refuse to repeal the legislation.

To a Leave MP the Withdrawal Agreement was easy to vote against because it is not leaving. It is a further 21 to 45 months in the EU, accepting their new laws without any say on them, under their court, and paying large unspecified sums to their budget. With the backstop it might keep us in a customs union permanently. The Conservative Manifesto very clearly promised we would leave the EU, single market and Customs Union. The Labour Manifesto promised to leave the EU and set out a detailed trade policy that would be incompatible with Customs Union membership.

Mrs May might late in the day get some legal text offering reassurances about the backstop. It is unlikely to be a full rewrite of the Agreement taking the backstop out in the way Parliament requested through the Brady amendment. This should not be enough to lead to the successful passing of a motion in favour of the Agreement after all, and certainly not enough to give the government a majority for the complex legislation it will take to put the 585 page agreement into UK law. I see no way of avoiding a full debate on the complete agreement, whatever the draft Withdrawal Agreement Bill might say, allowing plenty of opportunity for doubts to be expressed about many features of this comprehensive lock up of UK sovereignty under a new and damaging EU Treaty.

Given this Remain may well seek delay instead. The issues this poses are two fold. Why would the EU consent to 3 to 9 months delay, given their view that the negotiations are over and the Agreement cannot be re opened? How would

this fit in with their timetable for European elections and a new Commission? Why would they want to prolong the exit of a country that is clearly going to leave and is refusing their expensive terms for an extension of membership?

Worse still is why would the UK want delay? It prolongs business uncertainty. It makes the UK look feeble and indecisive. It delays new trade deals and stops us spending the money saved on exit. It fails to take back control of our laws, our money and our borders.

I do not see how there are things we can get the EU to agree in April and May that we cannot get them to agree in February and March against the pressure of the deadline of our departure. The public want government and Parliament to just get on with it. That is also the best negotiating strategy. I still want a managed WTO exit with a UK offer of a free trade agreement which could avoid tariffs and other new barriers to our EU trade.