

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.