

May day

Yesterday Mrs May at last admitted she could not win the vote. She had to accept the Withdrawal Agreement was disliked by far too many MPs.

It was therefore a curious decision to spend the first half of the campaign rushing round the UK as if appealing to voters in a General Election, and to spend most of the last week-end wooing businesses as if they had some kind of bloc vote.

The Prime Minister did not once approach me about my intentions. Maybe she accepted my view and realised she could not change it. Her Chief of Staff told me I would be invited to a one to one meeting with her which never materialised. Several other MPs I have talked to were also left alone, when the government needed every Conservative to vote with it to give it any chance of winning. They had already lost the support of the DUP.

Stirring the country up did help generate a lot of constituency and nationwide correspondence. I received more messages to oppose her Agreement than to support, and many positive messages about the approach I took in the Parliamentary debate. It also shifted opinion against the Agreement. One recent poll says 62% wanted the Agreement voted down and only 25% support it.

Mrs May implied she can get some reassurances about the Irish backstop and then try again to get it voted through the Commons. That is very unlikely, given the magnitude of the opposition to it. There should be no doubt that this is a completely unacceptable surrender of powers and money by the UK for no good reason. This is allied to the very worrying treatment of Northern Ireland as some new country called UK (NI), to be treated differently for customs purposes and with different legislation to the rest of the UK. Even if the whole backstop was removed completely I would not vote for this one sided and unfair Agreement, and nor would a good many other Conservative MPs. What bargaining power would we have left for a better Future Partnership after signing away powers over laws, borders and money?

Only a large defeat will send a clear message to the EU that a few cosmetic changes to the Agreement will not be sufficient to get Parliament to change its mind, and to get them to understand we will be leaving with no Withdrawal Agreement unless they radically change their approach. The Prime Minister's decision not to press the vote means there would have been a big defeat.

I have given Mrs May and her team plenty of advice to avoid this outcome which they have ignored. This Agreement is Mrs May's Agreement, and this latest Project Fear campaign was her campaign. The more they run Project Fear and the more extreme they make it, the more most of the public shrugs its shoulders and scorns politicians who mouth such nonsense. Mrs May was unclear when she would bring this Agreement back for a vote, and unclear over whether it was even feasible to get changes to the legally binding text of the Withdrawal Agreement as opposed to the less important text of the vague Political Declaration.

Many MPs are asking why Ministers were made to go out and assert that the vote would definitely take place today, and why they had to maintain the fiction they would win. This has removed confidence in Mrs May from some more MPs who used to support her.