

The next Prime Minister and the EU

The next Prime Minister has one immediate and urgent task – to get us out of the EU. Unless the Conservative party delivers soon on its promise in 2017 to take us out the substantial loss of votes to the Brexit party suggested in recent Westminster polls will be confirmed or may accelerate. We are long past the position where we need a new leader to find a compromise between Leave and Remain, or who thinks that a few tweaks to the Withdrawal Agreement will enable it to pass. Only getting us out by October 31st at the latest is going to get the government and the party the right to a hearing again from voters, and the space and authority to press forward with all the many policies we can then offer based on the freedoms Brexit delivers.

Any new Leader has to understand the depth and range of feeling in the country that the outgoing government and the official opposition have let the country down badly, by delaying, diluting and querying the whole idea of Brexit. We have just witnessed a huge tidal wave of support for getting on with leaving, and against signing the Withdrawal Agreement. Mrs May's Agreement was designed in Brussels by the EU, and met with great opposition from Leave and Remain voters alike.

I tried hard over many months to persuade her to go back to the EU and tell them the Agreement could not be sold to UK voters and had to be changed. I argued with her to stand up to the EU and tell them if necessary we would just leave without signing the Agreement. In the later stages of her tenure as PM I urged her to do herself a favour by dropping the Agreement, to ease the obvious strains on her of the repeated disagreements and negative votes. I was amazed at her resilience in defence of a proposal which the country had already rejected by a large margin, and which this Parliament was unlikely to accept.

Some say we cannot leave without signing the Agreement because Parliament will not allow it. The only hope this Parliament has to reconnect with voters who have left both main parties in droves is to leave. A new PM can do so. Best would be to go to the EU, say we have messed them around for too long and we wish to leave immediately. If the EU agrees it can be done as the delay in our exit was done by agreement between the new UK government and the EU. We should offer a comprehensive free trade agreement which would enable us to leave with no new tariffs or trade barriers whilst over the months after exit we seek to work out and sign the detailed proposal.

If the EU would not agree to an immediate exit, then we need to wait until 31 October. Parliament has legislated for our exit then. A new PM just has to ensure Parliament does not legislate to keep us in. Government has plenty of powers to do just that, which Mrs May declined to use last time because she had herself decided she wanted to delay our exit if she could not have her way and sign the Agreement.