

The Leader – vol 4

Brexit latest

I have always believed that in the game of bluff around Brexit, no Deal wouldn't happen since rational behaviour would prevail. Either Parliament would vote through Theresa May's proposal (which can't be dignified with the word "deal"; negotiations haven't started yet) or, following a new referendum, we would finish up still inside the EU.

I still believe these are the two likely outcomes.

The sense that Brexit is an unholy mess cooked up to solve party political problems is widespread

But I have been struck by how much No Deal talk has now entered the national vocabulary. **There is a whiff of fear**, especially in business. I have spoken to all the main business groups including those representing the main sectors of the economy. Key take-aways from the conversations were that many firms are desperately worried. Even if they don't believe No Deal will happen, some of their customer and suppliers do. **A large amount of potential investment is quietly leaking out of the country**; heavy costs are being incurred and contracts lost; and very few businesses are remotely prepared.

When I worked in a large multinational company, my colleagues there had a rather low view of politicians. **But the Brexit saga has turned suspicion into outright contempt**. The sense that Brexit is an unholy mess cooked up to solve party political problems is widespread. The events of the last few days must have hardened that feeling.

First there are the machinations in the Labour Party.

Corbyn has grudgingly been persuaded to sign up to a People's Vote to prevent further defections

Jeremy Corbyn has been strongly opposed to a People's Vote and committed to 'Deliver Brexit'. He has now grudgingly been persuaded to prevent further defections, to sign up (sort of) to a People's Vote with an option to remain. **I have yet to find anyone who believes a word of it**. We all assume that the Labour Party will whip, when the time comes, for a People's Vote, while quietly knowing that a substantial number of their MPs will vote with the government. None of the rebels will be subject to any of Corbyn's 'purges'.

And this week we have had Theresa May agreeing, in effect, to a **three month postponement of Brexit** but with no indication of a plan to break the deadlock.

It is for this reason that the most likely route to a People's Vote remains the one which currently seems most improbable: that the government eventually recognises that there are better odds on winning a referendum than getting the deal through parliament. **The government does not want to concede, but it may yet have to.**

The businesses I have been talking to say that **this three month delay is, if anything, more worse than useless**: prolonging the uncertainty over 'no deal'. I noticed that my successor Greg Clark and his ministerial team were amongst those threatening to resign unless Theresa May backed down from a 'No Deal'. They seem to have been persuaded she has. Maybe I am missing something here.

In other news

The other, related, political shock was the foundation of the breakaway group of independents, or TIG.

They have undoubtedly made a splash and captured some media attention. There is a public mood of wanting 'something new' and an alternative to the discredited binary system we have at present. The MPs showed courage by breaking away and **my instincts are that we in the Liberal Democrats should work with them if we can.**

We have a lot to bring to the table: organisation; infrastructure; a strong, and growing, local government base.

Early contacts with TIG suggest positive vibes

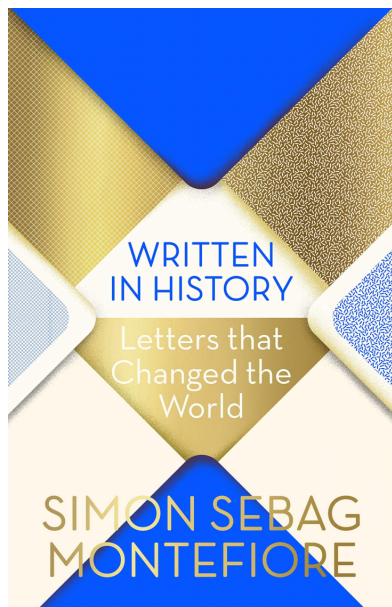
It is too early to talk about formal association but the first-past-the-post system imposes its own brutal logic. Hanging together or hanging separately. **Early contacts suggest positive vibes.**

This week's news from the **Indian subcontinent managed to penetrate the Brexit haze** which surrounds our domestic agenda. It brought me up short as I have close links with India; my Indian in-laws are in the firing line if war heats up. The events are eerily familiar to those I described futuristically in my novel *Open Arms* is now unfolding in real time. The novel explores ways in which that conflict plays out in multi-cultural Britain.

And finally

It is difficult to find time to read amidst the political drama. I am still enjoying the excellent work of one of my favourite authors Simon Sebag Monte Fiore: biographer (Stalin; Catherine The Great); novelist (*One Night in Winter*) ; Historian (Jerusalem; *The Romanovs*). *Written in History* is a compilation of around 200 letters "which changed the world" from the Pharaohs to the present day. There are some remarkable love letters from Henry VIII, Bonaparte, Stalin, Nelson and James I (to his male lover the Duke of Buckingham); letters about war; moving letters of goodbye (Walter Raleigh's before his execution is a classic).

And I am immensely privileged this week to be able to present “My music” at the Wigmore Hall with the orchestra of St Johns. Mostly Bach and Mozart. Having had a turn on *Desert Island Discs* ten years ago, and another on a similar programme on Radio 3, this programme represents a trilogy of talk and music programmes, featuring my favourite classical music. This will be a rare treat away from the political fray.



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[ALDC want to help you win](#)

The local elections are fast approaching, and we all want to see a bumper set of results. ALDC can help you with that!

ALDC are the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and Campaigners – a membership organisation that provides advice, resources and training to support our members with their campaigning to win elections.

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[Have your say on Lib Dem policy](#)

We are currently developing new policies on health and social care, crime and policing and poverty and regional inequality and **we want to know what you think.**

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[Supporter scheme](#)

Following extensive consultation within the party, the Federal Board asked the Federal People Development Committee to develop a formal scheme for registered supporters. This is in keeping with the Party's agreed strategy to create a political and social movement and forms part of proposals to open up our structures which are being debated at Spring Conference in York.

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[British Politics is Changing](#)

We have been calling for a realignment of politics for decades. I have welcomed the courageous move by 11 Members of Parliament to sit as independents. We now must seize the moment and maximise this opportunity to reshape British politics.

Those MPs who have defected to the newly formed "Independent Group" come from different political traditions to our own. We should respect them for being honest about the fact that their former parties no longer articulate their values. Thankfully, our party, is different and still articulates the values that we have always held. In the politics of Brexit, we agree on a lot and have a shared desire to see a People's Vote. We shall cooperate in achieving that.

However, I want us to be open to the possibility of a shared agenda beyond

the immediate Brexit debate. We will not agree on everything and where we do not agree we should not be afraid to say so. We can, however, concentrate on what unites us and how we can work together issue by issue to bring about change. I hope to work closely with The Independent Group in Parliament.

Politics, of course, is not just what happens in Westminster. As leader of this party I value enormously the work done by our parliamentarians in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Brussels and our thousands of hard working and effective councillors. We all, I believe want to seize the opportunities this moment presents to build a broad movement for change in the country and seek to maximise political representation to advance the values we share.

Together, we will need to decide how we engage with any new political force. Under our present electoral system that will mean in some cases people in different parts of the country having to take difficult decisions to avoid damaging electoral contests. However, that is clearly a matter for local parties in consultation with HQ to decide working within our established structures, while keeping our eye on the bigger electoral prize.

The overriding lesson of the week is that British politics is changing. That is good news for the country, good news for liberal, open values and good news for our party.

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