

With six months to go, Brexit is still baffling

With six months to go before Britain formally leaves the European Union on March 29, 2019, Brexit has never looked more baffling.

Last week, the UK's official opposition Labour Party formally backed a policy that could lead to a second EU referendum.

So, finally, all those people who want to scrap Brexit altogether have something to hang on to, right?

Not exactly.

Let's start from the beginning. The governing Conservative Party is bitterly divided on exactly what Brexit should look like.

Prime Minister Theresa May has put to Brussels her so-called Chequers plan for what she thinks the future relationship between the UK and the EU should be.

It uses lots of suspiciously Remain-friendly language like a "common rulebook for all goods including agri-foods" and describes a "facilitated customs agreement" that treats the UK and the EU "as if a combined customs territory".

This means there would be no need for customs checks at the border — thus removing the need for a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

But it also leaves room for regulatory flexibility, allowing Britain to be competitive in certain areas once free from the EU and crucially, Chequers would see an end to legal oversight from the European Court of Justice in the UK.

Cabinet departures

May's deal was an attempt to paper over the cracks in her party between those who want to remain very closely tied to the EU, those who want to storm off and go it alone and every position in between. She also has to make sure she doesn't lose the 10 votes of the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party, who prop up

May's Conservatives in Parliament.

It didn't work. Her plan led to two high-profile resignations. First, her Brexit Secretary David Davis. Then, her Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson.

These two men — who since resigning have described Chequers as effectively wrapping “a suicide vest around the British constitution” and handing the “detonator” to Brussels (Johnson) and as a deal that “falls far short” of delivering “what the British people were promised during the referendum” (Davis) — have thrown their weight behind a different plan, which would see a far looser trading arrangement between the UK and the EU, but allowing for greater trading opportunities elsewhere.

If you can bear to read it, Johnson has outlined his plan for a “SuperCanada” free trade deal in no fewer than 4,500 words in the Daily Telegraph newspaper. The timing of this pitch for his version of Brexit is significant, as it comes days before the Conservative's annual party conference after months of speculation about May's leadership.

A divided party is a major problem for May. Had she not lost her parliamentary majority in last year's disastrous snap election, it's possible that she could have forced her disgruntled MPs to swallow whatever Brexit deal she wanted.

But now, with two high-profile former ministers whipping up her rebellious backbenchers and the nightmare of her reliance on the DUP in parliament, it's hard to see a way through for her.

Second vote?

This is where the Labour Party comes in.

Labour's call for a second public vote would only happen in the event that May is unable to get her Brexit deal through Parliament, then fails to hold a general election. Of course, the unspoken reality here is that without a general election and taking power from the Conservatives, Labour lacks the authority to hold such a vote. And even then, Labour has been a little fudgy on the issue of whether Remain would even be an option on the ballot paper.

What is possible, however, is this: May's Brexit plan could fail to make it through

Parliament which, after some boring constitutional nonsense, could lead to her government falling, forcing a general election.

Presumably, both parties would then offer detailed outlines of their Brexit plans in their election manifestos, offering the public a clear choice. Should either party win an outright majority, then there may be no need for a second public vote.

For what it's worth, the Labour Party is not tremendously clear on Brexit, either. Loosely speaking, Labour wants to remain in the Customs Union to avoid a hard border in Ireland and keep all the benefits of single market access (for those who really care, you can read the Labour Party's Six Key Tests for a final Brexit deal, which Jeremy Corbyn somewhat amusingly forgot in a broadcast interview last week).

Even more confusingly, Corbyn also said last week that he would vote with the government to push through May's Brexit plan if she committed to remaining in the Customs Union, which would mean the Conservative plan being dictated and voted through by Labour. That would lead to even more chaos for both parties.

It's hard to predict exactly how MPs will vote when the Brexit deal arrives. The majority of the House of Commons was opposed to Brexit, yet still voted to trigger Article 50. With the threat of a no-deal crash exit hanging over them, will they vote against May and risk a calamity?

Or will the unhappy Remainers hold their nerve and hope that events will play in their favor? And it's worth remembering that all of this is still Britain negotiating with itself — Brussels has not agreed with May's Chequers proposal, the only plan formally on the table, soon after it was published.

So, what does the next six months look like for Britain? From the madness described above, goodness knows. But given the divisions in British politics and May's habit of clinging onto power, business as usual and months more of zombie governance is as likely an outcome as any.

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