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Land of no return

A year on from Brexit, the UK is more divided than ever

Of all the oddities surrounding Theresa May's decision to call a snap election, perhaps the oddest was her assertion that "the country is coming together but Westminster is not". The evidence seemed to show exactly the reverse.

The result of the election – a hung parliament with no single party able to form a majority government – is the latest in a line of close or indecisive results over the past decade. The 2010 election produced a hung parliament and the 2014 Scottish referendum gave unionists a victory but hardly a crushing one. The same is even more true of Brexit's 52 percent win in 2016. May's desire to increase the thin majority David Cameron won in 2015 was understandable but perhaps overoptimistic.

If Brexit pitched young against old, the 2017 election has revealed more nuanced fault lines. Analysis of voting behaviour suggests not only that young people were more likely to vote Labour than their parents, and even more so than their grandparents (not in itself a very surprising revelation), but also that higher levels of education, especially among the young, corresponded with Labour voting too.

It might be tempting to see this as evidence of growing opposition to Brexit. It's no secret that the more highly educated voted overwhelmingly Remain in the referendum. However, the picture is more complex. The Liberal Democrats' promise to put the Brexit question back to the people in a second referendum did not appeal to the voters.

Former party leader Nick Clegg did so badly that he lost his seat at Sheffield Hallam (the Cleggmania of 2010 must seem like a distant dream now). Even in europhile Cambridge, voters deserted the Liberal Democrats and re-elected Labour with a substantially increased majority.

So if the educated electorate is no longer attracted to anti-Brexit parties,

what does Labour's strong showing in the election mean for the Brexit negotiations? In theory, it need mean nothing: the government is under no obligation to involve other parties in its discussions and is constitutionally at liberty to present parliament with a fait accompli.

Politically, however, no-one believes this to be possible. Since parliament will have to approve the final form of Brexit, it makes sense for May to involve the other parties in some way in her negotiating strategy, if only so they can all claim ownership of what is likely to be an unsatisfactory result for all.

Political impasse

There are plenty of precedents for this approach to times of unusual turbulence. The Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald invited the Conservatives into a national government to deal with the global depression of the 1930s. Coalition governments also directed the country in both world wars.

This carries risks for the Conservatives. Hardline tory eurosceptics, who now include thousands of former Ukip voters, have moved up a gear from demanding withdrawal from the EU. Now only a hard Brexit will do. For them, pulling the UK out of the single market and the customs union is the price worth paying to give Britain full control over immigration.

Any apparent retreat from this position, however pragmatic, would be bound to stir a backbench rebellion. It might even prompt the revival of the currently moribund Ukip. That would send May into the arms of Labour in order to get her deal through the House of Commons. It's not unprecedented for prime ministers to depend on the opposition to pass important legislation, though it seldom ends well for the government. Robert Peel, for example, repealed the corn laws with the help of the Whig opposition, thereby putting the Tories out of power for a generation.

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The parliamentary arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) also carries Brexit-shaped dangers. Although the DUP is pro-Brexit, Northern Ireland as a whole voted Remain, not least because no one, including the DUP, wants to see a hard border reintroduced with the Republic. However, eurosceptics will not want the border with Ireland to become an easy backdoor for immigration into the UK.

The only alternative, if there is to be strict immigration control, would be the politically toxic idea of introducing stricter controls on movement between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. It would be difficult to think of anything more likely to anger opinion across all communities and to lead the DUP to dump the Conservatives and leave them to stew.

But there are dangers in post-election Brexit for Labour, too. The chaos which engulfed Labour only a year ago might have calmed, but the divisions have not gone away. Labour's euro-enthusiasts were deeply frustrated by Jeremy Corbyn's lacklustre performance in the EU referendum campaign, leading many to blame him for Remain's defeat. Some are now wondering why the energy and flair he showed in the 2017 election was not in evidence during the referendum campaign.

As a long-term opponent of the EU, Corbyn might be expected to prefer a hard Brexit. Politically, however, there is nothing to be gained for Labour from supporting the prime minister in what she wants. There is everything to be gained from forcing her to negotiate a much softer deal, and then to take the credit for it afterwards.

Then again, that strategy is electorally risky. If Ukip revives, which seems likely if the dream of a hard Brexit is watered down, will those voters who deserted Ukip for Labour be tempted to rescind their support? If so, the next election might not be quite as easy as Labour is currently assuming.

Deeper divisions

Incredible as it may seem, the 2017 election has left the country even more divided than it was after the referendum. Last year, supporters of the EU were angry that their hopes for the future had been dashed by what they saw as a selfish, nostalgia-soaked older generation. This year, their anger is even sharper, since some of their predictions of political chaos seem to be coming true.

Meanwhile, those who voted for Brexit, or those who have come round to accepting it, are angry at the suggestion that the result of the referendum might be in jeopardy because of a totally unnecessary election. It will take a political leader of exceptional charisma and skill to unite a country divided so sharply along those lines. There is no obvious candidate for the role.

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Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel have both suggested that Britain need not regard the decision for Brexit as final and that Britain

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might, prodigal son-like, return to the European fold, where there will no doubt be more joy over one sinner repenting than over the prospect of moving forward as 27 virtuously European states.

That outcome might look attractive from Paris or Berlin; in London, it simply is not practical politics. May cannot wish away the result either of the referendum or of the election and she may find herself having to choose between what is best for her party and what is best for the country. Such decisions are the mark of statesmanship and can earn a prime minister a place in history. They can also bring a government down.

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