

British Politics in the aftermath of Brexit

by Lily McNulty-Bakas



British politics, generally stable and disinclined to dramatic and disruptive change, has been torn from this preferred modus operandi by the EU referendum. Its political parties have experienced a rare flux in the last month which has been greater than that which they would usually experience over the course of an election term. With events moving at a dizzying speed, it has been disorientating for spectators who have tried to keep up.

Brexit should be viewed as an overdue catalyst to a situation that had been escalating for some time. It was cultivated over the years by negligence and weak leadership on the part of parliamentary leaders unwilling to stand up to radical europhobic factions within their parties, and by cynical untruths told by newspaper editors representing private interests and driven to sell copies. Underpinning this has been Britain's peculiar relationship with Europe, which has never been close due to a myriad of factors from its geographical positioning, to its strong relationship with the Anglosphere and previous colonies. Further compounding this, successive governments have used the EU as a scapegoat and distraction mechanism for domestic compliance.

Turning attention to more recent developments, British governments have, like many other European states, unleashed devastating austerity measures in response to the 2008 financial crisis. The insecure climate these measures create puts pressure on the durability of social cohesion which is further squeezed when a government panders to anti-immigration sentiment for fear of losing members to more openly anti-immigration parties, and demonises the poor, and pushes a security discourse in order to maintain agendas and distract from the pain of austerity

policies. With this, and when the right-wing press fans the flames of Islamophobia whilst firing a barrage of accusations at the EU, Brexit can be positioned to the British public as the only remedy.

The referendum was the product of a manifesto pledge by David Cameron that aimed to stem the tide of voters leaving who were sympathetic to the message carried by UKIP and Nigel Farage, whilst also quash any backbench rebellion or trouble from the strong europhobic wing of his own party. Labour too has had a complicated relationship with the EU and is broadly split over its support for it. And so the Remain campaign, an alliance of foes without a rallying spirit or popular notion to fight for, can almost be regarded as doomed from the start.

Britain woke on Friday 24th June a nation divided, having voted to exit the European Union 52% to 48%. An apparent generational gap whereby 73% of 18-24 year olds voted to remain contrasted with 60% of 60+ voting to leave exemplifies this division. There were also dramatically different voting patterns across regions as Scotland voted 62% to remain and are subsequently considering another Scottish referendum on membership of UK.

The morning that the result was announced David Cameron resigned and so began the race for his successor. Britain absorbed the shock that over the course of the night they had exited the European Union and now drifted rudderless as their PM, too embroiled in the outcome of the referendum, had to abruptly end his 6-year premiership. During the dramatic week that followed a line of prospective leaders emerged including; Liam Fox, Stephen Crabb, Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Andrea Leadsom and Theresa May, who emerged triumphant in the end.

With regards to Boris Johnson's bid, the former London Mayor was quickly installed as the bookies' favourite. However, less than a week later Johnson used an event where he had been expected to announce his candidacy to say that he wouldn't be standing. It emerged that Gove, who had previously backed Johnson had decided that he himself would be running. By noon, the front-runner for the Tory leadership had been stabbed in the back by the man who was supposed to be making up the "dream ticket" with him in what is being called 'The Cuckoo Nest Plot'.

Theresa May, the former Home Secretary who campaigned to remain in the EU, positioned herself as the candidate to unify the party and country after a divisive referendum. Britain's second woman prime minister was driven into Downing Street from Buckingham Palace on Wednesday 13th July where she delivered her first words as PM. Installed amid arguably one of the most turbulent periods in British politics and without time for much preparation, May promised to heal the nation's divisions and build bridges. She made a direct pitch to blue-collar Britain and the political centre ground that her government would deliver Brexit and refocus its priorities on people whose needs were greatest. Making good on that priority meant that her first duty was to sack the man next door, Chancellor George Osborne, the architect of six years of austerity and cuts. However, whilst May's language was centrist and conciliatory, her first cabinet appointments suggested a shift to the right.

What followed the sacking of Osborne was a 24-hour blitzkrieg that extended over the weekend as May continued her ruthless cull of the "Notting Hill set" and built her "unity cabinet". Boris Johnson, heading a list of Brexit supporters who would work alongside hard-core Remainers, including new chancellor Philip Hammond, was appointed Foreign Secretary to everyone's astonishment including his own. However, these men and women in the "unity cabinet" have divergent views on Europe and much else. May's cabinet is split between those like Hammond, who insist that whatever happens the UK must retain as much access to the single market as possible, and others, such as Johnson, who argue that the UK can thrive outside the single market

if it has to. May also has to confront the the future of the Union, as the SNP's desire for independence cannot surely be contained if as May says, "Brexit means Brexit".

Furthermore, May has come under pressure from opposition parties to call an early general election, something that she has promised Conservative MPs she will not do. Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrat leader, said people deserved more than a "Tory stitch-up" lambasting the Conservatives for having plunged the UK into chaos and declaring it unacceptable that May be "PM without having won the elction in her own party, let alone the country".

Although her inheritance is a difficult one, May has one political dynamic working unquestionably to her advantage. Over on the benches of Her Majesty's Opposition, Labour is embroiled in its own leadership battle and unable to provide any serious scrutiny.

Jeremy Corbyn, despite overwhelmingly losing a vote of no confidence in his leadership, has resisted calls to go. You can find an outline and comments on the developments within the Labour Party and the no confidence vote [here](#). Since then, he now has a place on the ballot paper in a leadership election triggered by former shadow business secretary Angela Eagle, following a closely watched national executive committee (NEC) vote. In a separate decision taken at the same meeting, the NEC ruled that only those who have been members for more than 6 months are permitted to vote, while new supporters would be given only two days to sign up as registered supporters to vote in the race for £25 far higher than the £3 fee many Corbyn backers paid in the contest last year and accusations of social exclusion have quickly surfaced. This change affects 20% of Labour's membership which has shot up to more than 500,000.

Angela Eagle has, in fact, pulled out of the race on 19th July after it became clear that she would fall short of her opponent, Owen Smith, in nominations. So a head-to-head race between Corbyn and Smith is on before a result is announced at the party's conference on 24th September.

Such a situation is unprecedented and results from failures of party organisation and conflicting visions of party democracy. There is now widespread talk of a Labour split and the possibility of a parliament in the autumn containing two Labour parties.

We can then contrast this turmoil to the mighty Tory power-broking machine that rapidly crushes its unelectables and settles on she who is most likely to preserve their hold on power. What is so stark about the events unfolding on both sides of the House is the realisation that the natural party of government is back in the saddle, despite its own calamitous responsibility for the most nation-shattering political catastrophe in modern times. The political crisis is all on the left, with almost a total absence of opposition.

Brexit Britain is a bizarre state of affairs, one in which it's champion Nigel Farage resigns as leader of UKIP on 4th July brazenly declaring that "During the referendum I said I wanted my country back...now I want my life back". One where another chief Leave campaigner, Boris Johnson, is politically executed and resurrected within the same week. Where the party in opposition with less direct responsibility for the turmoil is in a worse state than that which lost its Prime Minister a short time ago. Although we have already witnessed the short term economic effects and an increase in hate crimes, arguably the legacy of the toxic and divisive campaign, what will become of Brexit Britain still remains to be seen. What's for sure is that the current uncharacteristic drama of British politics isn't over yet.

Picture: BusinessTimes.com.sg