

EVENT REPORT

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Reconnecting Europe IV

The UK Snap Election – What Will Tomorrow Bring?¹

Three weeks before the UK general election which was called so surprisingly early by Prime Minister Theresa May, the winner seems to be certain; shock effects like in other recent European elections seem to be impossible. There's no British Macron in sight; no dramatic rise of the Green party to be expected as in the Netherlands. May appears to be drifting effortlessly towards a comfortable, perhaps even a landslide victory; Jeremy Corbyn, already unconvincing in the Brexit campaign, now wants to 'convince the sceptical and undecided', but will have trouble doing so (and of what exactly one may ask), leaving the LibDems as the only serious threat to the Conservatives – but will they really be able to rain on May's parade? With UKIP in self-destruction mode, the Greens brave but chanceless in the British election system, only the SNP can be a real spoiler. The Scottish Nationalists will, of course, not take over Britain, but another (expected) huge victory on their home turf, will underline the Scottish wish for independency and further undermine the UK's unity. So, even though the race seems already run in the eyes of most observers, what is actually at stake and what has the campaign been all about? And, last but not least, why should we, the ones who stayed behind in the European Union, actually care?

One day before the general election the political landscape in the UK looks scattered. Theresa May went into this snap election, selling herself as a strong and reliable leader and the only one who could successfully manage the Brexit negotiations. Interestingly enough these very characteristics, which she always promoted as her best assets, eventually became liabilities in these last few weeks. Due to the recent terror attacks in Manchester and London people came to question the decisions she made in her previous office as Home Secretary where she cut down police budgets drastically. Also people disagreed with many statements and planned legal changes she announced and somehow started to feel not so protected by her 'strong leadership' anymore. Therefore under the heat and pressure of the electoral campaign her image slowly became tarnished not only in the eyes of other politicians and her own parliamentary group, but more importantly in the eyes of the voters. May undoubtedly showed that she lacked the ability to explain policies and provide answers for very pressing question and came out of the election campaign a weakened and damaged Prime Minister. But to which extent her image really has become stricken in the eyes of the British population we will only see until after the election.

Just before election day opinion polls still show that the Conservatives will be anything between one and twelve points ahead, but points transfer into parliamentary seats rather interestingly. In the last general elections in 2015 for example Conservatives were seven points ahead but this lead was transformed into a totally unexpected majority of twelve seats. This situation, as we now know, led to the current Brexit dilemma: it forced David Cameron to go through with his promise of a referendum. All we can say right now is that polls are very unpredictable but there are still ways to read them. If Theresa May e.g. wants to

¹ The event took place on 7 June 2017. The **panelists** were: **Dr Kirsty Hughes**, Director Scottish Centre on European Relations; **Jean Lambert**, Member of the European Parliament, The Greens/EFA and **Jennifer Rankin**, Brussels correspondent *Guardian News&Media*. The event was moderated by **Klaus Linsenmeier**, Director Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union.

do at least as good or better than Cameron did two years ago, anything above seven points will take her there. As polls also show that the population expects a conservative victory no matter what, the question seems to be how big this victory will be and what that will mean for the Brexit negotiations.

As for May's main opponent Labour's Jeremy Corbyn, he seems to have taken a turn for the better. Whereas in the beginning he was thought chanceless, in the meantime he seems to have convinced more voters than was thought possible. Whereas in the BBC-organised leadership debate in London on 31 May, Jeremy Corbyn actually showed up to talk to the voters, Theresa May was nowhere to be found. The supposedly strong and stable leader became more and more an absentee leader and Corbyn could gain some momentum on this, meaning that even if many voters did not quite agree with his visions they acknowledged his commitment.

Yet, it is far from sure whether Corbyn can actually secure the key battle ground seats that Labour needs in order to gain a majority and form a government. Even though he had some successful rallies and attracted quite a crowd, this only happened in areas, which tend to vote Labour anyway. New ground and new votes that he so desperately needs have not been gained yet. The situation, only a day before the election, is still extremely uncertain. One big uncertainty to take into account is the three million people who voted in the referendum in 2016, but did not vote in the last General Election in 2015. The question is: will they stay at home again and if not, will they give Labour a chance or will they secure the stand of the Tories in order to secure the Brexit deal they voted for? The second uncertainty is the young people. Jeremy Corbyn seems to have won their interest and support, but especially young voters tend not go to the voting polls in the end. Whether Corbyn can change this trend remains to be seen.

The third and greatest uncertainty is the answer to the question what voters really think about Brexit and how it will affect their votes. Even though the whole idea behind this election was for Theresa May to get a mandate to negotiate the best possible Brexit deal and the election was labelled as 'Brexit election' the campaign wasn't really about Brexit at all. Brexit was rarely discussed publicly and no details were given about what this exit from the EU really will mean for the country and its citizens. Nobody explained what impact it will have if the UK no longer has access to the European single market and the Customs Union. And when Theresa May repeatedly said: 'no deal is better than a bad deal', she failed to explain what the no deal option actually means. May also never even mentioned the risk of increased trade barriers after Brexit or what the future of fishery and agricultural policies might be, but seemed to get away with this huge lack of information because no other party dared to challenge her on that.

But even if you see Labour as the obvious better choice, the party doesn't seem to be on the right Brexit track either. Where the Tories are vague, Labour is contradictory in their position on Brexit. They say that they would like to keep the advantages that the EU single market provides the UK with, but at the same time want to end free movement of people, which the EU already announced with great emphasis is a package that cannot be separated. Labour tried hard to distinguish their manifesto from those of the Tories, but this seemed difficult to sustain. The main difference between the Labour Party and the Tories seems to be what Corbyn in direct response to May's slogan kept replying: 'no deal is the worst deal'. Other than that, Labour has not talked in more details about the actual consequences either but basically stated that they want the most profit out of a Customs Union with the least barriers. The only time Jeremy Corbyn really mentioned Brexit was when he was the first one to put a serious policy issue on the election table by revealing that the UK already had information about the Manchester terrorist through the Schengen system but didn't act on it – making a very important point about what will happen with domestic security issues once the UK has exit the European Union.

It is obvious that a genuine anti-Brexit position is missing in the British political arena. The Liberal Democrats, along with the Greens, represent the most pro-EU party in the UK but have not announced any

serious actions to remain in the EU in their manifesto. Calling for another referendum would be the very first necessary step to take here. Another necessity would have been to talk about the damages and about the fact that as the World Bank and the UK National Institute for Economic and Social Research have already stated, services exports to the EU are likely to drop by 60% – and all this under a free trade deal. Instead the DemLibs, too, failed to discuss Brexit at all. All this gives the very worrying impression that the UK is not at all ready for the negotiation talks that will start on the 17 June.

Still, some politicians actually did try to change something and bring a dynamic into the dusty and rather twisted British electoral system. The Progressive Alliance – initiated by the Greens – was formed to change the electoral system, build a more pluralistic parliament and try to bring together the forces from other smaller parties. Unfortunately, this was a rather slow process, which involved a lot of trust building as much as watching out for what was happening at the local level. Unfortunately this process, initiated in the run-up to the 2017 general election, was eventually interrupted by the call for the snap election. But this really is an idea which should be further explored.

But what is really going on in British society that creates all this confusion? What led to the results of the referendum in the first place? After recent polls still 51% of the population thinks leaving the EU was right where 49% think it wasn't. The country is very obviously divided, scared of the future and confused about what to expect. The political leaders do nothing to reflect this division in their manifestos and policies. Nobody seems to acknowledge the fact that at least half of the country is very unhappy with recent events. The chance for the remain voters to be heard is shrinking consistently. So if the Tory's should – against all odds – not be the winners of this election who is really ready to take them on? Who is willing to fight a battle on core ideas and questions and hold their ground? Pro-European politicians should finally be open about their opinion and begin an open discussion. They have to stand up and fight for their beliefs, talk about what the true benefits of a European Union really are and educate people about what really is at stake if the UK continues its hard political line on Brexit.

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