

## Staring into the Brexit void

7. February 2019 by [Jean Lambert](#)

Next week, on 14th February, MPs are expected to return to the House of Commons for another 'meaningful vote' on Theresa May's vision for Brexit.

It's hard to fathom a less fitting way to mark Valentine's Day. If the Prime Minister gets her way, the UK will finally embark on an agreed pathway towards ending its mutually beneficial relationship with the EU - an arrangement which has helped bring relative peace to Europe, and enabled millions to live, love and work in 27 other countries.

The debate will also once again focus the attention of the world's media on the UK's deep-rooted domestic problems. It will expose the tribal nature of British politics, the vulnerability of our electoral system to abuse and manipulation, and the deep cracks in our unwritten constitution.

Yet, at the end of the day, the event is likely to leave us with more questions than answers. Here's why.

### What is the current state of play?

Brexit is stuck in a rut, with Parliament unable to find a majority for any single route ahead.

During the last 'meaningful vote', on 15th January, MPs overwhelmingly rejected Theresa May's Brexit deal - the only agreement she could possibly have reached within the confines of her self-imposed red lines.

For a brief moment, it was encouraging to see a slim majority of MPs vote to take a catastrophic 'no deal' off the table. Yet they failed to turn this sentiment into action, voting against another proposal which would have granted them the power to make it a reality.

Meanwhile, the Tories united around an amendment seeking to replace the Irish backstop with 'alternative arrangements', and secured a majority of the House. Yet in failing to outline what these 'arrangements' might look like, their only achievement is to push the UK closer the precipice of a 'no deal' cliff edge without a defined plan of action.

### What happens next?

The EU has been extremely consistent in its message: it is not prepared to reopen negotiations over the Withdrawal Agreement or make any concessions over the Irish backstop.

Once Theresa May finally takes this on board, she will be left with just three options: exit the EU with 'no deal', revoke Article 50 altogether, or extend Article 50 to buy more time.

In any sensible world, the Government would immediately rule out leaving the EU without a deal. Yet, sadly, any semblance of 'sense' appears to have departed from our Conservative Government years ago. With each day that passes, it looks increasingly likely that Theresa May will plough the country off a 'no deal' cliff edge on 29 March, despite the immense (and rapidly growing) body of evidence proving this would be an immense act of self-harm.

Meanwhile, any Government that was truly acting in the national interest would heed the results of its own impact assessments, hold its hands up, and admit that Brexit was an ill

thought-out project that will cause irrevocable harm to the country and its citizens. It would immediately revoke Article 50 and stop this madness.

Unfortunately, given that neither of these options appears likely, there is only one viable path ahead: pressing the 'pause' button on Brexit by extending Article 50.

Contrary to what you'll hear from some British MPs, the UK can't simply demand an Article 50 extension. It will have to ask the European Council for one, and all 27 Member States must agree to the request unanimously.

At this juncture, it would be entirely understandable if some Member States just wanted the troublesome UK to take its coat and leave the club, regardless of the storm brewing outside. Yet, throughout this Brexit saga, the EU's 27 Member States have shown incredible unity and the will to reach an agreement. The bloc seems unlikely to give up on this now.

However, Member States have also been clear that they will only consider extending Article 50 if it fits with their own strategic interests. In other words, the EU is unlikely to grant an extension so that the Government can continue searching for unicorns on the Irish border. It will want to see the UK Parliament agree on a workable blueprint to solve this impasse. This could look like more time to prepare for leaving the UK with 'no deal', to implement new technologies on the Irish border, a general election, or - what I believe is now the only viable option - putting the question back to the electorate in the form of a People's Vote.

### **What can the EU do to help?**

When it comes to big questions about the future relationship between the UK and the EU, it's worth bearing in mind that both are restricted by Theresa May's red lines - a set of rules heavily influenced by the most hard-line Leavers in the Tory Party. This leaves very little leeway for the "creative" response that the Prime Minister has demanded.

Yet, on a practical level, the EU has been working consistently to try and buffer the damage that will be caused by Brexit - regardless of whether there is a deal or not. For example, last week the Commission published its latest set of contingency measures which could guarantee that those who are covered by EU Social Security Coordination will have their acquired rights upheld by the EU (for example, Brits who spent time working in Germany will not lose out on any pension funds acquired during that time). I am now co-leading on the effort to push this through the European Parliament as quickly as possible, and trust that Member States will cooperate on that. The European Parliament also last week backed rules allowing British nationals to enter the EU visa-free for a stay of up to 90 days, so long as EU nationals travelling to the UK enjoy the same conditions.

But looking at the broader picture, I believe the EU also has an important role to play in seizing control of the conversation around Brexit - pulling it away from the fantasy world inhabited by so many Leavers, and back into the realms of reality.

Despite their swashbuckling talk of 'regaining our sovereignty' and 'taking back control of our borders', most British cabinet ministers have spectacularly failed in their duty to outline how Brexit will tangibly impact people's lives and their futures.

It would not only benefit the UK, but other countries in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in May, if the EU can shout from the rooftops about its immense contribution to citizens' freedoms, rights and protections.