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## HUMILIATED BUT UNREPENTANT, WHAT NEXT FOR THERESA MAY?

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The scale of the defeat suffered by Theresa May in Westminster on 15 January 2019 will go down as the worst humiliation a British Prime Minister has suffered in the House of Commons in well over a century. It qualifies as a historic defeat, dwarfing the Suez debacle in 1956 and going hat in hand to the IMF in 1976. The PM's deal to take the United Kingdom out of the European Union, painstakingly negotiated over twenty one months was thrown out by 432 votes to 202. The night before, the House of Lords had already voted by a majority of 321 to 152 to reject the deal, regretting that May's proposal would damage the future economic prosperity, internal security and global influence of the UK. That majority included many conservative peers as well as almost all Labour and Liberal Democrats. The head of the British Chambers of Commerce, Adam Marshall said that "there are no more words to describe the frustration, impatience and growing anger among business after two and a half years on a high-stakes political rollercoaster ride that shows no sign of stopping".

Beyond the personal humiliation suffered by Theresa May, who is paying a heavy price to pandering, ever since she entered Downing Street, to hardline Brexiters and assuming the process was the sole property of the Conservative party, the question is what happens next? Immediately after the vote, the Prime Minister, displaying no humility whatsoever, offered to "hold meetings" with those who disagree with her but insisted that she would stick to her "core principles" on Brexit – which means a trade policy independent of the European Union and therefore no hope of staying in a customs union. Such a stance burns bridges with the Labour Party and soft Brexiters pushing for Norway-style solutions. Would she negotiate with the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn or him with her? If not Theresa May's stance is akin to kicking the can, yet again down the street. In any case, "Norway Plus" has many of the same flaws as May's deal: even more rule taking with no say, paying similar sums to the EU as the UK now does. There are now two options on the table, "no deal" and "no Brexit". For all the madness which passes as politics in Westminster these days, neither Parliament nor the government are likely to go down the first road which would lead the country to chaos.

In the current confusion, it is worth paying heed to the analysis developed in the Financial Times by Martin Sandbu arguing that the most important aspect of today's painful reality "is that any EU exit on negotiated terms will look very much like the legal argument on the table" which means that "nothing will change to avoid a so-called "blind Brexit" and to pin down the future trading relationship

before leaving the EU". Members of Parliament who argue that the alternative to May's plans are a softer Brexit (Norway Plus), or a harder Brexit or a Canada-style free trade agreement "are contradicting themselves, in addition to contradicting one another". Thirdly there will be "no withdrawal agreement without special arrangements for Northern Ireland to obviate the need for physical infrastructure between the UK and the Irish Republic". The EU simply will not give up control of its external borders.

The same three-way choice which existed before this week's vote remains: leave the EU on negotiated terms which are unlikely to be any different from what is on offer, leaving without a deal or staying in. No matter that Mrs May survived the no-confidence vote tabled by the Labour opposition or if she finally resigns, whoever is PM of the United Kingdom will face the same reality. Ahead of European elections in May, where populist forces are expected to gain ground, European leaders, not least the French president Emmanuel Macron are unlikely to allow the British further room for procrastination. Nor are EU leaders likely to call a special summit on Brexit before a modicum of common sense has been restored at Westminster. The French in particular will do everything to avoid a European Council sliding into disagreement, whose only beneficiaries would be the likes of the Hungarian Prime minister, Viktor Orban.

In a strong plea for a new referendum, Hugo Dixon argues that if Labour fails the confidence vote, it must "immediately support a People's Vote". To those Brexiters who would scream "betrayal", Dixon argues that "it is the Brexiters themselves who betrayed the nation with their fantasies in 2016". Time could yet be wasted as he notes that "there are no unicorns in the Brexit forest, only horses with cardboard horns glued on their heads. In time, the pressure on the Labour leader to do whatever his members, supporters and the country want will probably prove irresistible". Jeremy Corbyn, who still seems to believe that the EU is nothing more than a great capitalist plot might remind himself that the millions of young voters who nearly gave the Labour Party a victory in the general election of 2016 are passionately pro-Europe.