

## BEYOND THE ELECTION, THE QUAGMIRE OF BREXIT CONTINUES

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*Electoral volatility has been a growing trend in British politics for more than a generation. Today, millions of voters switch between an increasing number of parties every time they go to polls so how the next general election will play out is anybody's guess. But, whoever wins next 12 of December, voters should realise that the quagmire of Brexit will be far from over.*

**N**ever has more been at stake in a British general election since 1945 yet never have voters been in such a mood of “a plague on both your houses”. The famous line from Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet involves a dying character cursing two families, the Capulets and the Montagues. They feuded for many years, and this fight caused many problems.

Fast forward four centuries and the Tory and Labour parties are slogging it out in an election which is a contest between two unpopular men who offer visions for the future that the public dismiss with scorn because they believe them to be dishonest. The Prime Minister Boris Johnson says he will “get Brexit done” but in order to create what kind of economic model? Nobody has the faintest idea all the more as, after years of (unnecessary?) austerity which has impoverished many voters, the Conservatives are now proposing to slosh out billions of pounds across board.

Jeremy Corbyn for his part will slosh out even more money, renationalise some companies and hold another referendum to decide whether the UK should jump ship or return to the warm embrace of the European Union. He adamantly refuses to say which solution he personally would opt for. Gone is the broad popular enthusiasm which brought the Labour Tony Blair to power on a platform of heavy investment in public services without changing the fundamentals of the economy.

In 2017, faced with two leaders who offered ambiguous answers on the fundamental question of the day, Brexit, the voters decided to blow a raspberry and returned an ambiguous answer – a hung parliament. The risk is that they might do the same thing next month, all the more as the spoiling

role of the Liberals, the Greens, the Scottish National Party and the supporters of Nigel Farage increase sense of confusion.

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One can forgive voters for being more interested in the unfolding drama, or should one say vulgar comedy, of Prince Andrew and the Jeffrey Epstein scandal or in certain reality shows. A mood of passive cynicism prevails but campaigns bring surprises: so far neither of the two leaders has made any major mistake. Meanwhile electoral volatility has been a growing trend in British politics for more than a generation. Half a century ago, voters provided loyal battalions of partisans to Conservative and Labour parties which had dominated the country's politics since the interwar period. The Liberals played, at best, a walk on part as did the Scottish National Party until the turn of the century. Today, millions of voters switch between an increasing number of parties: in 2015, 43% supported a different party from the one they had voted for in 2010. In 2017, one third switched from their vote two years before. How this election plays out is anybody's guess. Yet everything is on line that has been true of the post Thatcher era: Britain's relationship with Europe, its future links with Scotland, the role of government in the economy and the "special" relationship with the United States.

In Scotland, Brexit has become a dividing line between voters: old Labour, Liberal and Conservative loyalties dissolve increasingly as, overwhelmingly, people are either for or against the union with the United Kingdom. Much will hinge here on whether Labour convinces voters that traditional issues like economics should trump Brexit. In England and Wales, the Liberals, Greens and, to a degree, Labour will try and bring out the Remain vote. Brexit has brought to the surface a deep historical resentment which, soaked in decades of economic decline ignored by the two leading parties for too long, has been hammered into a lethal political weapon by the far right which has captured the Tory party.

While Jeremy Corbyn is an uncompromising socialist, a unilateralist and anti-American, Boris Johnson is a woolly Tory who is half metropolitan, half English romantic. He is hard line on crime but liberal on social mores. On Brexit he waited for the last moment because ambition for him always trumps principles. His ideological compass point is impossible to define though where Iran and Turkish policy in Syria is concerned, he sides with Emmanuel Macron, no mean point since France and Britain alone have the capacity to intervene militarily beyond the frontiers of Europe in decisive fashion. But does Boris Johnson believe Britain has a place at the top table or does he share the nation's deep aversion to military adventurism?

Contrary to what he thinks on Brexit however, the hard part will not be over when (and if) Britain leaves the EU. It was interesting to see how neither Johnson nor Corbyn convince the Confederation of British Industry that their economic policies would solve the vast array of questions that

will spring up immediately after Brexit. How to safeguard a trading relationship worth 650 billion pounds and determine the terms of cooperation on everything from air transport to fighting terrorism. The risk of unfair competition for Europe's companies from a less regulated Britain implies that access will come at the price of sticking closely to EU law on workers' rights, environmental standards, state aid and other rules.

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The issue of fish and access to British waters for France notably, the question of Spain's veto over Gibraltar and the City of London's ability to offer financial services to European companies are difficult issues. Will the UK shift its position once it has to grapple with the hard facts of what it means to leave the single market and customs union? The British public is so tired of the whole argument that it may not even realise that the quagmire of Brexit will be far from over, whoever wins next month, assuming voters do not decide to deliver another hung parliament.