The UK wants a second Brexit referendum

Written by Edward McMillan-Scott on 18 March 2019

Photo credit: Edward McMillan-Scott

Dear Brussels colleagues,

The last time I wrote here on the same day in 2017, Brexit looked a done deal. Not now. The last few days have seen our Parliament vote against No Deal and for an extension of Article 50 and this week there will be more decisions by MPs to end this nightmare.

On Saturday (March 23), more campaigners for a second referendum will march on Westminster than the 700,000 who came on October 20 [1].

People looking in at the House of Commons last week may have misinterpreted the defeat of a proposal for a second referendum in the UK on Brexit as an accurate reflection of parliamentary opinion - or even public opinion.

As a supporter and fund-raiser of the People's Vote campaign I can confirm that we urged MPs that

such a vote was premature, but this week is different. When all other options fall, MPs will vote for a [People's Vote](#) [2].

Since People's Vote was launched in April 2018, opinion polls have consistently put Remain in the EU ahead of leave – and [a poll we published at the weekend shows a 57-43% margin for Remain](#) [3].

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The next few decisive days - in advance of the EU Council on 21 March, when Theresa May will ask for the extension of Article 50 - we are backing a move by two Labour MPs which will approve Theresa May's deal, subject to a confirmatory referendum by the British people.

Jeremy Corbyn has confirmed that his [MPs will be whipped to support the Peter Kyle and Phil Wilson amendment](#) [8].

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However, on Brexit she cannot rely on them - despite the huge amounts of public money paid over - or on some 60 extreme Eurosceptic MPs within the European Research Group, a "party-within-a-party" founded in 1993 by Daniel Hannan MEP - himself from Northern Irish stock.

This week, a number of alternative Brexit deals are likely to be proposed by MPs who insist the UK must leave the EU if they are to "honour the result of the 2016 referendum". But there is little encouragement for supporters of a soft Brexit like the Norway option, which protects the British economy from deep damage but also means being bound to many European rules over which we would have no real influence.

The poll of 1,823 people conducted on Thursday and Friday last week - the first significant piece of polling since May's defeat by 149 votes - shows that support for leaving the EU falls significantly when people are faced with a specific Brexit option.

Peter Kellner, a past president of YouGov and one of Britain's most respected pollsters, said, "Two findings from this survey should terrify politicians on all sides. First, the sense of crisis has intensified. Last month, an already-worrying 33 percent felt that the UK faces a major national crisis. This number has now jumped to 42 percent. A further 34 percent think 'Parliament is having difficulties which it

may not be able to resolve on its own' - little changed on last month's 36 percent."

"Second, the public is polarised. Most voters oppose the Government's Withdrawal Agreement. If a referendum were held today, likely voters divide 61-39 percent in favour of Remain rather than leaving on the terms negotiated by Theresa May."

The polarisation and mounting sense of crisis have boosted support for a fresh referendum. Six weeks ago, the public was evenly divided, with 42 per cent supporting a public vote and 41 per cent opposed. Today, support has climbed to 48 per cent, while opposition has fallen to 36 per cent. This is a 57 to 43 per cent split when 'don't knows' are excluded.

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The generation gap on the referendum issue should also give politicians cause for concern. People aged 50 or over divide fairly evenly: 47 per cent support a public vote, while 53 per cent are opposed. But the under 50s favour a new referendum by more than two-to-one: 68-32 per cent.

No doubt British public opinion has been moved towards a further referendum by the support of three of the four living former prime ministers - and by helpful comments from senior EU figures like Donald Tusk.

Labour's Tony Blair, writing in *The Observer* on Sunday 3 March, said that an extension needed a purpose, and he has been an open supporter of the People's Vote since it was launched last April [9].

His successor Gordon Brown argued for a year's extension for a "citizens' consultation" saying "Brexit should be delayed for up to a year to prevent an "impending national disaster" and allow proper consideration of the UK's future relationship with Brussels [10].

Conservative John Major made the same call for a year's extension in a Letter to the Editor in *The Times* saying "EU and government sources are presuming a short extension (if any) to Article 50. But I would argue for a longer period, perhaps a year, to enable a full public consultation and well-prepared exit" – although his opposition to Brexit as a "colossal misjudgement" is well-recorded [11].

[my Tweet with the Major letter is here [12]].

As a footnote, Theresa May's predecessor David Cameron was door-stepped by the BBC in January and said he didn't regret calling the referendum, though he did regret losing it "and obviously regret the difficulties and the problems we've been having trying to implement the result."

And off he went for his morning jog, his security car trailing behind him [13].

Dear colleagues, keep faith with the largest pro-EU population in Europe - across the United Kingdom!

Edward

About the author

Edward McMillan-Scott was a European Parliament Vice-President 2004-2014. A former leader of the Conservative MEPs, he left the party in protest at Cameron's split from the EPP. He then sat as a LibDem/ALDE MEP until 2014. He is an active supporter and

fundraiser of the People's Vote campaign and a Patron of the European Movement UK

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