

Bring on the no-deal Brexit!



The ruling class is desperate to find a way out of its Brexit impasse, but hamstrung by its divisions.

Sometimes a cliché becomes a cliché by virtue of its positive truth value. The cliché that a week is a long time in politics rarely has been more evidently true than during the week that saw prime minister Theresa May's [European Union](#) withdrawal deal roundly defeated in parliament, only for the government to survive a failed no-confidence vote called by the opposition. All this was sandwiched with a debate on 'Plan B' in the House and a wholly manufactured furore surrounding the breach of archaic conventions in Westminster.

A dying government

In another of Theresa May's strategical master strokes, she postponed the 'meaningful vote' on her proposed EU exit deal in December because she knew she would lose it, only to push ahead with the vote a month later and find that the deal was resoundingly rejected regardless – from both sides of the house and by members on both sides of the Brexit/remain divide. The one single achievement of this postponement was to waste yet another month of the [Brexit](#) timetable – to add to the 30 months that have already passed with little or no progress since the June 2016 referendum delivered its unexpected and unwelcome (to the dominant section of the British bourgeoisie) result. It *should* be incredible to think that so much time has passed; that the country is set to leave the EU on 29 March, yet the government still has no idea about the terms under which this departure will happen. In fact, however, this outcome was all too predictable, given that the prime minister is leading a party that is more divided than ever across historically entrenched lines – a division that the EU referendum was supposed to heal and has instead exacerbated nearly to breaking point. And this acrimonious division in the Tories, reflecting as it does a deep divide in the ruling class itself (between those sections of the bourgeoisie who benefit from EU membership as opposed to those, generally non-imperialist, who don't), is inevitably mirrored and compounded by an opposition party whose leader is equally held hostage by the bitter feuding in his own party, paralysed to act and unable to step into the breach. Not only was May's deal defeated in parliament; the

vote represented a legislative annihilation. Never before has a sitting government suffered a defeat on this scale: by 432 votes to 202, the 'Chequers deal' was voted down.

Why can't parliament approve May's deal?

Whether from a remain or a Brexit perspective, the main problem that the ruling class's parliamentary representatives have with Mrs May's fudge of a deal is that it leaves Britain in an unhappy limbo of having to accept EU legislation, rules and trade relationships but with no ability to shape them – it makes the country a 'rule taker' instead of a 'rule maker', as the popular argument runs. For British imperialism, which was for a time the world's leading superpower, and which has been one of the three main powers in whose interests the EU has been run for decades, this is simply a come-down too far. Far better simply to remain, say the majority; far better simply to leave without any kind of a deal, say the hardline Brexiteers. A few more of those pushing for Brexit might have been brought round to the fudge if it hadn't been for the vexed issue of the [northern Ireland](#) 'backstop', which, in order to prevent the reappearance of a border between the British colony in the northeastern corner and the rest of the island of Ireland, gave a guarantee that, if a suitable trade deal hadn't been negotiated within the two-year time frame allowed, or if such a deal hadn't succeeded in finding a solution to the border question, the north would remain inside the EU customs union – 'until such a solution could be found' (ie, potentially indefinitely). The [glaringly obvious answer](#) to this apparent conundrum – withdraw British troops and end centuries of colonisation in the north, allowing the Irish people finally to be reunited and determine their own destiny – is one that *all* British bourgeois politicians have promised not to consider for a moment, but the issue refuses to resolve itself in any other way that is acceptable to a majority. The likes of Tony Blair are happy to use the guarantees given to the people of Ireland in the Good Friday peace accord to push the case for overturning the Brexit vote altogether; hardline Brexiteers, who are for the most part right-wing Tories and staunch unionists, claim they can find a 'technical solution' to prevent the need for a hard border. Mrs May has indicated

she would like to try and rewrite the agreement itself, while the EU and the Irish government have made it clear they will accept no such rewriting. Despite the fact that there is no majority for a no-deal Brexit, this remains the default position if no other deal can be agreed by a majority – much to the alarm of remainers and soft Brexiters (remainers in disguise) alike. But despite the clear majority in favour of any deal as opposed to no-deal, the splits between the various factions, and the very real disagreements over how to bring a new deal or a second referendum about, continue to paralyse the ruling class and its parliamentarians.

The thorny question of how to overturn Brexit without rousing the anger of the masses

There may be a vocal section of MPs and their backers who wish to move straight to a second referendum and in this way, they hope, escape Brexit altogether, but they are by no means in a majority. Although their *aim* is acceptable to the ruling class's remain majority, many saner members of this fraternity understand that to overturn the referendum in such an outright way is a path fraught with danger. Who knows, they rightly ask, what the social consequences might be from such an action? What if the result is the same as before? What if it brings in a remain vote but only by a tiny margin? How will this impact workers' faith in Britain's much-vaunted 'democratic system' and 'mother of all parliaments', which is already hanging by a thread after two years of ruling-class bickering? These remainers may well wish the referendum had never been called, but, since it was, and since the people have been promised repeatedly by Tory and [Labour](#) leaders alike, as well as by parliament, that the result will be respected, to overturn it at this stage would be to sow the seeds of social unrest – even now simmering under the surface as a result of rising poverty and insecurity. Far safer, in the eyes of these pragmatists, to find a route to delivering a 'Brexit' that is remain in content and Brexit in name only. This has been the approach of Mrs May's negotiating team throughout the process and this is what her deal represented. And this is what has been splitting the remain camp and preventing it from coming together to subvert Brexit. Another problem with pushing such an agenda through comes in the shape of the arch Brexiteers, who insist on showing up the remain *content* of May's deal and exposing its flaws, which has the effect of entrenching the arch remainers and educating the public as to the true meaning of the prime minister's endless

repetition of her vacuous 'Brexit means Brexit' slogan. And so the ruling class at every turn is stymied by its own contradictions; unable to reach a consensus on any way forward, endlessly and very publicly bickering over the right tactics to adopt, while hurtling ever closer to the possibility of an accidental no-deal – the outcome that is least favoured by them all, but which could yet happen by default if they fail to find an acceptable compromise. Meanwhile, convention dictates that a government unable to legislate is no longer able to govern, and so a general election must be called. But alas not. The prime minister's deal may be dead in the water; she may have been proven unable to govern; her government may have been shown to hold office, but not power – and yet, despite the margin of her defeat, May is clinging on. And this for the reason that although she cannot get majority support for the 'soft Brexit' deal she has negotiated with the EU, no-one else is able to come up with a plan for exiting the union that will get any more support than hers. Nor are any of the various prime-ministerial contenders from both main parties in any hurry to jump into May's shoes at a time when the British premiership is such an obviously poisoned chalice. And so, while rejecting the Brexit deal she has negotiated, and openly discrediting her leadership, her party continues to back her as leader and to try to find other means than a general election to push their various preferred approaches – from no-deal to no Brexit.

John Bercow and the British 'constitution'

The furore over the 'meaningful vote' on May's deal was accompanied by another furore among politicians and commentators over speaker John Bercow's decision to allow a cross-party amendment to be put forward before the withdrawal agreement was voted on. The effect of the amendment was that the government would have to come back to the house three days after the vote was defeated with its proposed alternative ('Plan B'), rather than being allowed three weeks as was being projected by May. Having delayed the vote in the first place, this adjustment would merely bring the government back onto the original schedule. The uproar caused by this technicality was not insignificant, and was carried on under the pretext of protecting 'British rules and values' – a piece of staggeringly hypocritical misdirection by the government and its media supporters. Whilst selling out the vote of the British people without a qualm, these same shameless elements have invented a moral crusade in the name of 'protecting tradition' and the so-called 'British constitution'. Bercow's decision to allow the amendment has been labelled as both

'historic' and 'unprecedented', and, indeed, a lack of precedent is important to the so-called constitution the government professes to protect. To cut a boring story short, the British constitution is little more than the aggregate of all laws passed by parliament, some judge-made law, and convention. It is an uncodified and unwritten constitution and so is clearly not worth the paper that it isn't written on. The significance of convention to this constitution, which the government so wishes to be seen to defend, should not be lost on us. In particular given the government's recent failure to meet convention and call a general election following its crushing defeat. Whilst Bercow has previously revealed he voted to remain in the EU and so is open to accusations of a conflict of interest, the size of the surrounding storm is rather out of proportion to the issue at hand. A recent Financial Times article presented a long list illustrating the government's hypocrisy in this regard. "The artificial nature of this uproar is underlined by the fact that there have been many constitutional trespasses over the past three or so years, almost all of which have received little more than a shrug from government-supporting MPs and pundits. "Theresa May's government prolonged the current parliamentary session over two years, so that there would not be a Queen's speech on which they could lose a vote. The government packed the standing committees (which scrutinise legislation) with Conservative majorities by procedural sleight of hand, despite there being a hung parliament. "A secretary of state repeatedly misled the House and its committees over the extent and existence of Brexit sector analyses reports. The government deliberately broke the Commons' 'pairing' convention when an opposition MP was on maternity leave so that the government could win a vote. "And there are more. The government repeatedly ignored and does not even participate in votes on opposition motions. The government committed itself to billions of pounds of public expenditure in a blatant bribe to the Democratic Unionist Party for support in a supply and confidence arrangement. "The government repeatedly seeks to circumvent or abuse the Sewell convention in its dealings with the devolved administrations. The government seeks to legislate for staggeringly wider 'Henry VIII powers' so that it can legislate and even repeal acts without any recourse to parliament. "The government even sought to make the Article 50 notification without any parliamentary approval and forced the litigation to go all the way to the supreme court (where it lost). The government employed three QCs to oppose the litigation on whether Article 50 could be revoked unilaterally

(which it also lost). "There are even more serious examples. This government became the first administration in parliamentary history to be held to be in contempt of parliament. This government even stood by as there were nasty and unfair public attacks on the independent judiciary and the independent civil service." ([Outrage at John Bercow is the sound of a constitution working](#) by David Allen Green, 10 January 2019) As self-indulgent as the Bercow affair is for the political class, the critique of his actions might hold a little more weight if it weren't being launched by a government that has continually flaunted and breached parliamentary convention itself. Even then, such matters are trifling to the mass of people in this country; workers must have looked on with bemusement and anger as this pitiful affair played out. The behaviour of politicians and journalists at such a time reminds us of the sight of a cat being rescued from a tree while its owners' house burns.

Labour opportunism and disarray

With the government unfit to govern, and with May having survived the no-confidence vote in her leadership called by her own MPs, Labour leader [Jeremy Corbyn](#) was next to call for a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in the entire government. But, as the last issue of [Lalkar predicted](#), the same Tory MPs who called for the vote of no-confidence in Theresa May, now voted that they *did* have confidence in her after all. What changed during the intervening month other than an already impotent government suffering a historic parliamentary defeat? These MPs cannot even pretend to be anything other than arch political opportunists. They were eager to eject May and have one of their number elevated to the prime ministerial throne in a Conservative party coronation, but to face the public in a general election? Unthinkable. Consequently, the government held on with the backing of its own MPs and the bribed DUP, with a margin of 325 votes to 306. Questions have also been asked as to whether the Labour party really hoped to succeed in its no-confidence endeavour. As Dominic Lawson (son of Thatcher's notorious chancellor, Nigel Lawson) pointed out in a column for the Sunday Times: "The opposition is only pretending it wants to trigger an election. "To Nigel Dodds must go the award for the most illuminating wit displayed in the debate of no confidence in the government, called by the leader of Her Majesty's opposition. "The leader of the Democratic Unionist Party at Westminster (on whose 10 votes the government depends for its majority) told MPs: 'I have been struck by how many honourable members have been assiduous in their

entreaties that my honourable friends and I should ... vote in the lobby in support of the government in order to prevent a general election. Indeed, some of those entreaties have even come from the government side of the House.’ “Or, in other words, most of these private entreaties to the DUP not to pull the election ripcord came from the Labour benches. Well, of course. They are terrified by any prospect of taking over the negotiations for Britain’s departure from the EU – their responsibility if they had won the general election that would surely have followed a successful no-confidence motion. “It’s not just that the person they really don’t have confidence in is their own leader – more than 80 percent of them put their name down for just such a motion (admittedly, before the 2017 election). Even those still serving in the shadow cabinet know their ‘alternative’ policy on how the UK should leave the EU is absurd and would not survive first contact with negotiating reality. One of them pretty much admitted this to me, which at least demonstrated that they are cynics rather than idiots. “Their public position is that only they would (or even could) negotiate a unique form of customs union with the EU. This is not just to create the idea that they are for ‘soft’ Brexit, as opposed to the ‘hard’ Tories. They argue that this would ‘solve’ the issue of the border between the Republic of Ireland and northern Ireland – no customs barrier, no hard border, easy-peasy. “What they actually know (but are relying on Labour party members and voters generally not to know) is that a common external tariff doesn’t on its own solve the issue of the so-called hard border – because regulatory standards are a function of the single market, not the customs union. And Labour’s policy is to leave the single market, in order to evade its requirement for freedom of movement (the requirement that caused so many Labour seats to produce large majorities for ‘leave’ in the 2016 referendum). “That was why the Labour election manifesto pledged to leave the single market. On the customs union it had not a word. But in July 2017 the shadow trade secretary Barry Gardiner wrote a fine piece in *The Guardian*, demolishing the idea of being out of the EU but remaining in a customs union with it. ““Turkey [has] a separate customs union agreement with the EU,’ Gardiner wrote. ‘If we were to have a similar agreement, several things would follow: the EU’s 27 members would set the common tariffs and Britain would have no say in how they were set. We would be unable to enter into any separate bilateral free trade agreement. We would be obliged to align our regulatory regime with the EU in all areas covered by the union, without any say in the rules we had to adopt. ““And we would be

bound by the case law of the European Court of Justice, even though we would have no power to bring a case to the court ... And were, say, the EU to negotiate an agreement with the US that was in the union’s best interests but against our own, our markets would be obliged to accept American produce with no guarantee of reciprocal access for our own goods into the US.’ “Poor Barry thought he was safe to point all this out, as it was then true to Jeremy Corbyn’s line. As recently as last January the Labour leader was still denouncing the customs union as ‘tariff-heavy against quite a lot of very poor countries, and in some cases protectionist against developing countries’. But the next month Corbyn was persuaded by his Brexit spokesman, Sir Keir Starmer, to unreservedly back membership of ‘a customs union with the EU’. “One Labour cynic told me Starmer had spotted that the customs union has many provisions giving Brussels power to veto anti-competitive state support to companies, and he wanted to sabotage the chance of a future Corbyn government being able to practise full socialism. “But that would suggest Labour is thinking about government rather than mere opposition tactics. And if that’s the case, its rejection of Mrs May’s plan – on the grounds that it doesn’t allow for a ‘permanent customs union’– is especially perverse. Because the backstop agreed by May would keep the UK in a customs union with the EU indefinitely (or at least until the EU wanted such an arrangement to end). “That is the main reason so many Conservative MPs voted down the withdrawal agreement. In other words, Corbyn’s ostensible reason for rejecting it is that it doesn’t do what the Tories who rejected it point out that it does.” ([Labour’s nightmare: Jeremy Corbyn running Brexit](#), 20 January 2019)

Deal or no-deal

Following her defeat, in a mere publicity stunt May asked to meet the other party leaders to discuss the next move. But while this may have made some sense two years ago, it is certainly too late for such an approach to bear any fruit now. Whilst Liberal Democrat leader Sir Vince Cable, Scottish National Party leader at Westminster Ian Blackford and others took up the offer, Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn refused to attend any such meeting with the PM. He justified this position by saying he would not hold any talks with May until the possibility of ‘no-deal’ was taken off the table. Clearly, this is silly season politically and intellectually. It obviously makes no logical sense to talk of no-deal being ‘taken off the table’. For what is ‘no-deal’ but the *absence* of a deal? Therefore, unless a deal is agreed upon, no-deal is the

default option. Caught between his vocally remain members and MPs and his leave voters, Corbyn's position is characterised by embarrassed sophistry. If no-deal really is the one unacceptable position, then Labour ought to have backed May's deal – the one guaranteed way of removing no-deal as an option. Meanwhile, after holding talks with cabinet representatives Michael Gove and David Lidington, Vince Cable has claimed that cross-party talks have increased the likelihood of a second referendum. Theresa May has rejected this interpretation of the discussions – in public, at least. Needless to say, Corbyn is still facing calls to commit the party to a second referendum from within his party – the so-called 'people's vote' option. This comes from those as highly-placed as shadow Brexit secretary and ardent remainder Sir Keir Starmer, who has also claimed that delaying the 29 March exit deadline may now be inevitable. Having managed to hold off committing himself either way until now, Corbyn has finally succumbed and added his voice to the second referendum chatter, just as May is trying to distance herself from it. "If the government remains intransigent, if support for Labour's alternative is blocked for party advantage and the country is facing the potential disaster of no-deal, our duty will then be to look at other options, which we set out in our conference motion, including that of a public vote." ([Brexit: Rule out no-deal. Jeremy Corbyn tells Theresa May](#), BBC News, 17 January 2019) Corbyn is playing a risky game here. Evidently, he is banking on Theresa May acting as a human shield for his own duplicity. The prime minister has become the symbol of the Brexit failure; she is soaking up all the vitriol and hatred that ought to be spread around the entirely self-interested political class, all of whom are so detached from the realities of most workers' existence and preoccupied only with serving the interests of big business and finance capital. Questions must be asked of all of the corrupt survivalists in Westminster. In the entire affair, incredibly, it has been the traditionally 'eurosceptic' right wing of the Tory party that has provided the most consistency among the Westminster elites (even accounting for their no-confidence flip-flop). If nothing else, at least the activities of those in the European Research Group (ERG) (types like Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg et al) have shed a little light for workers on the real content of May's attempts to pursue a Brexit in name only. Corbyn, however, a man whose entire strategy appeared to be pushing for a general election, now looks as if he may not really want that election to come about at all. Instead, he is flirting with the Tony Blair position of calling for a second referendum. He has ruled out no-deal, but has

refused either to accept the existing deal or produce one of his own. At least previous prophets of 'hope' and 'change' like former US president Barack Obama waited until getting into office before reneging on their pledges to the people. To those paying attention, Corbyn is badly damaged. History illuminates countless examples of how the social-democratic fake left always ends up bending over for the bourgeoisie. One might hope that his revisionist cheerleaders would be awakened by reality from their dreams of a socialist utopia to be ushered in through a Labour electoral victory, but they seem to exist in an unfortunate state of permanent blindness. Corbyn himself will no doubt be hoping that the wider public are similarly afflicted, and so distracted by a justified rage at the prime minister that his opportunistic manoeuvres will go unpunished.

Plan B: more Plan A

Failed former Glasgow Rangers manager Mark Warburton once famously said that when his tactics were not working, his Plan B was to 'do Plan A better'. He was sacked not long after. Incredibly, this is the reality-avoiding path the prime minister has also decided to tread. In an uninspiring two-and-a-half hour discussion on 21 January, which only took place at all thanks to the intervention of the aforementioned Speaker of the House, Mrs May revealed that her Plan B is to try Plan A again. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Further weight was also provided during the debate for the view that Labour does not yet want power. One of many amendments tabled was put forward by [Labour's Yvette Cooper](#), which basically amounted to a desperate attempt to buy time and stave off a no-deal scenario. At present, the government has until 26 February to have a deal passed by parliament. Should it fail, and it almost certainly will, Article 50 would, under Cooper's amendment, be extended by nine months, postponing Brexit until after Christmas. Although the amendment [fell by a narrow margin](#) at its first hearing on 30 January, it is expected that Cooper and her cross-party allies will bring it back to the House for another try as the clock ticks down further. This is a war, and one in which Yvette Cooper may have passed on a new superweapon to the government's forces. But it is a weapon which it seems incapable of knowing how to use. All experience and evidence to date tells us this government will likely blow its own legs off! Regardless of this built-in chaos factor, a spade is a spade and this attempt to postpone Britain's withdrawal from the EU is a further subversion of democracy that should rightly

outrage workers. Moreover, if Article 50 is extended, the legislative branch (parliament) would then lead negotiations, wresting control from May's executive (the government). This has the potential to create a constitutional crisis far greater than anything caused by the Speaker of the House, turning all traditions of British bourgeois democracy on their head. However, unlike Bercow's decision to allow an amendment that would hurry the government up, the Cooper amendment would buy the ruling class more time in which to try and get its act together and find a way out of its Brexit impasse. So we should expect to hear little by way of complaint – at least until power is eventually transferred from executive to legislative. Finally, on the major stumbling block of the northern Ireland backstop, nothing has been decided. May told the house that she would talk to the DUP and relay the outcome of those talks to the European Union. That's it. More of the same. No solutions. Brexit would appear to remain a hostage to the whims of Ulster obscurantists and unmoving Brussels eurocrats. And so we wait.

Where are we now?

The referendum to leave the EU was the [largest shake-up to British imperialism in recent times](#). The majority of the capitalist class reacted in terror and, through its parliamentary flunkies and underlings, tried to create a bulwark against this. This bulwark was the Chequers deal: to 'leave' but also remain – Britain would 'leave' the EU but remain in the single market (for goods but not services) and remain under the EU's regulatory framework. What is the EU? It is an imperialist club of the capitalist class. An unelected, self-appointed, anti-worker cabal hell bent on maximising European imperialist reach. It began with anticommunist intent, halting the spread of the revolutionary movement in Europe. The EU is not, as the liberal elites would have us believe, the manifestation of internationalism; it exists to *crush* true internationalism – revolutionary socialism. A vote to leave the EU was a vote against the bosses' club that has fully supported the British ruling class in stripping workers of their rights at home and in waging bloody wars abroad. Let us not forget that the EU is a tool through which the various national European governments are strengthened in enforcing austerity across Europe, while turning a blind eye to supposedly 'democratic' EU member state governments that implement regulations that make socialism illegal. Did one single person vote to leave the EU on paper, but to de facto remain? Because that is what May's withdrawal deal represents. Hence, she is her

own gravedigger. Whilst no-deal is being presented as the road to some sort of Mad Max-style dystopian future, does it not resemble the will of the people more than any deal currently on offer, or any other Norway or Canada-style fantasyland deal suggested? In this respect, Boris Johnson is 100 percent correct. The right-wingers of the Tory party, in this instance, are far closer to representing the will of the people than the party's 'moderate' wing or any part of the Labour party, although their reasons for doing so – ie, in the hope that British imperialism might survive the [capitalist economic crisis](#) by freeing trade from all impediments, leading to a race to the bottom in terms of wages, rights, conditions and regulation, the complete opening of British markets to US privateers and agribusinesses, and so on – are as anti-worker as those of the remainers. This issue better than any other in recent memory encapsulates perfectly the long-held Marxist analysis that bourgeois democracy remains an illusion – an illusion of choice; an illusion of democracy; an illusion of freedom. This abhorrent, historically redundant, outmoded system will not disappear of its own accord; it must be annihilated by the efforts of the organised working class. A real Brexit is one small but important step towards the goal of weakening and then destroying British imperialism. With the ruling class in chaos over how best to survive the capitalist crisis (ramp up [protectionism](#) or ramp up the [war effort](#)), how best to implement further [austerity](#) (quickly or slowly) and how best to survive the Brexit catastrophe (a new referendum or a fake Brexit), only one thing is certain: the present chaos is a sign of weakness in the ruling class and is providing many wonderful illustrations to workers about the true nature of the capitalist system and about the careerists who serve the capitalist class in the political and media spheres. A divided and chaotic ruling class is providing unprecedented opportunities for the working class to [organise](#) and further its own struggle for emancipation from the insanity of free-market fundamentalism. The task of communists is to do everything in their power to help workers learn the lessons on offer; to help them reject the [xenophobic siren songs](#) of the little England Brexiteers while advancing clearly the demand for a full and complete exit. Whatever weakens [British imperialism](#) should be a cause for celebration to British workers. **Yes to Brexit; no to xenophobia!**

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