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Voters endorse an Alice-in-wonderland Brexit



In calling the election, Theresa May rejected Alice's belief in politics as a game in which all should have prizes. She saw the election and Brexit negotiations as processes in which she would win and others would lose. Her opponents foresaw an outcome in which all would be losers: the Brexiteers because the prize they claimed was not a unicorn but a turkey, and the Remainers because the effect of a hard Brexit would be far worse than they predicted.

The election result creates the prospect of an Alice-in-Wonderland outcome in which all may have prizes. People wanting to leave the European Union have seen the return to Downing Street of a prime minister committed to Brexit. More than four-fifths of the popular vote went to MPs elected on manifestos pledged to respect the referendum result, the position of Labour as well as the Tories.

They make up more than nine-tenths of the new House of Commons. Half of all voters would like Brexit to happen as soon as possible and another quarter, after voting to remain last year, now give their resigned consent.

According to an election day poll of actual voters, only 28 per cent would like to see Brexit abandoned if at all possible.

Having given the EU notification of the decision to withdraw from the EU by 30 March 2019, it is now virtually impossible for the UK to withdraw its withdrawal. Nor is there a desire in Brussels to see its most awkward and unstable member remain. Postponing the date of withdrawal would require the unanimous consent of 27 member states. It would also require a majority vote of the British Parliament to reject the referendum result.

The failure of Theresa May to secure a parliamentary majority is a major victory for opponents of a hard Brexit. UKIP, the only party that campaigned with an unambiguous commitment to a hard Brexit, won just 1.8 per cent of the vote and no seats.

More than 53 per cent of the UK vote went to parties favouring some form of soft Brexit, that is, an agreement offering the prize of keeping a significant number of benefits of EU association in exchange for contributing to the EU's budget and accepting absence from deliberations in which decisions are made affecting the UK. Having endorsed remaining in the EU less than a year ago, Theresa May can hardly assert that there are no features of EU membership worth retaining.

The terms of Brexit, whatever they are, will require endorsement by a majority in the House of Commons and a majority in the House of Lords, where the swing vote is in the hands of cross-bench peers. In a House of Commons of 650 members, there are a total of 315 Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru and Green MPs elected on manifestos that endorsed some form of soft Brexit. Collectively, these parties won a larger share of the total vote, 53 per cent, than was cast for leaving the EU in last year's referendum.

Instead of being assured of parliamentary support for whatever she decides Brexit means, Theresa May will have to negotiate with MPs, including dozens of Tories who voted remain in the EU referendum. Tory voters are also divided in their views about the EU. Lord Ashcroft's election day poll found that two-thirds favoured Brexit and one-third favoured remain. Those favouring the EU contributed twice as many votes to the party's narrow lead over Labour as did former UKIP voters.

If upwards of a dozen of Tory MPs reject hard Brexit conditions there will be no majority in the Commons. While the Lords lacks the authority of

election, its members can collectively claim more knowledge of relations with Europe than any team of frontbench spokespersons.

The election outcome has created new opportunities for a soft Brexit. Theresa May's red line conditions set out in indelible ink have been replaced by question marks in pink water colour. The mad game of political croquet that is about to commence could produce a win-win settlement. Brexiters would gain a prize denied to Enoch Powell and Tony Benn, namely the UK Parliament no longer being bound to accept the authority of Brussels. Those who want an association agreement with the EU can use their newly gained parliamentary strength to win substantive prizes too.

To bring about a settlement will require British politicians to stop playing winner-take-all games and prepare for compromise as soon as discussions start with the EU later this month. The EU has re-affirmed the three issues that must be settled before talks about access to the single market can commence.

They are the post-Brexit status of EU citizens in the UK and of British citizens living in the single market; the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; and the size of the divorce bill that Britain should pay to cover existing commitments to the EU budget.

Ironically, the election has achieved a prize goal of Brexiters - returning control of British government to Parliament—but not in a way that was expected, weakening the authority of Downing Street. A new Prime Minister would not change the arithmetic of Parliament. Its assent to any Brexit measure is subject to approval by MPs who were not elected to support a Tory government.

Key players in parliament are no longer hardline Brexiters but people who can craft soft Brexit measures that can attract cross-party support. Step forward Labour spokesperson Keir Starmer and Liberal Democrat Vince Cable—and don't turn your back on members of the House of Lords such as Peter Mandelson.

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