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## Does Tony Blair have an answer to Shakespeare's Hotspur?



Tony Blair's call to spirits to rise up from the deep to throw off Brexit was worthy of Owen Glendower's faith in his magical powers. So too is the reply that Shakespeare gave Hotspur: 'Why so can I or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?' Blair's cosmopolitan audience showed there are people in the City of London welcoming his call to remain in the European Union. But his talk gave no hint of how troops raised in the Square Mile could successfully capture Parliament.

The most straightforward way to repudiate the Brexit referendum result is to call a second referendum in which some who voted to leave would change their minds as signs emerge of the difficulties and uncertainties entailed in de-integrating the UK from the EU. It would require a swing of less than 2.0 percent to turn the minority vote for remaining in the EU into a majority.

For this to happen, Parliament would have to approve another referendum. Remainers could try to emulate the successful campaign of their opponents and seek an MP among the 20 qualified to introduce a Private Member's bill in this session of Parliament. A mischievous Scottish National Party MP could speak from conviction of remaining in the EU. Defeat of the bill by an overwhelming mass of English MPs would add fuel to the party's case for Scottish independence.

One stumbling block to a referendum is the wording of the question. Tony Blair's call favours the proposition that the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union; the Conservative majority favours the opposite. Like the historic Glendower, Blair is ignoring the strength of the troops massed against him in Parliament. In any event, the Government can claim that the courts have given MPs a voice. Earlier in February almost 500 MPs voted to go ahead with withdrawal, including a majority of Labour as well as Tory members.

In a sense, Blair is correct in stating that both the referendum and parliamentary votes have been taken 'without knowledge of the true terms of Brexit'. These can only become known in autumn 2018, when UK and EU negotiators publish joint recommendations about the rules that should govern the post-Brexit relations between UK and the EU when it officially cases to be a member before Easter 2019. Once these terms are known, Remainers could promote a referendum about whether the terms should be accepted. The government would again reject such a demand on the grounds that a parliamentary vote is sufficient to authorise acceptance.

Theresa May has left open whether the government would recommend accepting a deal with the EU or endorse its rejection if its terms were a bad deal. Conservative MPs critical of the only deal on offer would want to hold the Prime Minister to her pledge that exit with no deal is better than accepting a bad deal. At present, a majority of MPs would prefer to vote for whatever deal was available rather than no deal. In the House of Lords, where the government lacks a majority, a majority of peers would undoubtedly endorse whatever an elected government negotiated and the Commons approved.

Blairite MPs could offer an amendment asking the government to return to Brussels to withdraw its notification of withdrawal. Such a strategy assumes that the EU would allow the UK to rescind its notification of withdrawal. The EU has made it clear that, like pro-Brexit Tory MPs, it wants an end to years of uncertainty about whether Britain is in or out of Europe. Labour MPs would face the awkward choice of voting for the government's deal as

a lesser evil or casting a negative vote that would not lead to better terms but to a complete break with the EU.

In practice, the only way to undo the referendum vote is to have a House of Commons with a majority of MPs in favour of British membership in the EU. If Blair issued a call for a general election before withdrawal is a fact, he would need the votes of 433 MPs for a ballot, or dozens of Conservative and SNP MPs to combine with Labour to form a new government with Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. If Hotspur were a bookmarker, he would offer odds of more than a million to one against this. Once a new House of Commons is elected in 2020, there will be five years for MPs to review the consequences of what Parliament and people have voted for and decide to apply to become an EU member state.

Instead of issuing a call which is certain to get a parliamentary response only from Lord Mandelson, Tony Blair could achieve more if he tried to work his magic on the devils that are in the details of Brexit and will affect the state of Britain in the world once it no longer belongs to the European Union. For example, he could return to a cause he once advocated when shadow minister for employment a quarter century ago: the need to improve state education and vocational training so that British workers and enterprises can compete better in an increasingly competitive world.

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