

Brexit : A Never Ending Crisis

By Juanita Justin

The ‘Last Chance’ vote that took place on the supposed Independence Day in Britain on March 29 resulted in rejecting the deal once again. The Withdrawal Agreement which has been previously voted down twice, lost again for a third time by a majority of 58 — with 344 voting against the motion, 286 voting in its favour. As it stands, it has been decided that the UK will leave on April 12 with or without a deal. Prime Minister Theresa May believed the third vote as an alternative Brexit option for a closer economic relationship with the EU and once again the House is undecided on how to leave the EU in an orderly manner.

After a two-day summit with the EU in March, Prime Minister secured to delay the original departure date from the EU from March 29 to May 22 only on the condition that the members of the Parliament (MPs) approve of her deal. But if May happens to lose the vote on the MPs agreeing with her deal, then the UK is required to propose an alternative plan forward on April 12, or they could be in serious danger of a disastrous exit from the EU (Davies 2019). A no-deal will do significant damages to the UK, specifically Northern Ireland, which currently does not have a functioning government rendering them unable to properly prepare for the exit (Cooper 2019). The opposition to the deal is still focused on the backstop aiming to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The backstop is considered to be an accord for the Irish border that is designed to adhere with the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement that proposes to retain an open border between Ireland and Northern Ireland after Brexit. The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was signed to bring an end to the three-decade conflict between the faction wanting to preserve the Northern Ireland’s status to stay in the UK, and the faction wanting to leave the UK and join the Republic of Ireland. Over the years, the communal relations have improved and the once hard border with militarised checkpoints is now open for free trade (Serhan 2018). The trade deal guaranteed a seamless open border, but if Brexit happens with no-deal, then leaving the customs union and the EU single market will once again resurrect the hard

border with checkpoints which would be a target for militants (Macdonald 2019). To avoid any future tensions, the Irish Government insisted on a legally binding document that committed to avoiding a hard border to be listed as one of the conditions in the Withdrawal Agreement for Brexit. Some Brexiteers are against the backstop as it will lead to the UK staying in the customs union preventing it from having its own independent trade policy, and the agreement might become a long-term relationship between the UK and the EU preventing them to leave completely. While the others support it, as it will unilaterally align them to the Single Market to reduce the damage on the British economy (Institute for government 2019).

The House refuses to leave the EU without a deal. A no-deal Brexit outcome with hardly a week to prepare may cause significant economic damage to the British economy. The MPs are desperate to convince the House of a different route hoping they would agree to the plan to stay in the customs union. The MPs did not support any of the eight alternatives present in the deal even though many were given a free vote and not forced to follow the party's orders. But some proposals fared well, specifically the Customs Union with the EU being rejected by only three votes (BBC 2019). If the UK decides to leave the Customs Union as well, then the EU will impose custom regulatory checks, ensuring tariffs and verification of goods that comply with its standards. The UK runs the risk of being challenged by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other countries of favourable treatment if it decided not to impose customs and tariffs on its side of the border for goods crossing the Northern Irish border (Institute for Government 2019). Sheep farmers in Northern Ireland fear tariffs at WTO rates that would be introduced in case of a no-deal Brexit to replace the current electronic border action for exports. Since the farmers are already making less, introducing a traffic system will make them unprofitable and 'unfeasible' leading to the disappearance of the sheep-farming industry in the future (Logan 2019). A no-deal Brexit could have adverse impacts on farm businesses, livestock sector and the food industry severely affecting the rural economy. WTO tariff rates on agri-exports risk cheap food imports and the availability of veterinary medicines (Macauley 2019).

Theresa May's government depended on the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to garner votes for her deal, as the DUP was much more supportive to Theresa May in the June 2017 snap elections, as opposed to the hard-line Tory Brexiteers in the European Research Group which made her vulnerable to internal ambush. Though the team was appealing the DUP to vote for the deal, the odds were still stacked against her (The Economist 2019). May still promises to continue talks with the DUP and reassuring them over the Irish backstop — to contain the risks of splitting Northern Ireland from the UK as the opposition to the deal is still focused on the backstop aiming to avoid a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Earlier, before the 'Last Chance' third vote, May agreed to her conservative MPs saying that she would formally step down after the deal is passed in the Parliament and Brexit ensues, giving the reigns to her successor. This stance was designed to somehow persuade the Tory back-bencher MPs to support and vote for her Brexit deal. Despite her desperate plea, the outcome of the vote remains unchanged with a majority opposed to it (The Economist 2019). However, having general election now is a risky move as seen during the snap election in 2017. Though the government hopes to gain parliamentary majority, they might actually lose seats and the election itself.

On April 3, the Parliament passed a bill that was won by a majority of one vote (313 votes to 312) to ensure that Theresa May prevents a no-deal scenario by seeking another extension from the EU in case the agreement is not passed by the deadline on April 12. May wanting to leave the EU "in an orderly way" decided to "reach across the House" to hold talks with Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Labour Party and the Opposition Party to discuss the plans of the agreement moving forward. Corbyn said that he welcomed the PM's "willingness to compromise to resolve the Brexit deadlock," while some believe that with hardly any time left, the talks will lead to a bad compromise (BBC 2019). The EU customs union has been Corbyn's core Brexit demand as he believes that it is in the interest of the UK economy, an access to the Single Market and a guarantee of minimum European regulations. One suggestion that has been backed by both party MPs is a short-term customs union as a temporary staging post — comprehensive customs arrangement. Two ministers from May's

government resigned from their posts in protest against the cross-party talks and compromise. Her senior ministers fear that another extension by the EU would be a long delay for Brexit. Reports state that 15 others could follow, including several cabinet ministers, if May wanders too far from her previous commitments (BBC 2019).

The EU, however, believes that a no-deal scenario is a very real prospect on 12 April and that they have been preparing for this scenario since December 2017. Since the UK has nothing to show for after all the delays, the EU questions the reason for delaying Brexit any longer (BBC 2019). May is now trying to request the EU for a further short extension to get the agreement passed by the Parliament before May 22 so that the UK does not have to be a part of the European elections.

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