

Did Brexit need a Peace Poll?

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With the British Social Attitudes polls tracking a consistent preference to remain in the EU with only 22% choosing leave in 2015 Cameron went for a referendum in 2016 expecting to win a 'remain' vote (NatCen 2018 p119). But these polls failed to measure the impact of identity politics on the referendum campaign in the hands of skilful ethnic entrepreneurs. With all the benefits of hindsight this error was corrected in their 2018 report (NatCen 2018 p137).

Inevitably, the negotiations to leave set up a dynamic that polarised public opinion around the UK/EU negotiating positions and in this context 'remain' and 'leave' supporters commissioned partisan polls in support of their separate agendas in addition to more objective tracking polls run by the major polling companies. Academic studies also tracked changes in voter preferences for a negotiated agreement (Grant et al 2018) and 'leave' and 'remain' voter priorities suggesting 40% were potential swing voters (Pagel and Cooper 2018).

However, these studies fail to take account of the political identity/emotive aspect of the choice the electorate would make in a contested referendum. Significantly, in this context if the UK and EU fail to reach an agreement in Parliament then 'leavers' will play the 'blame game' and persuade much of the 40% swing vote that the EU is not the kind of institution that the UK should be a part of. Perhaps what is needed now is a conflict resolution approach to problem solving?

As part of the Northern Ireland peace process and negotiations all the major procedural and substantive issues and decisions that had to be made were tested against public opinion with questions designed and agreed by party negotiators. With all the benefits of hindsight the same could have been done to help develop a consensus for the terms of Brexit but that is now done with the 585-page draft Brexit withdrawal agreement endorsed by Cabinet and published on 14 November 2018.

Visiting the substantive elements of this agreement with a view to amending it would not be helpful at this time. Additionally if the agreement between the UK and EU passes through Parliament then again polling on this would serve no useful purpose. However, if the agreement does not get Parliamentary backing then the Government will find themselves having to resolve a procedural problem about which there is presently no consensus.

For example should the UK leave with no deal? Or should the government ask for more time with an Article 50 extension? Should the agreement be renegotiated? Or should the government call a general election? Or should there be a second referendum (People's Vote) and most critically of all what should the choices be for such a referendum and with what wording? In the Brexit context such a scenario is particularly problematic given the ambiguous meaning of 'no deal'.

With all these points in mind a 'Peace Poll' that engages with all the principal Parliamentary Brexit stakeholders to develop and test all the unresolved procedural issues, including those associated with a second referendum (franchise, timing, questions, meaning and

understanding of options etc.) could help Parliamentarians reach an informed decision on procedural issues.

Additionally, it should be remembered that in Northern Ireland the parties to their peace agreement, the Good Friday Agreement, signed up to it because they had a stake in it, they took ownership of it through multiparty negotiations. So if no agreement is now reached the Government may want to take this lesson to heart and try a multiparty national consensus approach in the UK.

However, even if this withdrawal agreement is accepted in both the UK and EU Parliaments then the UK still has to negotiate their future relationship with the EU over the coming years. In this context it will also be important to mend bridges so painfully damaged by polarised negotiations between ‘leavers’ and ‘remainers’, and between the UK and their Continental partners in Europe, whatever that future relationship may be. To this end all best practice in conflict resolution needs to be employed to achieve the desired outcome, including the ‘Peace Polling’ methods developed in Northern Ireland and around the world (Irwin 2002, 2012, PSR 2017).

References

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