

The Brexit Story, as told by BrexitCentral



Written
by
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It all began for BrexitCentral back in September 2016, less than

twelve weeks after the June 2016 referendum at which more people voted for the UK to leave the EU than have ever voted for anyone or anything in British electoral history. And it began on a consensual note, with prominent Remain campaigner and Tory MP Nick Boles writing the **first ever piece for the site** by an external author – one of more than 500 to have done so in the ensuing years. Despite the fact that he later left the Conservative Party over its Brexit stance (and voted Green at the 2019 General Election), he wrote back then:

“I backed the campaign to remain in the EU because I worried about the economic impact of leaving the Single Market even more. I feared my constituents would end up paying a high price in lost jobs and falling incomes as a result of declining foreign investment and trade. But the immediate economic shock that the Remain campaign predicted has not materialised. Consumer confidence remains strong and recent data suggest that both the manufacturing and services sectors are buoyant. It is far too early to be certain about the long term impact of leaving the EU but the early signs are positive, and provide a basis for cautious optimism.”

And he was clear that a clean break from the EU was needed:

“Clinging onto the structures of the club we have just left – whether the Single Market or the European customs union – while having no say over their future development, would

ensure that we end up in the worst of both worlds, neither in nor out, with no power to influence what the European Union does, and no freedom to do something different.”

He was right then – although, as we saw, there were many Remainers who said they accepted the result of the referendum whose subsequent actions suggested they really thought otherwise. Indeed, as the 2016 party conference season got underway, the Lib Dems effectively refused to accept the referendum result by **agreeing a new policy** that the UK should only leave the EU if a second referendum endorsed that position at the conclusion of negotiations (and even then the Lib Dems would campaign to remain members of the EU, regardless).

At the Conservative Conference in October 2016 – Theresa May’s first as Prime Minister – she **confirmed** that before the end of March 2017 she would trigger Article 50 – to begin the two-year countdown on the Brexit negotiations, at the end of which the UK would formally leave the EU. And she also used a phrase which became a regular refrain:

“The referendum result was clear. It was legitimate. It was the biggest vote for change this country has ever known. Brexit means Brexit – and we’re going to make a success of it.”

It was also in those early weeks that we published a **reflective piece from Tory MP Mark Francois** – which I reckon stands the test of time – arguing that it was the appalling handling of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007-2008 which sowed the seeds of Brexit. Meanwhile, future Brexit Secretary and current Foreign Secretary **Dominic Raab wrote for us** to observe that even with the worst trade deal Brussels could offer, the UK will thrive outside the EU.

In the autumn of 2016, despite **Hugh Bennett's entreaty** that legal attempts to stop Theresa May from triggering Article 50 risked demeaning the integrity of June's referendum, the High Court **found in favour of Gina Miller** and friends, meaning that the Government would indeed have to pass legislation in Parliament before Article 50 could be triggered. And in another reminder that the political establishment intended making life difficult for the Brexit cause, **Remainer Hilary Benn beat Brexiteer Kate Hoey** for the chairmanship of the newly established Exiting the European Union Select Committee.

Patrick O'Flynn – then an MEP and a regular BrexitCentral author over these years – was arguably correct in **his prediction** of November 2016:

“Whatever view you take of the High Court decision on ratifying Article 50, it is hard not to accept that the sourness and anger that characterised our politics in the days after 23rd June has returned. Fundamentally, many Brexit voters do not trust Remain politicians and do not believe them when the bulk of them insist they are not trying to derail the Brexit process but merely to make sure it works as well as it can. None of us really knows exactly how this process is going to pan out, but I am afraid that until Brexit is completed there does not really seem to me to be a way out of this atmosphere of anger and distrust.”

And our most prolific author, former Labour MP Austin Mitchell, also **hit the nail on the head** as far as the forces organising against Brexit were concerned in one of his first pieces for us:

“For Recalcitrant Remainers, the EU is so important that it’s become their religion; a deity which the people must obey whether they want to or not. These Remoaners never give up. They’re dedicated to re-fighting a battle which was decided by the people in the referendum. They’re so convinced that the people are wrong that they’re happy to act as secret agents for the EU, strengthening its hand in the Brexit negotiations, standing ready to reject the outcome if it fulfills the will of the British people and making every effort to sabotage anything

which implements that popular will. Democracy can't be allowed to stand in the way of the European Union."

Mercifully not all Remainers remained recalcitrant, as we carried pieces by some of those who had backed the Stronger In campaign but who definitely were respecting the referendum result, like former Tory Chief Whip **Mark Harper** and former Conservative Party Chairman **Grant Shapps**, who memorably used our platform to declare: "I am backing Brexit all the way, as hard as you like".

2017 began with two of the stars of the Vote Leave campaign writing for BrexitCentral. **Gisela Stuart**, who chaired the campaign, noted that Leave and Remain voters now shared the view that the referendum result was decisive and that the Government should get on with the job, while **Michael Gove** – during a brief sojourn on the backbenches – argued that a 'Fake Brexit' would not allow politicians to deliver the change which people had voted for. One perennial proposal from the forces trying to resist that change was for the UK to remain inside the EU's customs union – an argument that was **shot down** by another regular contributor, Shanker Singham.

17th January 2017 was a big moment as Theresa May headed to Lancaster House to set out the Government's 'Plan for Britain' and the priorities that the UK would use to negotiate Brexit – what

swiftly became known as the **Lancaster House Speech**. It was widely welcomed by Brexiteers with our Editor-at-Large, **Matthew Elliott**, describing it as “an inspiring vision of a global Britain” and expressing particular satisfaction at her explicitly saying that no deal would be better than a bad deal, while Tory MP **Steve Baker** used a **BrexitCentral article to praise it** for providing “a crystal clear strategy for how we are to leave the EU” and “a bold vision for national renewal”.

Following the Government’s failure to win its appeal at the Supreme Court in the Miller case, ministers pressed on with getting the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill onto the statute book. At Second Reading in the Commons **it was passed by 498 votes to 114** and we specifically saluted the **346 heroic Remainers** who put democracy first and voted to trigger Article 50 by publishing a full roll call of their names. Given their later actions, it is notable to recall that this illustrious list included the likes of Anna Soubry, Chuka Umunna and Heidi Allen.

Meanwhile, in what was arguably a prophetic piece, given the events of December 2019, Fawzi Ibrahim of Trade Unionists Against The EU argued that **Labour must embrace Brexit or risk becoming irrelevant**, while Jacob Rees-Mogg – then a backbencher – used our platform to **deconstruct the latest intervention on Brexit from Sir John Major**, which he described as a “deeply negative, anti-American

and defeatist speech” which “reminds people why John Major lost so heavily in 1997”.

29th March 2017 was the day that Theresa May formally triggered Article 50 – a moment which we marked with **a piece from veteran eurosceptic Sir Bill Cash** noting that the historic day would restore our democratic freedom to govern ourselves. But very quickly we found ourselves in the midst of a general election campaign, which Theresa May called against the backdrop of opposition parties and peers seeking to jeopardise preparations for Brexit while weakening the Government’s negotiating position in Europe. It was billed by some as the Brexit election, but with Labour having stated in terms **in its manifesto** that that it “accepts the referendum result”, the voters looked at a plethora of issues as they made their judgement. And the Tory decision to run a presidential-style campaign with a Prime Minister who wasn’t very presidential helped to deprive Theresa May of her already thin parliamentary majority, forcing her to come to a confidence and supply arrangement with the DUP in order to retain the smallest of working majorities.

The morning after the election **I wrote**:

“Last year’s referendum result still stands. And there is a consensus between the Conservative and Labour parties to accept that result – the fact that Jeremy Corbyn did so and appeared to accept an end to free movement, for example, will

have given many Leave-inclined voters the confidence to vote for his party yesterday. There is no excuse for any delay in pursuing the all-important Brexit negotiations.”

In hindsight, perhaps a lot of us were naive to have taken Labour at their word – but in effect that Friday morning after the election should have been the moment we realised that another general election was going to be needed in order to deliver Brexit. As it was, the May Government remained in place and there was an early boost for Brexiteers with the **appointment of Steve Baker to the Brexit Department**. Businessman and Vote Leave veteran Simon Boyd **told MPs** they would not be forgiven if they did not respect the referendum result, while Labour Leave’s John Mills **explained** why both Labour and the Conservatives must stick to their manifesto commitments of leaving the Single Market and Tory MEP David Campbell Bannerman also made **the case against EEA membership**.

The post-election **Queen’s Speech** contained a raft of Brexit-related legislation, not least the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill – commonly referred to as the ‘Great Repeal Bill’ – to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and end the authority of EU law in the UK. Talks began over the summer in Brussels between Brexit Secretary David Davis and the EU’s Michel Barnier and their respective teams and when Parliament returned in September 2017, the Repeal Bill was **given a Second Reading by 328 votes to 292** – a

majority of 36. Labour MPs were whipped to oppose it, despite **Kate Hoey's assertion** that the party had no mandate to block it (she was one of seven Labour MPs to vote with the Government).

We then saw Theresa May deliver her **Florence Speech** in which she said the UK should be the EU's "strongest friend and partner", which led Richard Tice – then of Leave Means Leave and later Brexit Party Chairman – to **conclude** that she had "conceded everything and asked for nothing in return".

At the 2017 Conservative Party Conference I was pleased to discover the latest Remainer to be converted to the Brexit cause was none other than Stanley Johnson, the ex-MEP, former European Commission official and father of Boris. He **explained his volte-face for BrexitCentral thus:**

"The critical moment came a couple of weeks ago when EU Commission President Juncker gave his State of the Union address to the European Parliament. The vision he presented of an EU with a single government, and with directly-elected EU ministers with EU-wide responsibilities, including finance and defence, was quite simply – it seemed to me – totally over the top. Up until then, I was still ready to argue that if you wanted to steer the ship in a different direction, the best thing surely

was to stay on board and try to seize control of the steering wheel. In other words, fight from within for change. But the ship metaphor doesn't really work. The train metaphor is a better reflection of reality. Mr Juncker's Federal Express is heading down the track at an ever-increasing speed in a direction we really don't want to go. Even if Britain stayed on board, I doubt if we would be able to change the points on the track ahead, or even slow the train down."

As talks continued, an increasing number of Brexiteer voices started to suggest that if a bad deal was going to be what the EU offered the UK, then the Prime Minister should be held to her word that it would be better to have No Deal. This was the view proffered by Tory MP Sir Christopher Chope, for example, who **wrote for BrexitCentral after a trip to Brussels** with the Exiting the European Select Committee where they met, among others, Michel Barnier and the European Parliament's Brexit Co-ordinator, Guy Verhofstadt:

"Having heard what they had to say, I'm afraid I've come to the conclusion that the only Brexit deal being offered to us from Brussels would be far worse for the UK than leaving without a deal in March 2019... While the EU negotiators sought to emphasise that they did not want to punish the UK, I find their negotiating stance to be inconsistent with such an assurance."

Even **Brendan Chilton** of Labour Leave set out for us why the Government needed to prioritise preparing for a no-deal outcome. And speaking of Labour, it was in December 2017 that Austin Mitchell shared **Tony Blair's secret memo to Alastair Campbell** with a 12-point plan for stopping Brexit – which a surprising number of people failed to realise was satire.

It was also at this time that Martin Howe QC of Lawyers for Britain **sounded an early warning** that costly EU demands on regulatory alignment could prevent us securing trade deals elsewhere – but just a day later the UK and EU published a **Joint Report marking the conclusion of the first phase of negotiations**, which included the infamous Irish backstop in Paragraph 49. This stated that in the absence of agreed solutions to address the unique circumstances of the island of Ireland, “the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union”.

2018 began with former Prime Minister Tony Blair putting his oar in, doing his best to scupper Brexit and calling on the country to “re-think” its decision of 2016. Labour MP Kate Hoey was swift out of the traps to **call on him to bin his latest 'Dodgy Dossier'**, while East of England MEP **Patrick O'Flynn** declared Blair's attempts to derail the referendum result as contemptible. But then Nigel Farage

was **called out by Suzanne Evans** for his mooted idea of backing a second referendum. A government reshuffle saw European Research Group Chairman Suella Fernandes appointed a minister at the Department for Exiting the European Union, with Jacob Rees-Mogg **elected in her place** as the new Chairman of the ERG. And in an important staging post on the road to Brexit, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill **secured its Third Reading** in the Commons by a majority of 29.

Those still in denial of the referendum result continued to call for the UK to remain in the EU's Customs Union after Brexit: but Lawyers for Britain Chairman Martin Howe QC explained why remaining in the EU Customs Union after Brexit would be **a political and economic disaster**, while I sought to call a halt on the Remainer revisionism and explained that **we did vote to leave the EU's Customs Union** at the referendum. Jeremy Corbyn was evidently not paying attention, since he proceeded to announce a new Labour policy of remaining in a customs union with the EU – an idea that was **slated by Professor David Paton** of Economists for Free Trade as “bizarre” and by international trade expert **Shanker Singham** as “a non-starter”. The issue of the Irish border also began to come to the fore and speaking to us, Nobel Peace Prize winner and former First Minister of Northern Ireland, **Lord Trimble**, explained why it was “rubbish” to suggest that Brexit would undermine the Good Friday Agreement.

March 2018 saw Theresa May deliver her **third big Brexit speech** at London's Mansion House and by way of a reminder that the then Prime Minister still enjoyed broad support from much of the wider Brexit movement at that juncture, it was **welcomed by John Longworth** of Leave Means Leave as a defining moment on the path to successfully delivering Brexit. On the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 2018, DUP Deputy Leader Nigel Dodds **explained** why Northern Ireland had to accept the mandate for Brexit and respond accordingly, while Hugh Bennett **accused the EU of cynically exploiting the Irish border** to try to keep Britain under the thumb. Amidst continued attempts by some to push for continued British membership of the Customs Union, **Priti Patel** set out why we needed out of the protectionist racket that is the EU's Customs Union, while we exclusively published the text of **Jacob Rees-Mogg's Speaker's Lecture** offering his vision for a global-facing, outward-looking post-Brexit Britain. And as the latest lunatic theory to be propagated by Lord Adonis claimed that the BBC was responsible for creating Nigel Farage, I set out how **Nigel Farage was actually created by Tony Blair**.

It was in May 2018 that support among the wider Leave movement for the May Government's Brexit strategy began to fracture, when its proposal for a "New Customs Partnership" with the EU post-Brexit was met with less than universal acclaim. Tory MP and International Trade Select Committee Member **Marcus Fysh branded it "a non-**

starter”, while Henry Newman of Open Europe described the proposal as **“bad politics, bad policy and a bad plan”**. In the meantime, on 26th June 2018, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill was passed into law, repealing the European Communities Act 1972 which took us into the then European Economic Community in the first place and setting in stone 29th March 2019 as the date on which we should be leaving the EU.

But within a fortnight the entire Government’s Brexit strategy was in disarray following the Cabinet gathering at Chequers, the Prime Minister’s Buckinghamshire residence, where senior ministers met to agree a White Paper setting out their Brexit vision. Hugh Bennett described the White Paper as **an exercise in giving away control**, while Martin Howe QC **explained** how the Chequers plan would still leave UK judges subservient to the ECJ. First to resign over Chequers was Brexit Secretary himself, **David Davis** (who was replaced by Dominic Raab), along with junior Brexit minister **Steve Baker**, followed by Foreign Secretary **Boris Johnson** (who was replaced by Jeremy Hunt) and **a clutch of other more junior figures**. Despite **the efforts of Theresa May** to sell her proposal to Tory MPs, many were left unconvinced. Tory Deputy Chairman James Cleverly **valiantly insisted** that it was a “workable plan”, but a string of his colleagues – such as **Andrea Jenkyns, Marcus Fysh, Robert Courts** and **Ross Thomson** – wrote for us explaining why they disagreed. During the ensuing summer recess, Jacob Rees-Mogg took it upon himself to marshal Tory grassroots opposition to Theresa May’s plan through

his explosive “chuck Chequers” letter sent to local Conservative Associations, which **we exclusively revealed to the world**.

In September 2018, thirty years to the day after Margaret Thatcher’s prophetic Bruges speech was delivered, Tory MP **Conor Burns** set out why it sparked the debate that led to Brexit. Talking of speeches, Jean-Claude Juncker’s latest federalising State of the Union speech provided Patrick O’Flynn with **another reminder** of why we needed out of the EU. And as the party conference season got underway, Labour delegates in Liverpool managed to pass an ‘all things to all people’ motion on Brexit which kept all options on the table, including the prospect of backing a second referendum. Conservative Party Chairman Brandon Lewis **declared** that Labour’s promises to respect the referendum result now lay in tatters, while Labour Leave’s **Brendan Chilton** lamented the damage being done to his party’s brand by all those talking of a second referendum and Global Britain’s Brian Monteith reported on **prescient new polling** showing that blocking Brexit or backing another referendum would cost Labour at the polls.

The party conference season continued with the Conservatives in Manchester, where we held the biggest of our BrexitCentral conference rallies, attracting a massive crowd, many of whom weren’t able to get into the venue. The **entire event can still be viewed on YouTube** or you can watch the individual speeches

from **Daniel Hannan**, **Ross Thomson**, **Andrea Jenkyns**, Tees Valley Mayor **Ben Houchen**, our former BrexitCentral colleague **Darren Grimes**, **Priti Patel**, **Conor Burns** and **Jacob Rees-Mogg** – with ‘chuck Chequers’ being a recurring theme.

As debate continued about the Government’s proposals, former Cabinet Minister **Lord Lilley** explained for us what he described as the deceit at the heart of Chequers, while one-time Europe Minister **David Heathcoat-Amory** declared that the Government had ignored the basic principles of successful negotiation in its dealings with Brussels. Former Vote Leave Chair **Gisela Stuart** warned against walking into the trap of an extended transition period while Professor Matthew Goodwin explained why **the Remainers’ caricature of Leave voters was wrong** and showed that they still failed to understand why people backed Brexit.

And then, on 14th November 2018, Theresa May finally struck a Withdrawal Agreement with the European Union – but without the support of **another brace of ministers who quit her Government** in opposition to the deal. First among them was her latest Brexit Secretary, Dominic Raab, who quit the Cabinet (to be replaced by Steve Barclay) along with Work and Pension Secretary Esther McVey, with Brexit Minister Suella Braverman, Northern Ireland Minister Shailesh Vara and another clutch of ministerial aides also resigning from the Government. **Dr Lee Rotherham** found some

nasty surprises in the smallprint of the Brexit deal for us while **Victoria Hewson** found that the Irish protocol in the Withdrawal Agreement ruled out an independent trade policy and **Martin Howe QC** set out why that protocol was neither a “backstop” nor temporary. **Gisela Stuart** concluded that Theresa May’s Brexit deal did not deliver what people voted for at the referendum as **Jacob Rees-Mogg** urged fellow MPs to oppose the draft Withdrawal Agreement and we **revealed** the European Research Group’s own case against the Government’s Brexit deal.

MPs then began what was due to be a five-day debate on Theresa May’s Brexit deal, only for the Government – anticipating defeat – to **pull it halfway through** and delay its conclusion and the so-called ‘meaningful vote’ on it until after Christmas. **I was not impressed.** For many Tory MPs sceptical about May’s leadership, this was the final straw and the requisite number of signatures were collated in order to prompt a vote of no confidence in her leadership. However, May survived the vote by 200 votes to 117, giving her a year’s immunity from further challenges.

The year ended with us publishing a **leaked House of Commons legal analysis** of the Brexit deal which contradicted Theresa May and added to Brexiteers’ concerns, and former Cabinet Minister **Theresa Villiers** explaining in a piece for us that without a major rewrite, Theresa May’s Brexit deal would remain unacceptable.

After the Christmas recess, 2019 began with take two of the Commons debate on Theresa May's Brexit deal. **Priti Patel** urged her colleagues to oppose it, as **an anonymous civil servant** set out how it created "a triple lock to shackle the UK to Brussels forever". **Shanker Singham** also called on MPs to vote down Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement – and on 15th January, in what became known as Meaningful Vote 1, that is exactly what they did, by a margin of 432 votes to 202: a **record-breaking defeat for a government** on the floor of the House of Commons by a majority of 230.

The following day May won a confidence vote in the House of Commons that had been tabled by the Opposition and the following week went back to the Commons to **explain how she intended to proceed**: by taking a more consultative approach to the next phase of negotiations, giving stronger reassurances on workers' rights and environmental standards and attempting to address the concerns about the Irish backstop – while ruling out a second referendum. When asked to endorse the approach, MPs backed the infamous **Brady Amendment** – proposed by Tory MP and 1922 Committee Chairman Sir Graham Brady – that broadly supported the Withdrawal Agreement while requiring that the Northern Ireland backstop be "replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border" – and the basis for alternative arrangements would emanate from the so-called **Malthouse Compromise** brokered by Leave-

backing minister Kit Malthouse.

However, by Valentine's Day, the Government had suffered **another embarrassing defeat** on its approach to Brexit, by a majority of 45, as dozens of Conservative MPs refused to back a motion which effectively included an endorsement of taking the no-deal option off the table. On BrexitCentral, **Sir Bill Cash** had been emphasising the positives to leaving the EU without a deal while **Professor David Paton** was calling on Labour MPs to start embracing a no-deal Brexit, as was **John Mills** of Labour Leave.

By the end of February, **Theresa May** had conceded that if her deal had not been passed by mid-March, she would give MPs a vote on ruling out a no-deal Brexit, with the opportunity of extending Article 50 past 29th March. This prompted the latest resignation from her Government when DEFRA minister **George Eustice quit** over what he called "a series of rather undignified retreats" from the Prime Minister over Brexit. **Writing for BrexitCentral** in advance of the Agreement being put to MPs for the second time, he said that if MPs voted down the Brexit deal, the only option for a serious country would be to leave without an agreement:

"If the Prime Minister's agreement fails to get through, are we going to roll over like Greece did? Will we go back, cap in hand

to ask for an extension, and then meekly accept whatever terms they attach to that extension, if it's allowed at all? Or are we going to face them down, calmly get our coat and walk out the door?"

On 12th March, **Meaningful Vote 2** saw the May deal again **defeated** by MPs, this time by 391 votes to 242 – a majority of 149. The following day, as May had provided for, **MPs signalled their opposition to a no-deal Brexit** – at that juncture still the default position in less than three weeks' time – by 321 votes to 278, a majority of 43. So the day after that, MPs voted by 413 votes to 202 – a majority of 211 – to **instruct the Government to seek an extension of the Article 50 period** beyond 29th March, which **Theresa May duly did**.

It was only a minority of Tory MPs who backed the extension and amidst the most toxic, suspicious and fractious atmosphere I have ever observed around Parliament, I set out **the dilemma facing Tory MPs** expecting the deal to be brought back a third time thus:

“On the one hand, they are told by some that blocking a deal that would see the UK formally leaving the EU in a matter of weeks would provoke a backlash from voters who want Brexit delivered. Moreover, they are told that they risk no Brexit at all

since it would likely lead to a long extension to the Article 50 period during which anything could happen. Indeed, they are reminded that campaigning most vociferously for the deal to be voted down right now are the so-called People's Vote campaign, sensing it as their best opportunity to reverse Brexit altogether. On the other hand, they are advised by others that if they back the deal, there will be a public backlash some months down the line once it becomes clear to voters the constraints which it places on the British Government over the coming years. In other words, that what was a bad deal last week remains a bad deal this week."

After EU leaders agreed to the extension to one of two possible dates – 22nd May 2019, should the Withdrawal Agreement gain approval from MPs before the end of March or 12th April 2019, should the Withdrawal Agreement not be approved by the Commons – **MPs then voted to seize the Commons agenda** on 27th March to allow for indicative votes on alternative ways forward in relation to Brexit. This was a ruse from the likes of Sir Oliver Letwin, Dominic Grieve, Hilary Benn and others, who were allowed by Speaker John Bercow to hang amendments on a neutral motion – a controversial move which contributed to the growing breakdown in trust between the Speaker and both the Government and Brexit-backing MPs alike. Yet when MPs discussed and voted on eight different proposals, they **rejected every single one** of them. And when Theresa May did bring her deal back to MPs for Meaningful Vote 3 on 29th March –

the day we should have been leaving the EU – **it was again rejected**, this time by a majority of 58.

April Fool's Day saw another day of indicative votes in the Commons and another day where **every option put before MPs was voted down**. The next day, following a seven-hour Cabinet meeting, Theresa May **announced** she was seeking another extension to the Article 50 period, as she also offered to sit down with Jeremy Corbyn to try to agree a plan for leaving the EU with a deal. But before she had **written the letter seeking the extension**, Labour MP Yvette Cooper had managed to **force through the Commons in a matter of hours** a Bill mandating the Prime Minister to do just that. And when EU leaders met to consider the request, it was agreed to **extend Article 50 until 31st October 2019**.

Anger among Brexiteers at the course of events was palpable. Rebecca Ryan of StandUp4Brexit explained that **grassroots Tory Brexiteers were seething** at May's subcontracting Brexit to Jeremy Corbyn, while Viscount Ridley – better known as Matt Ridley – argued that **May had betrayed those who loyally believed she meant what she said** about No Deal.

More Tory MPs began openly to call for May to quit. **Priti Patel** wrote on BrexitCentral:

“In order to move on, what our country urgently needs now is strong leadership. Leadership that will stand up and defend our democracy, trust our people, protect our freedoms and take Britain out of the EU, immediately.”

ERG stalwart **Mark Francois** said it was time Tory MPs had an ‘indicative vote’ on Theresa May’s leadership before she destroyed the party.

And while Tory MPs were in open revolt, Nigel Farage had been plotting the launch of The Brexit Party, with the aim of standing candidates to fight the European Parliament election in May in which the UK would have to participate on the grounds that since we still hadn’t left the EU, we would be obliged to elect MEPs in accordance with the EU treaties. **Michael Brown**, a Tory MP between 1979 and 1997, explained for BrexitCentral why he had been moved to join the new party. **Annunziata Rees-Mogg**, a two-time Tory candidate and sister of MP Jacob, explained for us why she too had quit the Tories in order to stand as an MEP candidate for the party:

“Having joined the Conservative Party in 1984, it was a wrench to leave but I could no longer support a party whose leader appeared hellbent on riding roughshod over the largest

democratic vote our nation had ever seen. I couldn't just not support it, I felt compelled to highlight that what it was doing, driven by Mrs May, was destroying it."

And it wasn't only the Tories who were losing supporters over their Brexit stance. Tom Bewick, a Labour member of 25 years' standing who had run the Vote Leave campaign in Brighton, set out why his party's dissembling and duplicitousness on Brexit had **driven him to quit**.

It was during the European election campaign that Theresa May seemed to suggest during a select committee grilling that her "no deal is better than a bad deal" mantra **only applied "in the abstract"**, while a BBC documentary on Brexit showed the **contempt in which the EU negotiators held us**. Indeed, Mark Francois argued that it should be **compulsory viewing** before voting in the European election.

Two days before the European election, May unveiled **yet another Brexit deal** in which she conceded that the Northern Irish backstop could not be removed. Moreover, she would "commit in law to let Parliament decide" whether to adopt "a temporary customs union on goods only" and would include in legislation a requirement for MPs to hold a vote on whether to hold a second referendum. Tory

MP **Anne-Marie Trevelyan** suggested that the new 'offer' looked beyond the pale, while **Andrea Leadsom's decision to resign** as Leader of the House Commons in protest came less than 12 hours before polling stations opened for the European election.

The **results were carnage** for the Conservative Party: nationwide they came fifth with less than 10% of the vote, retaining just four MEPs out of 73. The Brexit Party topped the poll, winning 29 MEPs on 31.6% of the vote, while Labour languished in third place behind the Lib Dems. Tory MP Owen Paterson wrote that **the reason for the defeat was obvious**:

“Despite being told it time and again, the UK did not leave the European Union on 29th March. As soon as the Prime Minister opted to extend Article 50 and so necessitate the UK's participation in these elections, the sense of betrayal – which had been long brewing – overflowed. When Mrs May compounded that sense by opening the door to a second referendum on Tuesday, it erupted. One by one, the 17.4 million people who voted to Leave the European Union had seen each and every promise which had been made to them since the referendum broken.”

Theresa May had in fact announced **her decision to quit as Tory**

leader and Prime Minister the morning after polling day and before a single vote had even been counted, which set in train a two-month leadership contest that dominated the news agenda throughout June and July 2019.

Seven of the ten contenders for the job set out their vision for delivering Brexit during the campaign here on BrexitCentral, namely **Mark Harper**, **Andrea Leadsom**, **Matt Hancock**, **Dominic Raab**, **Sajid Javid**, the runner-up **Jeremy Hunt** and the winner, **Boris Johnson**, who (unlike his predecessor) then proceeded to appoint **a Cabinet that believed in Brexit**. In his piece for BrexitCentral, Johnson wrote:

“Three years of hand-wringing, of a managerial outlook that saw Brexit as a problem to be mitigated rather than an opportunity, has left us humiliated... Not only were we the architects of our own incarceration – in the form of the Irish backstop – but we also laid down the one weapon that might have got us what we wanted. By never truly meaning the threat to walk away, our demands were never taken seriously... Politics has changed and many of my colleagues understand this. MPs on all sides have got to understand it is their responsibility to deliver Brexit as democrats first and foremost. It was right to ask the people whether we should stay in the EU or leave, and it is right for Parliament to enact that decision.”

Dogs in the manger need to wake up – our democracy is too fragile to be played around with. We voted to leave and leave we will.”

But the parliamentary arithmetic had still not changed and looked like remaining a problem for Johnson as he sought to deliver Brexit. The day after the new Prime Minister took office, Fawzi Ibrahim of Trade Unionists Against The EU had **another prophetic warning for Labour Remainers** set on continuing to block a Brexit deal:

“The most likely scenario following Parliament failing to support a deal is a snap general election – a Brexit general election. In one single manoeuvre, the Government would pull the rug from under both Labour and the Brexit Party. The latter, whose rallying cry is ‘implement Brexit’ would be muted as the Tories would have a plan to do just that. If Labour went for Remain, it would be virtually indistinguishable from the revived Liberal Democrats and haemorrhage votes in the very constituencies that Labour is supposed to win votes. And if Labour went for respecting the 2016 referendum result but promising to negotiate its own deal, it would be seen as pie in the sky, chasing rainbows – the promise of an imaginary deal when there is a real one on offer would have little appeal. The prospect of more delay, years of uncertainty and chaos is not a vote winner; Labour would be trounced.”

In his **first statement to the Commons as Prime Minister** in late July, Johnson stated that “if an agreement is to be reached it must be clearly understood that the way to the deal goes by way of the abolition of the backstop” – and that became his key aim for the autumn, despite the commentariat and cognoscenti all claiming that it was an impossibility.

But with the clock ticking down to Brexit on Hallowe'en, Hilary Benn was up to his old tricks again in early September, **publishing a Bill** – with the support of recently-departed Cabinet ministers Philip Hammond and David Gauke – to force the Government to seek yet another extension to the Article 50 period, until January 31st 2020, unless a Brexit deal was reached or Parliament approved a no-deal Brexit by mid-October. Again, Remainers relied on Speaker Bercow to get the Bill debated by securing an emergency debate and then amending a neutral motion to **seize control of the Commons agenda** and the 21 Tory MPs who backed the bid to seize the agenda promptly had the party whip withdrawn – including the aforementioned Hammond and Gauke, Ken Clarke and Dominic Grieve.

Johnson said that voting for such a Bill would “plainly chop the legs out from under the UK position and make any further negotiation absolutely impossible” and that there were **“no circumstances” in**

which he would ask Brussels to delay Brexit. He later nicknamed it the 'Surrender Bill' and said he would "rather be dead in a ditch" than go to Brussels and ask for an extension. But MPs voted for the Benn Bill all the same, giving it a Third Reading by 327 votes to 299, a majority of 28. After its passing, the Government proposed a motion for an early general election, but while 298 MPs backed it and only 56 opposed it, under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, it failed to get the backing of the requisite two-thirds of MPs (434 MPs) to pass.

Austin Mitchell sagely observed that the recalcitrant Remainers kept on proposing a Brexit delay because they couldn't agree on anything else and another eurosceptic former Labour MP, Bryan Gould, suggested that we had reached the position we were in because Remainers had collaborated with the EU to prevent an acceptable deal – and that they were doing incalculable damage to democracy with their ongoing sabotage of the referendum result. In turn, Tory MP Robert Courts took aim at the hypocritical Lib Dems for wanting to ignore the result of the Brexit referendum they had themselves demanded a decade ago.

After the Commons' September sitting, Parliament was prorogued, to return after the party conference recess, but following legal action by a group of Remainers, the prorogation was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court. This prompted Lord Lilley to express his sadness

that British courts were becoming as politically predictable as the European Court of Justice and **Patrick O'Flynn** to conclude that the pro-Remain establishment's efforts to block Brexit had reached new heights.

Speaking to the Commons on its resumption, Boris Johnson **declared**:

“I think the people of this country can see perfectly clearly what is going on. They know that this Parliament does not want to honour its promises to respect the referendum. The people at home know that this Parliament will keep delaying, it will keep sabotaging the negotiations because they don't want a deal. The truth is that members opposite are living in a fantasy world. They really imagine – this is what they want to do – that they are going to cancel the first referendum, they are going to legislate for a second referendum. And that Parliament will promise that this time, it really will respect that vote – and they think that the public will therefore vote to Remain and everyone will forget the last few years... The public don't want another referendum – what they want and what they demand, that we honour the promise we made to the voters to respect the first referendum.”

The Conservative Party Conference came and went, where the slogan ‘Get Brexit Done’ was unveiled and Johnson’s message to Brussels was that as far as he was concerned, it was a new deal or No Deal – and made **a new offer to the EU**. Following another (this time lawful) prorogation, the gridlocked and paralysed Parliament reassembled for a State Opening with a **Queen’s Speech** promising a legislative programme to “seize the opportunities” of Brexit – although it was unclear how long the session would last.

As the negotiations were reaching a conclusion in Brussels, former Tory MEP **Syed Kamall revealed for us the eight mistakes he saw the UK make** in the Brexit negotiations. And just a day later, news emerged from Brussels that **a new deal had been struck** between the UK and EU that involved replacing the backstop (that so many said would never be replaced). A number of our authors were swift to welcome the new deal, not least **Jacob Rees-Mogg** (now Leader of the House of Commons), **Shanker Singham**, **Simon Boyd** and **Kate Andrews**; and we **revealed** how Steve Baker had exhorted the European Research Group to back it as well.

On October 19th MPs then assembled for a rare Saturday sitting – the first since the Falklands War – to debate and vote on the new Brexit deal, but they proceeded to **vote by a majority of 16 for an Oliver Letwin amendment** to the Government’s motion so that MPs were unable to endorse the proposal in a Meaningful Vote, making

the emergency “Super Saturday” sitting tantamount to farce. With the deal not having been endorsed, under the terms of the Benn Act/Surrender Act, the Government was forced to send to Brussels the text of a letter seeking a further Article 50 extension (albeit not signed by the Prime Minister).

Tory MP Richard Drax – a parliamentary neighbour of Letwin – did not hold back in **his summation** of the latest developments:

“The treachery of many MPs in this disgraced Palace of Westminster is literally sick-making... I am ashamed of this determined effort to prevent our departure from the EU. And, make no mistake, Oliver Letwin’s continued efforts to prevent a no-deal departure are only a fig-leaf for his and others’ true intentions.”

The Government swiftly introduced its European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill to the Commons nonetheless and on 22nd October it secured a Second Reading by 329 votes to 299 – but the Government’s plans were immediately blown apart when **MPs proceeded to vote down the timetable motion** that would have ensured the Bill’s swift passage through Parliament. As a result the Government paused the legislation. A few days later the EU formally agreed a further Brexit extension until 31st January 2020 (which the

terms of the Benn Act gave Johnson no option but to accept). But with the threat of a no-deal Brexit at the end of October now ruled out, opposition parties then finally relented and backed an early general election to take place on 12th December.

The rest, as they say, is history – and very recent history at that. Following Boris Johnson’s pledge not to extend the transition period beyond the end of 2020 and to seek a trade deal with the EU with no political alignment, **Nigel Farage** opted not to have Brexit Party candidates contest the 317 seats which the Conservatives won in 2017. Labour fought the election on a platform of negotiating a new Brexit deal and then **holding a second referendum** within six months, while the Conservative refrain was to **“get Brexit done”**. It was a refrain that resonated around the country and in places which voted Leave in 2016 that had not returned Conservative MPs for some time, if ever. Gisela Stuart, the former Labour MP who chaired the Vote Leave campaign, **declared her support for the Tories**, as did **four Brexit Party MEPs**, Annunziata Rees-Mogg, John Longworth, Lucy Harris and Lance Forman.

As Conservative campaigner Andrew Kennedy predicted **here** in September 2019:

“The next election will not be fought on traditional party lines.

It will be fought on the battleground of 'us versus them', the people versus the establishment – an election between the national interest against their self-interest. And the people will win. Why? Because we will be fighting with our hearts and souls for our beliefs; they will be fighting simply to defend their privilege.”

In one of the most dramatic ever election nights, the Conservatives emerged victorious with a parliamentary majority of 80. Labour suffered their worst result since 1935. Unlike 2017, the 2019 contest really was the Brexit election: the Conservatives were promising to uphold the result of the 2016 referendum, whereas Labour, the Lib Dems, Greens and nationalist parties were all seeking either to block it or run it again (and with rules rigged to aid the Remain cause).

And what a difference an election made. In the first division of the new House of Commons on 20th December 2019, the latest incarnation of the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill was given a Second Reading **by a majority of 124**. Earlier in January 2020 it completed its passage through Parliament before the European Parliament also gave its seal of approval on 29th January 2020. And at 11pm on Friday 31st January 2020 the UK's membership of the European Union formally came to an end – 1,317 days after the referendum and 1,237 days after the launch of BrexitCentral. It took longer than we anticipated, but we got there in the end.