

Staying in the EU would not be perfect. But it's the best deal on offer



*Is it time for Parliament to compromise and vote through May's Brexit deal? **Dimitri Zenghelis (LSE)** argues that 'no deal' is not the only viable alternative to a deeply flawed deal. Yes, a second referendum would divide the country – but it is already divided. People are now in a better position to understand the choices on offer and many would like to be done with Brexit. Under May's deal, negotiations will drag on for years.*

As Parliament prepares to debate the agreement reached between Theresa May's government and the European Union, it has become fashionable among supporters of the deal to point out that it is impossible to satisfy everyone and that the time has come to set aside our differences and realise that compromises must be made in the national interest. Most people now agree that 'no deal' will be the worst outcome. Business abhors uncertainty and this agreement provides a workable process with some certainty with regards continuity of trade with our major business partners and a transition period to sort out future arrangements.



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Yet the withdrawal agreement is just that – a divorce agreement. Its focus is on the UK's exit from a political and economic union. It does not resolve the issue of the UK's future trading relationship with the EU. This is left for the transition period, a period over which the UK holds even fewer negotiating cards as it will have already left the Union. The option of a 'no deal' cliff edge will not have disappeared, it will have been merely sidestepped and pushed to the end of the transition (to hell with the backstop!). In the meantime the UK will abide by rules over which it will have little or no influence.

The negotiations over the eventual role of EU institutions and the returning of control of the UK's borders depend on this next stage of negotiations. Greatly curtailing the power of EU institutions – such as the Commission and the European Court of Justice – from imposing laws on the UK is inconsistent with the terms of the backstop agreement and the aspiration to retain frictionless trade in goods with the EU. To bridge this gap we can expect years of negotiations and horse-trading. Yet by leaving the EU, the UK's diminished influence on these institutions and their decisions is guaranteed.

So this deal is not optimal. But this is a divided country and, given the need for compromise, many argue that it is better than the alternatives. Yet if parliament fails to pass the current deal, 'no deal' is not the only alternative. In fact, one of the few things that unites a majority of parliamentarians is that a disorderly 'no deal' Brexit would be a disaster and must be prevented. Consequently, a suspension of the Article 50 process to allow time for a second referendum is becoming an increasingly likely outcome. What choices will be on the ballot remains to be determined, but the main choice should be between May's deal or remaining in the EU.

With a second referendum now back in contention as a mainstream option, it is worth assessing the risks.

Firstly, holding another vote on the subject of the UK's membership of the EU smacks of elite 'remoaners' unable to accept the results of the first referendum. It is, after all, widely acknowledged that the EU always asks people to vote again when they don't like the answer. What next? people cry, best of three? Yet this critique doesn't hold water. As a point of principle, if a referendum is held twice and yields the opposite result, this surely vindicates the decision to re-run the vote? It allows a full reflection of people's view in light of new information. And there has been a lot of new information over the last two years of tortuous negotiation leading us where we are now. After all, people don't have to change their vote the second time. A bunch of the most recent polls suggest that over 60 per cent of people across the UK now [favour](#) a 'final say' vote on the Brexit deal. The point is best summed up by former Brexit secretary and Leave proponent David Davis, who pointed out that "if a democracy cannot change its mind, it ceases to be a democracy".

The second argument against a new vote is that if Remain win by anything other than a landslide, it will leave a deeply divided nation prone to civil strife. Certainly, there will be some immensely upset and incensed people who will feel that their vote has been ignored and their prize snatched away. A narrow victory for Remain will not provide a clear signal of the people's will. But UK society is already divided. And many, even most, people are not frothing at the mouth Eurosceptics. A year ago, talk of another vote was strictly taboo. Now it is back on the table. Most want to get this out of the way and return politics to where it should be – focusing on housing, health, security, jobs and education. May's talk of "getting on with the job" holds much appeal. But under her deal, 'the job' would have years to run as the real negotiations begin in earnest dominating the political agenda for half a decade or more. Instead of civil war, is it not equally possible that there will be a palpable sigh of relief as politics is no longer single tracked by one topic? Might it not just lead to a return to what we had before?

Resurgent support for UKIP and a split but functional Tory party may be far from ideal, but it would arguably be better for the British body politic than the status quo. The assumption that a Brexit reversal will wound national pride and result in insurgency and civil war may fit the anxieties of today, but it might seem rather quaint and old fashioned in two years' time when people look back in relief and bemusement at the last three years.

Of course, Remain may not win a second referendum. People may vote Leave. Even if a second vote does not deliver an even more decisive victory for the leave campaign, as Nigel Farage recently argued, it would still provide a clearer signal than the last one. With two years of hard evidence to consider, it would be very hard now to argue now that people were misled by lies on the side of a bus, protesting against David Cameron's austerity, or ignorant of how complex leaving would be. No longer will it be possible to trot out the hackneyed assertion that "nobody voted to be poorer". A second vote would provide something far closer to a mandate than the first vote, which was so obviously flawed (abstracting from issues of electoral fraud, few people with a life in 2016 knew the difference between a customs union and the single market, nor had any desire to – the same cannot be said today). If people vote Leave again, then Parliament can then pull together to try and make Brexit a success, or limit its failure, as people see fit. That is not possible currently.

Staying in the EU after all the tears, sweat and division of the last few years will be far from perfect. But perfect is not on the menu. The question is whether staying in the EU is better or worse than the alternatives? The last two years provide a backdrop against which to answer this. Change requires leadership. But when it came to steering us through Brexit, leadership was in short supply. Those championing Brexit, including the Prime Minister and those in power, were never honest about where the negotiations would lead. If they had, the current much-derided deal would come as no surprise. Regardless of the 2016 referendum result, nobody voted for this deal. Perhaps it is time they got a chance?

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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