

So MPs have backed the Article 50 bill – what happens now?

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*On 1 February, MPs voted to allow Theresa May to trigger Article 50 and begin the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. **Andrew Crines** states that the vote has strengthened the government's position, but with the EU likely to drive an extremely hard bargain, the arguments from the referendum will now have to be put aside if the UK is to secure a favourable deal.*



Less than 12 hours after the vote to trigger Article 50, John McDonnell was on Radio 4 arguing that the 'real fight starts now'. McDonnell confidently believes that Labour will have a significant say on how the negotiations are conducted and influence over the process through the Commons. At present there is little to suggest he is correct, however it is likely to rally the Corbynites who will (ultimately) blame the moderates for the lack of success. For McDonnell, this is a win/win situation as the grip over the party gets stronger.

In political terms, the problem is that Labour's fight has already been lost. Given the concessions made by Corbyn to May and the Conservatives, there is no single market access to fight over, no solidarity with EU social democrats, and no prospect of what some call a 'soft Brexit'. By conceding so much ground (possibly all of it) to the Tories, May now has a free hand to conduct the negotiations as she sees fit, with little or no prospect of Labour affecting how they will play out. Put simply, Labour has left the battlefield without firing a shot, and now the Tories are claiming complete victory.

However, this victory may be premature because there is always the Liberal Democrats who will – they argue – continue fighting for a strong relationship between the UK and the EU. This position is likely designed to appeal strongly to the 48% of voters who supported Remain, however it must be remembered that 22% of Liberal Democrat MPs (2, to be precise) voted against Farron's position and backed the triggering of Article 50. Whilst this is the minority, it does indicate that the Liberals are not a cohesive group of pro-EU MPs, rather they are as divided in percentage terms as the Labour Party. As a broader electoral strategy, however, it makes sense for the Liberals to appeal to the 48%, even if they secure even a fraction. This could pay dividends at the ballot box.



This leaves us with the SNP. As the third largest party, they have substantial impact in the Commons, however given they have their own agenda it is hard to see them pushing for and succeeding in achieving a softer Brexit for the UK. Put simply, the SNP exist to safeguard what they see as the interests of the Scottish people, which they undoubtedly now see as an independent Scotland within the EU. This potentially puts the rUK into a difficult position (should they secure independence), however current polling data suggests this is unlikely in the immediate term. This may change, however, when the impact of Brexit begins to be felt in the run up to departure.

Thus, the Conservatives appear to be in a strong position to take the UK out of the EU. With the exception of Ken Clarke and Anna Soubry, the Party seems to be united behind their leader as she begins the process of UK departure from the EU. Brexiteers and Remainers are now united for the best interests of the Conservative Party. At some point someone may have to think of the country, otherwise the threat from UKIP will never go away. In that sense, Cameron's referendum gamble failed twice.

But whilst we have been consumed by our own process, we must also recognise that there are two players in this negotiation. The EU has its own interests to safeguard, especially in a world that has a resurgent Kremlin and belligerent Donald Trump as President. These factors will likely make the EU more defensive than may have been the case in a more stable world. Put simply, it has its own message to send – that of stability and continuing in the face of a world where one of its members has turned its back on it.

This will likely make the EU a hard negotiator, and one which the UK negotiation team will need to be ready to face. It is important they are prepared because it is very likely the EU will be, and to consume our own propaganda too much will leave us in a very weak negotiation position. Put simply, the arguments of the referendum need to be put aside if a good deal is to be reached. The lesson for May, therefore, is not to assume UK exceptionalism will carry the day, or we may well face running over a cliff faster than expected.

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