

Written by

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There is an old joke about someone asking an Irishman the way to somewhere and receiving the reply: “Well, I wouldn't be starting from here.”

In these ultra-politically correct, humour-crushing times, I am not even sure I am allowed to allude to such a thing. But carrying the name Patrick O'Flynn, I figure I can get away with, it even if you can't.

The point is, that's where we find ourselves with Brexit, isn't it? Had Brexiteers been determining government policy these past two years, the alpha and omega would have been that the British people had decided to leave the European Union and take back control of their laws, borders and money.

All policy positions would have been contained within that democratic envelope. There would have been no question of allowing the preferences of some captains of multinational corporations, well-aired and rejected in the referendum campaign itself, to keep any part of the UK tied into elements of the Customs Union or single market or under the *de facto* jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The 12% tail of UK sales to the EU would not have been wagging the 88% dog of domestic economic activity and exports to other jurisdictions.

The approach to Brexit would have been challenging but clear.

The Prime Minister would have written to the EU acknowledging the referendum result was bound to cause upset in Brussels and therefore all UK effort over the ensuing couple of years would go towards preparing our country to trade on WTO rules and lining up trade deals with major non-EU economies. The letter would have had a rider that should the EU wish to talk about continuing free trade and even – perhaps – an *ex gratia* departure payment from the UK then the door would always be open.

As the months went by, the UK position would have grown stronger with evidence of new customs facilities** coming on tap, a huge trade deal with the US being on the brink, plans for major tax cuts funded by disappearing EU financial obligations and potential extra tariff revenues and a popular buy British campaign in the event of Brussels seeking to punish the people for their decision. The EU would have known the UK was not bluffing, because the UK would explicitly have committed to a course dictated by democracy.

The EU would have faced the prospect of the Irish Republic's economy being decimated by a no-deal Brexit and German manufacturing industry taking a significant hit to its sales to "Treasure Island". It would also, of course, have by now been in a state of panic about a £10 billion annual black hole in its finances.

Instead, the Conservative Party as a corporate entity decided to put the Government into the hands of two Remainers – Theresa May and Philip Hammond – one of whom did a rather better job of pretending to be a convert to Brexit than did the other.

No significant preparations were made for "no deal", indeed scare stories about leaving on WTO terms were spun up from within the Treasury itself. And the Prime Minister engaged in a Big Lie. In public she posed as being committed to a full Brexit

on Vote Leave campaign terms – with red lines proscribing membership of the Single Market and the Customs Union, free movement obligations, ECJ jurisdiction, the strictures of the CFP and the like.

But in secret – *in secret* – that Prime Minister had a senior civil servant create the Chequers plan behind the backs of the Brexiteers who had nominal responsibility for policy at the Department for Exiting the EU.

Brussels soon got the message that it was not dealing with a premier committed to enacting the democratic wishes of the British people, but someone fearful and incremental in her approach and with a Chancellor determined to subvert Brexit to the greatest possible extent. So it did what it always does when presented with weakness – it brought out the thumbscrews.

The PM herself instructed her DExEU ministers to agree to the EU's preferred phrasing of talks and surrendered to it on the key issues of financial settlement and the ludicrous and perilous Irish backstop before even a word was uttered about trading arrangements for the future.

And now further surrenders are afoot. As Boris Johnson noted in a series of **tweets** on Wednesday evening, the Government is proposing that the UK become, in effect, a permanent colony of the EU – trapped in a customs union it can only get out of should the EU decide to grant it permission to and forced to abide by EU regulations indefinitely.

This all may one day be taught to business students as a case study in how not to secure a deal with an opponent. But there is a far bigger issue than that, the issue of erosion of political trust and the ensuing consequences. For to be blunt, there is a big core of Tory parliamentarians who could live with having achieved a very poor Brexit outcome were the effect to be the

continuation of their party in office.

And any Conservative seeking comfort on those grounds will not have far to look. While it is true that in the immediate aftermath of Chequers the average Tory poll rating dipped about three points (with UKIP ticking up by two), that effect has largely worn off and the Conservatives are at worst still level-pegging with Labour.

The argument being pushed around the Commons Tea Room goes as follows: “Let’s just get a deal over the line and then move on as soon as we can with a new leader and a new agenda that can take useless Corbyn apart. In the end anyone with any money or property will have no option but to vote for us so let’s hold our nerve.”

Anyone who believes this is, I suggest, kidding him or herself. Because the trajectory of Theresa May’s policy is heading towards an epic betrayal of the British public and of Britain itself.

As Michael Portillo recently put it, there has been a conspiracy against Brexit. It is in my view almost certain to lead to an epic punishment of the Conservative Party. If May and Hammond get their way, the Tories will have shown themselves to be utterly in the pocket of the corporate business sector and thus entirely useless in the face of the powerful vested interests that seek to obstruct necessary reforms to matters as fundamental as housing and immigration policy.

And while Jeremy Corbyn is certainly an extremist, he has some very smart people around him and they have smartened up his act considerably. He now talks of his approach being moderate and mainstream and in tune with the times and has retail policy offers that are at least superficially attractive to millions.

Many of us in the bubble find his Shadow Chancellor John

McDonnell a sinister character. But do not think McDonnell comes across that way to most voters. Like Corbyn, he has made enormous strides as a communicator over the past couple of years and has always been a superior strategist. They are much better now than they were when they took 20 points off May and Hammond in the general election of last year – the one where the Prime Minister’s tin ear for public opinion was exposed by the disastrous dementia tax.

Between them these guys will surely have the beating of a Tory Party that is under May looking ever more like an undertaking that puts sustaining perks and privilege above something as fundamental as the wishes of a free people to be self-governing.

I may have mentioned on this site*** before doing public meetings in my job as an MEP in coastal towns such as Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft and knowing that the mere mention of the name Edward Heath will elicit a chorus of boos and hisses in recognition of a betrayal of the fishing industry that took place almost half a century ago.

Theresa May is on course to betray something a lot bigger than a single industry, even one with the emotive power of the fishing fleet. She is betraying the British public as a whole and is doing so after engaging in extended deceit and subterfuge. This is an experiment in infamy. And as it enters popular mythology it will become even worse in the retelling.

The Tories have long had a reputation for being able to whistle up a smart marketing guy to reset the way they sell their political offer to great advantage. If policy on Brexit continues on the current path they are going to need a genius next time just to avoid a re-run of the massacre of 1997.

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