

OPINION

NIGHT OF THE LONG SPOONS

The eurosceptic fever dream is becoming reality. A dishonest election under a broken electoral system has obscured the fact that the country is as divided as ever, and produced a crushing Tory majority of a scale not seen since the Thatcher era. Rarely has the case for proportional representation been more starkly made. The Conservatives increased their vote share by 1.2 percent, and gained 47 seats: the LibDems went up by 4.2 percent, only to end up with one seat fewer than they started with.

In an ironic reversal of the 2016 referendum result, under 48 percent voted for pro-leave parties, while over 52 percent voted for parties supporting either a second referendum or outright remain. Yet a mendacious and now virtually unassailable Prime Minister claims a “powerful people’s mandate” for Brexit, and the UK is on course to formally leave the EU on January 31. Dark times are ahead. Little will change in practice during the transition period, currently scheduled to run until the end of 2020. But even then, Brexit will be a long way from ‘done’.

People on both sides of the divide had strong emotions about Britain’s membership of the EU which were never really about trade. They cared about history, sovereignty, internationalism, solidarity, and other deeply felt matters of politics and principle. But for 45 years politicians and the British media discussed the issue only in cynically transactional terms. What kind of *deal* is the UK getting from the EU, and could it get a better one? This myopic misrepresentation led inexorably to the Brexit vote, and then on to bitter arguments over the withdrawal deal. What should the terms be? What about the ‘divorce bill’? Would ‘no deal’ be the best deal?

This year will be dominated by another round of arguments about deals and potential ‘no deal’ scenarios. What economic relationship can the newly ‘independent’ UK negotiate with the EU – and what buccaneering trade deals can it strike with other countries, once free of all that pesky European regulation? In both cases, rude awakenings are surely in the offing.

What’s the Deal?

One person often said to take a transactional view of politics is Donald Trump. Apart from over-dignifying the corrupt reality, this seems basically accurate. Trump sees his special gift as bringing to politics the ruthless ‘dealmaking’ skills he claims to have learnt as a property developer. (Being impeached for doing precisely this seems unlikely to stop him.) After the Tory victory, he swiftly tweeted in his inimitable style:

“Britain and the United States will now be free to strike a massive new Trade Deal after BREXIT. This deal has the potential to be far bigger and more lucrative than any deal that could be made with the EU. Celebrate Boris!”

So what kind of massive deal does the president have in mind? The UK can’t officially start trade negotiations with the US before leaving the EU, but informal talks have been ongoing for at least two years. Leaked documents from these talks make



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very clear that the US is pushing the UK to leave the EU as far behind as possible, not just leaving the Customs Union and Single Market, but also maximising the scope for divergence from EU standards in all areas. This is why hard Brexiteers with murky US connections have always preferred ‘no deal’.

This is normal practice for US trade negotiators, who have a long history (not least in South America) of pressuring countries to abandon regional solidarities and negotiate bilateral trade deals directly with the US. Such deals always result in terms highly advantageous to the larger and stronger party.

Now Eat This

British markets are lucrative, but relatively small. US industries see Brexit as a Trojan horse which may allow them to crack open much larger EU markets. Their strategy is to push the UK wherever possible to align new national standards with the US rather than the EU. Much concern rightly centres on the NHS, but food and agriculture will also be a major focus.

In the agri-food sector this includes the infamous practice of chlorine-washing chicken, but the US National Pork Producers Council also sees a trade deal with the UK as a “historic opportunity” for American pork to evade EU restrictions on feed additives and antibiotics.¹ The US Grains Council want it to provide a way round EU pesticide restrictions. US negotiators want approval and labelling regimes for GM foods relaxed. They also insist that any trade deal should make no mention of climate change.² The pressure to lower both standards and tariffs will be relentless, and there are few signs that a Johnson government will even try to resist such pressure.

The US is already using its negotiations with the UK to conduct a proxy trade war with the EU. China will inevitably do the same, as will ‘smaller’ players such as Brazil and Australia, both of whom want to export more food into the EU than current standards and agreements allow. Long spoons will definitely be required at this diabolical banquet.

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1. *U.S. Lobbyists Prepare to Seize “Historic Opportunity”* L. Fang 2019 (The Intercept) <https://tinyurl.com/intercept-deal>

2. *Ten things food and farming people need to know about the leaked US/UK trade papers* O. Delargy 2019 (Sustain) <https://tinyurl.com/sustain-deal>