

MPs not opinion polls will decide whether there will be a second referendum on Brexit



By Richard Rose on 11 September 2018

Theresa May's Chequers proposal for withdrawal from the European Union has united pro-Brexit MPs and supporters of the EU. Both groups dismiss the Prime Minister's position as undesirable and unachievable. However, they disagree about what should be decided and who should have the last word.

After a majority of MPs voted to remain in the European Union in June, 2016 they initially resigned themselves to accept that a referendum majority EU had a superior legitimacy to that of Parliament. With both the Conservative and Labour whips endorsing withdrawal, in February 2017 the Commons approved withdrawal by a vote of 494 to 122.

With each passing month, the challenges of undoing EU membership has become greater and the inadequacy of the government's preparations for withdrawal have become evident. Moreover, the time is running out to do anything about the disruptions that are very likely to follow the United Kingdom departing abruptly in seven months time.

Pro-Remain groups are now actively seeking a second referendum in hopes that at least two percent of voters will have second thoughts to reverse their position views and produce a 51.9 percent vote to stay in rather than leave the European Union. If this were to happen, Remainers could get what they want without ratting on their acceptance of the sovereignty of the people.

The strategy to stop Brexit is relying on the results of public opinion polls to put pressure on MPs to approve a second referendum on EU membership. Last month a multi-millionaire advocate of remaining in the EU, Julian Dunkerton, gave £1million to People's Vote, organised by a cross-party group of MPs and peers chaired by Chuka Umunnato. It is being spent on a series of YouGov polls measuring public opinion about how to resolve the confusion about withdrawing from the EU.

The People's Vote strategy puts first things first: its polls concentrate on showing how much support there is for holding a second referendum once the terms of Brexit known as the result of negotiations between Downing Street and the European Union this autumn. This tactic avoids making explicit the desire of its backers, that Britain should remain in the EU and uncertainty about the result of a vote-again ballot. The only certainty is the ghoulish calculation that as more older people voted to leave, their death rate could reduce the Brexit majority to about a million votes. The Remainers are hopeful that the steady release of official information about the prospective costs of Brexit will push enough additional leave voters to switch sides in a repeat referendum.

To build up political pressure for a second referendum, the YouGov samples are large enough to estimate the views of politically strategic groups. Its latest release showed that a two-to-one majority of union members now favour a second referendum on Brexit and a significant majority would now like the UK to stay in the EU. Additional survey results will be released before the late September Labour Party conference in order to put pressure on Labour to support a think again referendum.

There is precedent for holding two referendums on a single EU issue. After EU measures were rejected by referendum majorities, both Danish and Irish governments called a second referendums to produce the “correct” vote, and they succeeded in achieving their goal.

While the British Parliament lacks the sovereign power to impose withdrawal terms on Brussels, it retains the power to decide whether or not a second referendum should be called. This could only happen if a majority of MPs would approve the terms of a second ballot.

The assumption of the People’s Vote strategy is that opinion poll evidence, re-enforced by lobbying at Westminster, would produce a parliamentary majority for another ballot. For a starter, this would require unanimity among more than 257-odd Labour MPs, including its eurosceptic leader and its divided backbenchers. If this were to happen and the SNP and Liberal Democrats unanimously voted for a second ballot, the group would still be short of an absolute parliamentary majority of 326 votes.

The only chance of getting a Commons majority for a second referendum is if enough Conservative MPs would vote for it to replace Labour defectors from a second-ballot vote. At present, the great majority of Tory MPs would not accept a re-run of the 2016 referendum question—Leave or Remain—as this would risk the possible reversal of withdrawal. They are split about how withdrawal should occur.

Conservative MPs could unite in endorsing a second-referendum ballot that offered a choice between leaving the EU with no deal or leaving it on whatever terms Theresa May brings back from Brussels in autumn. Whichever way a referendum majority voted, Brexiters would have achieved their goal of ending Britain’s EU membership.

If the People’s Vote group were to achieve a second referendum, this would be a pyrrhic victory. Instead of campaigning to stay in the EU it would have to choose between endorsing a hard or a harder form of Brexit. Whichever way the vote went, there would remain the need for a more realistic strategy for Britain’s place in the world after Brexit than either the Conservative government or the Labour opposition is currently offering.

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