

Brexit Bill Passing Heralds Game of Winner Takes All

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It was perhaps fitting that five days before Christmas, in the final parliamentary sitting of the decade, the House of Commons, flaunting a newly minted Conservative majority, saw fit to declare war on the country it professed to love. By a margin of 358 votes to 234, MPs approved the new Withdrawal Agreement Bill at its second reading. In a subsequent vote, they approved a timetable of just three days for its parliamentary passage in the new year.

There is no surprise that parliament has enjoined a political, social and economic campaign against the people. The people – or rather, the less than 48% who voted for outwardly Brexit-supporting parties last week – have voted for that, and will now get it good and hard. But it does not make it any less regrettable or easier to accept.

The debate passed predictably. Boris Johnson and his gormless sidekick Steve Barclay trotted out the usual mind-rotting boilerplate about “moving on from divisions” and “getting Brexit done”, throwing in the grotesquely offensive and ahistorical reference to the “United Kingdom’s independence”. Naturally the prime minister couldn’t resist a lie about his ‘oven-ready’ deal, quipping that “we can have it done by lunch”. The problem with this ‘lunch’ is that we have less than eleven months to prepare the most eye-wateringly complex banquet in our nation’s history and have just spent four years tearing ourselves apart over the green salad hors d’oeuvre. Johnson either doesn’t know or doesn’t care how complex and divisive this process will be, and the worst part is it doesn’t even matter.

Members of the opposition gamely attempted to inject some reality and compassion into the proceedings. Lisa Nandy begged Johnson to show ‘decency’ on unaccompanied child refugees, who may not be allowed into the country under the amended bill. Jeremy Corbyn (who has masochistically opted to remain as interim leader for this gruesome period) echoed that sentiment and noted, pointlessly, the impending need for checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Hilary Benn pointed out the lack of even the most basic economic assessment about the misadventure parliament was sanctioning. Keir Starmer emphasised that the loss of the general election did not make a bad deal good. But it changed nothing.

In the end, six Labour MPs voted for the motion – some of the usual suspects from the last parliament, plus Easington’s Grahame Morris and Chesterfield’s Toby Perkins – but it scarcely mattered. The time to defeat this bill was during the election campaign, and during that campaign Labour barely mentioned it. Needless to say, there were no Tory rebels.

We are quickly learning the key lesson of Brexit: it is a game of winner takes all. We will now find out what happens when the Brexiters face no restraint. The withdrawal agreement bill

has been hardened in key ways since October, when Johnson faced a hostile parliament.

First, commitments to workers' rights have been removed. Downing Street claims that it will address them separately, but cannot explain why it was necessary to instil doubt at such an early stage. The people of Blyth Valley and North West Durham were not voting to reduce their labour rights or destroy their jobs, but it is characteristic of the government's arrogance that it doesn't care how much those people could now worry.

Second, judges in the lower courts will find it easier to challenge EU rulings. That could create significantly more conflict with Brussels in the years ahead.

Third, and most significantly, MPs have effectively had their rights taken from them. They will now have no right to force a request to extend the transition period after December 2020, and will not be able to approve the negotiating mandate. The government will not even commit to preserving the negotiating aims of the political declaration. We are exiting the transition period in December, ready or not, and that is that.

Let us be quite clear. This really is taking back control: but for one man only. The new bill affords Johnson almost unlimited power to do whatever he pleases, unchecked by even the most basic parliamentary scrutiny. It is a hard-right manifesto of cruelty, as exemplified by the removal of provisions for childhood refugees. And it opens up the road for a catastrophic cliff-edge at the end of the process, with absolutely nothing anyone else can do to stop it. By contrast Theresa May's old deal looks like something that could have been drafted by the European Movement.

The government couldn't even resist trolling. This withdrawal agreement, the most significant and far-reaching legislation in our recent history, will be granted just three days of scrutiny in January – less time than was allocated to the Wild Animals in Circuses Act. It is commensurate with the style and pace of this new government. Just one week after the election, the Tories are moving at breakneck speed to confuse, overwhelm, and subdue their opponents. The aim is to stop us interrogating the most destructive piece of legislation in this country's recent history at the moment we are most liable to roll over. The worst aspect is that even now, there is no evidence that this is the will of the British people. Over 52% of voters last week backed parties supporting a referendum or Remain. Nobody will ever know if the people wanted Brexit, and nobody will now bother to ask.

And yet nothing will change the essential truth. Today was not the end of Brexit, but its poisonous beginning. The trade-offs we have warned about for the last four years will now have to be made. For the first time, we replace speculation with reality: 'Project Fear' is no longer something we argue about but experience. Boris Johnson may think himself omnipotent but he has no power over the EU and cannot avoid disaster just by declaring it will not come. Either we mitigate some (not all) of the damage by remaining closely aligned to the EU's instruments, or we erect concrete barriers with our closest trading partners in the hope of breaking other ones down with more minor allies further away. This is our inescapable choice and no amount of rhetoric will make it disappear. Britain will have to decide if it prefers to hammer itself economically or democratically.

There is now no more hiding for Boris Johnson. Armed with the majority of his dreams, he will have no more Remainers or doomsters or gloomsters to blame for the carnage he will now likely unleash. Everything that will shortly come to pass, he will own.

During the election campaign, the Conservatives openly paraded their ambition to govern as hard-right nationalists prepared to over-ride democratic norms and drive the economy into the wall. One week after the election, they are simply confirming it. Today MPs drilled the first real wounds into our country's economy and social contract. The scars will take generations to heal, and may never.

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