United Kingdom 2019 – the election that wasn't supposed to be

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On 23 June 2016, the voters of the United Kingdom narrowly decided that the country should leave the European Union. In due course, the then still new Prime Minister, Theresa May, formally notified the EU of the UK's intention to leave under the procedure set out in Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union – thereby triggering a process destined for completion on 29 March 2019, nearly two months before the next scheduled European parliamentary elections. There was, accordingly, none of the usual long-term preparation for these elections, for the UK was not expected to send MEPs to Brussels and Strasbourg any longer.

That isn't how things worked out. The process of negotiating the terms of Brexit with the EU proved tortuous – though not as daunting as the task of actually getting that deal approved by Parliament. Since 2016 Brexit has emerged that the single most salient issue in British politics, subsuming all other concerns. What is more, it does not fit neatly into the boxes of major party politics, dividing MPs, members and supporters in both the Labour and (especially) Conservative parties. So vexed is the issue, that the Prime Minister was resoundingly defeated three times on her proposed deal in the House of Commons, and always by large margins. When it became evident that the necessary legislation could not pass the British Parliament, the EU finally offered an extension of the Article 50 process with a new deadline for ratification of 31 October 2019. This meant that the UK was obliged to take part in the EP elections after all, with voting taking place on 23 May.

Ultimately, Theresa May paid the price for making several major strategic errors. First, she called a general election for June 2017, even though she already had a working majority in the House of Commons. She lost this majority at that election, making the passage of the controversial Brexit legislation much more difficult to achieve. More than this, perhaps, she lost credibility in the eyes of many of her own MPs and party members after having run a campaign widely regarded as poor. Second, she set out 'red lines' on Brexit that few if any had initially expected, especially from a 'Remainer' politician: the UK would not only leave the EU's political structures, but also its Single Market and Customs Union. This had two effects: first, it polarized the party, and public opinion more widely, between Hard Brexiteers (who shared this vision, but then cried 'betrayal' at any sign of compromise on the Prime Minister's part) and Remainers, who felt ignored. Second, it created the seemingly intractable problem of what to do about the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; with one inside, and one outside the Single Market/Customs Union, how could border controls be avoided and trade not disrupted? Having invoked Article 50 without first ascertaining the support of Parliament, her authority in party, Parliament, government and country ebbed away, as she suffered humiliation after humiliation in the Commons; her MPs and Cabinet colleagues openly disagreed with her and each other – some resigned from governmental posts, while others even defected from the party.

The Opposition's position was scarcely much better; while leftist leader Jeremy Corbyn remained generally popular with his grassroots members (less so with his parliamentary colleagues), he dismayed many of them on the issue of Brexit. Polls revealed that nearly 90% of the party's members wished the UK to remain in the EU, but he proved reluctant to embrace such a clearcut position, perhaps because of his long personal history of euroscepticism,

perhaps because of his fear of losing the support of Brexit-supporting voters in traditional working-class heartlands.

Lack of Labour clarity and internecine Tory paralysis blended with the unexpected opportunity of a European poll to create a perfect electoral storm for the major parties. Smaller parties with clearer and more unified positions on Brexit were the beneficiaries. Chief among them was former UKIP leader Nigel Farage's newly formed Brexit party. Farage had turned his back UKIP under its new leader (Gerald Batten) for lurching too far to the right and its willingness to adopt some extremely controversial characters as candidates. The Brexit Party had no members and no policies – except one: a demand that the UK should leave the EU on 29 October without an EU deal, and engage with the world on World Trade Organisation terms. In a few short weeks, Farage's strident populism worked wonders as the polls indicated voters flocking to his banner (mainly ex-Tory supporters). At the opposite pole of the Brexit spectrum, those parties with clear pro-Remain messages prospered, albeit less spectacularly, largely at the expense of Labour. When the votes were eventually counted, the Brexit Party topped the poll with 32% of the vote and 29 seats, while the Liberal Democrats (and their 'Bollocks to Brexit!' slogan) came second with 20% and 16 seats; Labour trailed behind in third place (14%/10 seats), the Greens fourth (12%/7 seats), the Conservatives only fifth (9%/4 seats), and the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales gaining 4.6% and 4 seats between them.