

## Stuart's political diary

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A number of interesting articles and responses have emerged with regard to the psychological implications of Brexit (the UK's referendum vote of July 2016 to leave the European Union), and the political interpersonal chaos one might perceive as a result. In the meantime, 'family' relations among our clients sometimes mirror the strife within that vote, and within party politics. As we live within the political sphere, so we exist within the conflict discussed below, whatever our feelings, and whether participant, therapist or client.

The old expression of a week being a long time in politics seems to have taken on a life of its own this autumn. It was in truth a few weeks ago that I sat down to compile the last in this diary series. At the time, Britain's Labour Party was in all-out civil war, and the Conservative Party was ploughing on in the post-Brexit shock, appearing at least to have united itself behind new Prime Minister Theresa May. Indeed, through-out media and satirical comedy alike, May was being likened to the former Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher, not least because of the idea that she represented a powerful unifying leader at a vital time, leading the Conservatives ('Tories') back to 'singing from the same hymn sheet' once again.

Now, however, at the end of September as I write, the new Messiah May has instead become the focus of both inferred and direct attack from her own side. Perhaps predictably, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson began the new attempt to bleed the Tory patient back to health. Launching his new 'Change Britain Campaign', Mr Johnson claimed his new pressure group, led by Mr Johnson's former 'Vote Leave' colleague, Labour MP Gisela Stuart, and containing several other Brexit figures, would ensure that the government would 'deliver the UK's referendum result in the most effective way' (Johnson, 2016). This has been followed by Mr Johnson and other Brexit hard-liners demanding a 'Hard Brexit', by which they essentially mean crashing out of all European Union (EU) deals in the fastest possible time, while by contrast the government refused to be drawn on either a timetable or a running commentary on how Brexit might, or might not, be going.

Days later, former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne made a play for continued relevance by co-launching a partnership aimed at galvanizing his old 'Northern Powerhouse' idea. The new partnership was trumpeted by Manchester City Council (2016) as a source of new impetus for the project, while Osborne himself claimed that the new Prime Minister Theresa May had 'had a wobble' over

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the scheme, insinuating that he was somehow being dutiful to the people of the 'North' by holding the government to account and pursuing the idea. Such positioning by private-schooled and son of titled parents 'Mr' Osborne as a man of the people 'in the North' is certainly interesting, if somewhat dissonant. In both cases, however, Johnson and Osborne have reappeared after their apparent Brexit executions, to rise again and now begin troubling Theresa May with a variety of quotations, speeches and remarks. Perhaps 'Old Boy Network' conservatism was indeed only resting and pining for the fjords?

Meanwhile, the Labour Party has voted and decided (again) who they want as their leader. Despite 265,824 members being denied a vote (official figures presented at the results conference and reproduced in the public forum online by Blogger 'Skwawkbox' (2016), who attended), incumbent leader Jeremy Corbyn won in emphatic form across all of the groups permitted to vote. Despite doom-mongers in the 'New Labour' mould claiming that only Marxist infiltrators supported Corbyn, who 'could never win a general election', the figures show conclusive support all round. Some 56% of full members, 70% of registered supporters and 60% of affiliate supporters supported Corybn, according to the official results.

Following the decisive victory, the Shadow Chancellor John McDonald made a passionate speech to the conference laying out fundamental planks of Labour economic policy, and offering a range of policy measures, all with an emphasis on remembering how the government needs to 'raise money, not just spend it'. Key themes included a new involvement of workers' cooperatives and initiatives in the success of industry, removing recent legislative restrictions on trade unions, looking to raise more tax on the back of capital rather than earnings, and aspiring to raise the minimum wage to a true living wage while studying results as they emerge of universal income schemes. This looked very much like a political party rebounding, having put to rest the ghost of rebellion through a painful but democratic process, in contrast to the now emerging Machiavellian 'little princes' making noises within Theresa May's unelected and unopposed rise to premiership. Some things, it seems, really were too easy and might now fall apart as a result of democracy being avoided in favour of a 'shoe-in' short cut.

As for how other leaders and powers now see the two main political powers in Westminster, the Liberal Democrats listened politely to a passionate speech from their new leader Tim Fallon, which although enthusiastic to a fault could not help but seem an exercise in wishful thinking and delusion. Grand claims about becoming the new official opposition, which is impossible since they do not have the numbers in the House of Commons, and of 'holding the government to account' when they hardly have the democratic mandate to make that much noise, just seemed like desperate propaganda for the members, at least to this observer.

Next comes the Scottish National Party (SNP) conference, and the expected formula is the nationalists building on the existing message of 'New Labour' being 'Tory-lite', and Corbyn being unelectable in England. Several major policy and consultation initiatives have been launched, such as the nationwide consultation into the design of devolved benefits, and the setting up of a new Scottish benefits agency with respect and compassion at its heart. As well as hopefully providing positive change for claimants in Scotland, this initiative is very careful to remind the people of Scotland that Westminster is to blame for austerity, bedroom tax and sanctions, not the Scottish government. This sits nicely alongside a nationwide conversation to discuss why the

SNP lost the independence referendum, and what people want from independence in the event of round two. Consultations like these serve several purposes: they remind the people of Scotland ‘who is to blame’, they encourage politically useful feedback, and they aim to increase the mandate the Scottish government has for negotiations over a range of topics with Westminster post devolution max, and post Brexit.

Our cousins in Northern Ireland, meanwhile, have launched a legal challenge to Brexit, also previously threatened by the Scottish government, over the legality of Brexit without legislation in the various governments in the UK. It seems likely, if not certain, that a messy legal argument will ensue as to where the power to make Brexit decisions lies constitutionally, and perhaps this is part of the reason for the UK government hesitating to initiate Article 50 and begin the legal wrangling. Tackling legal negotiations in Europe, while looking to negotiate international trade deals with what is reported to be a very small team of negotiators, while also fighting legal action at home, looks to be a very hard position from which to win re-election. Meanwhile, different European governments have been keen to provide ministers and representatives stating in a variety of ways that the UK can never ‘have its cake and eat it’, or in this case have free trade without free movement. The prevailing wisdom seems to be that if they let the UK have this, then the entire EU club will have given away its prize membership benefit for free, and no one else will want to pay to have it. This in turn could lead to a collapse of the EU, meaning the UK represents the line that will not be crossed.

### **Notes on contributor**

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### **References**

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