

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 41

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 41 Monday 21st October 2019

Topic for discussion.

Brexit

As of Friday 18th Oct, there was an agreement between the EU and the UK government to be put to the Commons on Saturday and to other European governments at other times. The Commons decision on Saturday was to pass an amendment which effectively delayed a decision until after our discussion.

Of the three main alternatives apparent at this stage - majority in favour, majority against or amendment to put the matter to a further referendum, which do you think will be the outcome? Make your mind up prior to the vote; we can then start our discussion by seeing whether we as a group successfully predicted the outcome. There may be an interesting discussion on Monday as to why the Commons voted the way it did on Saturday.

The principal implication of the proposed new deal appears to be on the Union

Summary

Most of the group said they had expected a delaying amendment, which turned out to be a correct prediction.

The implications for the Union seemed to raise little concern. Perhaps this is no longer a salient political issue in England.

As to how Brexit might be resolved, neither of the democratic devices, Referendum or General Election were considered to be likely to lead to a resolution

Discussion

Only one member of the group stated that she had expected a Commons majority for the deal. Some had expected the deal to be rejected, but most had expected some amendment leading to further delay. Thus the group seemed to have been reasonably accurate in predicting the outcome of the Saturday Commons debate

Much of the discussion concerned the impact on the Union. However there was little concern either way over the continuation of the Union. The issue of whether or not Northern Ireland should be separated by a customs border or what its relationship with the rest of Ireland should be did not appear to be of much importance to our group.

Nor did the prospect of Scottish independence leading to its leaving the Union raise much concern either way. There seemed little concern as to whether the Union should continue.

Historically these issues were important in English politics; nowadays perhaps they are less so. There was an awareness that public expenditure per head is significantly higher in all three non-English parts of the Union than in England itself, so that England in this limited sense might be better off with no Union. But this was not put forward as an argument for discontinuing the Union.

The discussion then turned to whether the current impasse might be resolved by a democratic device. A simple rerun of the first referendum with the same questions was not advocated, on the basis that whatever the result it would not resolve anything, leaving both sides unsatisfied; and the same problem of the status of the referendum in a representative democracy would recur. Implementation of the result could not be assured.

A more complex referendum with three questions, Leave with no deal, Leave with a deal, or Remain, using a single transferable vote was not considered to be a viable solution. The voting system was considered complex, and as the result would almost certainly be the middle one as the consequence of the voting system, the question of what sort of deal was not resolved.

The other democratic device - the General Election - was considered. Again there was little enthusiasm for this. While it was agreed that this would change the composition of the House of Commons, it was considered to be far from assured that a Commons majority for any particular course of action would result.

How can the division in the country be healed - the stated objective of politicians; no answer.

There was a desire for a return to the simpler form of politics where power shifts alternately between centre-left and centre-right parties, together with a consensus on many major issues that provides strong and effective government. However it was recognised that those days are gone and are unlikely to return.

As to Brexit the uncertainty continues with no obvious path to resolution.