

Parliament, the people and Brexit: a rare retrospect

For years on this site I faced a barrage of criticism from some for staying with the Conservative party and not joining UKIP or later the Brexit party . I explained patiently that there could only be a Brexit if the Conservative party gave the people a referendum by using their majority in Parliament to do so. I always thought UKIP and the Brexit party would fail to win a single seat in a General election. I was wrong by just one seat in one election. I always told such lobbyists that we needed to do three very difficult things. The first was to make it Conservative policy to hold a referendum. The second was for the Conservatives to win a majority. The third was to win the referendum. We managed to do all three with all the left of centre opposition parties continuously and resolutely against and with some Eurosceptics decrying us.

I myself stood on a manifesto of wanting to persuade the Conservative party to adopt an EU referendum in the 2010 election, and in support of the national Conservative party Manifesto pledge for a referendum in the 2015 election.

The pressure to give people a vote and to let us make the case for exit began with the David Nuttall proposal for a referendum which Parliament voted down on 24th October 2011. 83 Conservatives supported that motion which was defeated by 483 votes to 111. The extent of rebellion against the Conservative three line whip shocked the government. The inner group advocating the referendum were grateful to David for fronting it. We wanted someone as the first name on the proposal the leadership could not decry as a "usual suspect".

We gathered more support. By the time of the John Baron amendment to the Queen's speech seeking a referendum bill in 2013 we had well over 100 supporters of a referendum and the government itself abstained. The opposition voted the proposal down by 277 to 130. As the PM came to see we were near to having a majority of the backbench party and were intent on a referendum he conceded, knowing his leadership could be challenged by us if he did not grant one. It became official Conservative policy to let the people choose. The offer of a referendum helped the Conservatives to win a majority in 2015. We did not threaten the PM and wanted to help him win the election. He saw for himself the logic of the building support for a referendum.

When Mrs May shifted her stance from wanting to get Brexit done to accepting advice from a UK establishment that was determined to water down or thwart Brexit by negotiating us back in via another Treaty, many Conservatives rebelled. The first Meaningful vote on her bad deal was defeated by a massive 230 votes.

This week I was reminded of the significance of the third so called

Meaningful Vote on Mrs May's proposed Withdrawal Agreement. Against great pressure to back the government 28 Conservative MPs rebelled again against a three line whip. The resulting defeat led to Mrs May's resignation, the election of Mr Johnson and the 2019 election needed to bring Parliament's view on Brexit more in line with the public.

None of my Eurosceptic critics on this site have ever acknowledged that we did pull off those three difficult tasks, and did not see that we always needed votes in Parliament to do these things. It is always possible for those who do not share power or need to compromise to shout from the sidelines what is the best answer, but to get something done you need votes in Parliament. The tragedy was it needed a change of leadership and a change of Parliament to get Parliament to do what the public had voted for in the referendum. And Yes, there are still things to do to sort out the NI issue and the fishing.