

Catalan independence

I am of course neutral over the issue of whether Catalonia should be independent or remain part of Spain. It does not help for outsiders to express voting preferences before elections or referendums in other countries.

I did, however, find the BBC coverage of the Catalan election amusingly inaccurate. Before the poll they were running the Spanish government line that people were switching to parties that wanted Catalonia to stay in Spain, in response to the economic Project Fear campaign that the Spanish government were pursuing. Now we know the result, nothing of the sort was happening. I loved the irony. The BBC was busily giving credence to the views of the Partido Popular (a right of centre party it is alleged) that leads the Madrid government and has followed a thuggish policy of trying to suppress enthusiasm for devolved government and independence within Catalonia. That self same Partido Popular itself slumped from 11 seats to just 3 seats in the 135 seat Parliament”!

The one view I do hold is these matters of identity and democratic accountability are best settled by democratic means. If Spain had let Catalonia have a referendum to decide the issue the public may well have voted to stay with Spain, as Scotland did when we rightly offered them the choice. Instead, the unpleasant ways used to try to extinguish nationalist feeling has ensured the independence parties won this latest election. The EU, which used to encourage regional identity and regional political movements now seems ashamed of what it has helped unleash and will not speak out for a democratic way of resolving the tensions.

The paradox of how the EU destroys traditional major political parties

Numerous commentators are interested in so called populist parties. These are challenger parties of the right and left ranging from Syriza to the Austrian Freedom party, including Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, and Five Star in Italy. No-one apart from me seems very interested in why the traditional Centre right main party in each country, often Christian Democrat, and the traditional centre left party, often Social democrat, have collapsed or shrunk badly in so many places.

Just look at what has happened. Two main parties used to alternate in government in continental countries like Labour and Conservative in the UK ,depending on how well they did with their domestic economic policy primarily. Today few of them are left in power and none has a majority. In

Spain the PP leads a minority coalition which can scarcely govern. In Germany and the Netherlands no majority coalition has formed. In Greece the two main parties were swept away by Syriza. New Democracy (centre right) has recovered to second place whilst Pasok (centre left) remains on 6.3% of the vote. In France both main parties were demolished by Macron's new movement in Parliamentary elections. Mr Macron beat the National Front to take the Presidency. Neither former main party had a candidate in the second round.

It is true many of these places have systems of proportional representation making it more difficult for a main party to get a majority. It is also true that Greece and Italy have systems with offsets that give extra blocs of seats to first placed parties to try to create majorities. The French two round system allows a main party to get a majority through ballot by exhaustion.

The underlying problem seems to be EU and Euro economic policy. The traditional parties in each country are wedded to EU and Euro requirements. The policies often do not work out well economically for many people, so frustrated voters decide to challenge the orthodoxy by voting for a challenger party. Many of the challenger parties are explicitly Eurosceptic. Wilders in the Netherlands, Le Pen in France and Grillo in Italy are hostile to the Euro scheme. The Austrian Freedom party is hostile to EU migration policies, as is the National front in France, the Freedom party in Austria and the Freedom movement in the Netherlands. The AFD in Germany began with opposition to the Euro and has moved on to be in favour of more restrictive immigration policies.

Meanwhile in the UK the opposite movement has happened. In the 2017 election the Conservative vote share rose by 5.6% and the Labour share by 9.6%, taking the two main traditional parties to a combined 82.4%. In Germany the equivalent was 47.3% combined share for the CDU and SPD, in the Netherlands 30.4% combined, and Greece 34.4%. Why did this happen?

There were two main reasons. The first is both UK parties decided to accept the verdict of the referendum and became Eurosceptic. The UKIP vote collapsed as a result. The second is Labour cut loose from the austerity policies of the EU budgetary system and offered to spend and borrow much more money. This proved very attractive to young voters who were told they would get all their large student debts paid off, a promise which Labour only admitted was impossible after the election.

By offering to take back control, and by having a genuine difference of economic policy and approach, the two main parties in the UK re captured most of the vote. On the continent the refusal of main parties to criticise any aspect of the EU approach left voters looking around for ways to change a consensus that does not work for them.

It is the oddest situation I have ever seen in politics. Normally old well established and successful political parties adapt and change, altering policy when the electorate want change. Instead on the continent party after party is being slimmed or demolished by sticking with Euro austerity policies. As the member states governments get weaker, so the Commission gets

stronger. More powers will inevitably gravitate to the centre, making the task of national pro EU parties ever more difficult.

Record UK manufacturing orders

The economic good news keeps flowing. The November CBI survey showed orders for manufacturing in the UK higher than any time since 1988 under Margaret Thatcher. Retail sales continued to rise in real terms despite all the gloomy forecasts. Large sums have been invested in UK property by overseas investors who believe in it more than UK valuers.

Yesterday we were told that the UK plans to maintain open access for EU businesses coming to the UK under current rules, whether we leave with or without a deal. It makes sense to stress we do not want to put up new barriers. Such a statement if one comes from official sources needs to complement a direct question to the EU negotiators. Given our wish to have no new barriers, will the EU agree to the same? Or if they do want barriers, will they get on and specify what barriers they intend to place so business can progress and adjust accordingly? Any such barriers will of course need to be compliant with World Trade rules and international commercial law.

If the EU does decide on barriers I trust the UK government will see that as good reason to spare us paying any so called divorce settlement. From here there should be upside for us, and downside for the Commission if they continue to be unhelpful.

High Speed Broadband to become a legal right.

Having lobbied the Government on my constituents' access to high speed broadband I am pleased that the Government has announced that it has declined BT's proposal to deliver universal broadband through a voluntary agreement. Universal high speed broadband will be delivered by a regulatory Service Obligation (USO) which will give everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 Mbps by 2020.

1. Home (<https://www.gov.uk/>)

Press release

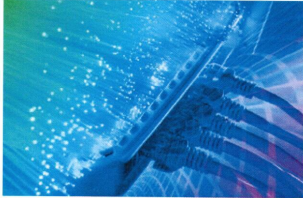
High speed broadband to become a legal right

Universal Service Obligation will deliver high speed broadband across the UK

Published 20 December 2017

From:

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-digital-culture-media-sport>) and The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/karen-bradley>)



The Government has confirmed that universal high speed broadband will be delivered by a regulatory Universal Service Obligation (USO), giving everyone in the UK access to speeds of at least 10 Mbps by 2020.

This is the speed that Ofcom, the independent regulator, says is needed to meet the requirements of an average family. After careful consideration the government has decided that regulation is the best way of making sure everyone in the UK can get a decent broadband connection of at least 10 Mbps as soon as possible.

Following the creation of new powers when the Government passed the Digital Economy Act 2017, we launched our consultation on the design of the regulatory USO in the summer. The Government will now set out the design for a legal right to high speed broadband in secondary legislation early next year, alongside our detailed response to the consultation.

Ofcom's implementation is expected to take two years from when we lay secondary legislation, meeting the Government's commitment of giving everyone access to high speed broadband by 2020.

In the summer, we received a proposal from BT to deliver universal broadband through a voluntary agreement. We welcomed BT's proposal and have considered this in detail alongside a regulatory approach. We did not feel the proposal was strong enough for us to take the regulatory USO off the table, and have therefore decided not to pursue BT's proposal in favour of providing a legal right to broadband.

The government believes that only a regulatory USO offers sufficient certainty and the legal enforceability that is required to ensure high speed broadband access for the whole of the UK by 2020. However, we welcome BT's continued investment to deliver broadband to all parts of the UK.

Culture Secretary Karen Bradley said:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/high-speed-broadband-to-become-a-legal-right>

We know how important broadband is to homes and businesses and we want everyone to benefit from a fast and reliable connection. We are grateful to BT for their proposal but have decided that only a regulatory approach will make high speed broadband a reality for everyone in the UK, regardless of where they live or work.

This is all part of our work on ensuring that Britain's telecoms infrastructure is fit for the future and will continue to deliver the connectivity that consumers need in the digital age.

This regulatory approach also brings a number of other advantages for the consumer:

- the minimum speed of connection can be increased over time as consumers' connectivity requirements evolve;
- it provides for greater enforcement to help ensure households and businesses do get connected
- the scheme will maximise the provision of fixed line connections in the hardest to reach areas.
- places a legal requirement for high speed broadband to be provided to anyone requesting it, subject to a cost threshold (in the same way the universal service right to a landline telephone works)

ENDS

Published 20 December 2017

Related content

Published by

- Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-digital-culture-media-sport>)

Policy

- Business enterprise (<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/business-enterprise>)
- Broadband investment (<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/broadband-investment>)

Party discipline, the referendum and the Manifesto

I have been careful not to criticise Conservative MPs personally who voted for Amendment 7, and am not going to change my stance in this article. I do wish, however, to explore why some MPs vote against the whip and ask is it reasonable to do so in certain circumstances? In the UK system an MP is there to exercise judgement and to hold the government to account, or to be part of the government. He or she should also be conscious that they were voted in because they belonged to a particular party, as well as for their own merits. It is important to look at the general Manifesto of their party when considering their later conduct.

It is true that Brexiteer MPs did often vote against new European laws, larger EU budgets and other increases in EU power under the Coalition. We did

so because we took seriously the Conservative party Manifesto of 2010 which we had stood on. It said:

"There should be no further extension of the EU's power over the UK without the British people's consent... We will bring back key powers over legal rights, criminal justice and social and employment legislation to the UK".
"The steady and unacceptable intrusion of the EU into almost every aspect of our lives has gone too far"

We took this to mean that we should resist the extra powers which successive new EU inspired laws and larger budgets brought to the EU. We understood the Lib Dems in government took a pro federalist line which was very different to the our party view in the Manifesto.

So what did the 2017 Manifesto say which might influence the conduct of Conservative MPs today? It said

"We are leaving the EU. In leaving the EU we have chosen a truly global role for Britain....No deal is better than a bad deal....We will no longer be members of the single market or customs union....the days of Britain making vast annual contributions to the EU will end"

Any individual MP may have stood on a personal Manifesto that modified some part of the national Manifesto. Ken Clarke, for example, has always made clear his opposition to the Referendum and its result. The rest of us did not disagree with the views I have quoted above. In 2010 I included in my personal platform a pledge to work for a referendum on the issue of membership of the EU, which we secured as a policy promise before 2015.

Those Labour Opposition MPs who are seeking to use Parliamentary tactics to delay or derail Brexit are opposing both the decision of UK voters in the referendum and the terms of their own Manifesto in 2017. To defy one expression of the public will is foolish To defy two may prove very damaging to them in a future election.