

Iain Dale: May moves Article 50 – and the BBC plunges into a period of national mourning

Iain Dale is Presenter of LBC Drive, Managing Director of [Biteback Publishing](#), a columnist and broadcaster and a former Conservative Parliamentary candidate.

Listening to the BBC coverage of triggering Article 50 earlier this week, you'd have thought that we were entering a period of national mourning.

It started with the *Today* programme, which relished interviewing anyone who had anything negative to say – and believe me, most of their carefully-chosen guests did. In the section I listened to they had one pro-Leave business guest. She was given all of two minutes to make her case. The five or six Remainers were left to witter on with hardly a challenge from the presenters.

We're going to have two more years of this. But the die is cast. Article 50 has been triggered; there is no going back. I had hoped that there would be a realisation from the likes of Nick Clegg and Hilary Benn that the course to take now is unite behind Brexit, and make the best of it. I suppose it was always a forlorn hope. Clegg seems to have cast himself as Remainder in Chief, having declared that "the phoney war is now over", and that Brexiteers must be held to account "for their false promises".

If he wishes to go to war with the British people over the way they voted, that's up to him. We should admire those who stick to their principles – but we shouldn't have any truck with politicians who fight the battles of the last war. Everyone's attentions should now be directed to how we make a success of Brexit – or if you are of a less optimistic persuasion, make the best of a bad job.

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It says a lot about the state of the British media that on the day before Article 50 was triggered, all we could talk about were the respective legs of the Prime Minister and the Scotland First Minister. Who'd have thighed it?

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I wonder when Keir Starmer looks himself in the mirror – and with that gelled hair, he must do so quite often – does he see the reflection of John Moore staring back at him

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A lot has been written about the rise in inflation during the last few weeks. Those who know nothing about economics appear to attribute it all to Brexit and the fall in the pound.

The truth is more simple. Since Brexit, the price of oil has risen by about 60 per cent, and the effect has now begun to come through in the inflation figures.

Were the rise in inflation all connected to Brexit, the rate would be far higher. In fact, it's only 0.1% higher than Germany's rate, and on a par with that of most of the rest of the main EU economies.

Alex Salmond is a genial cove. I host him every Wednesday afternoon for a half-hour phone-in on LBC. He and Nicola Sturgeon are adamant that Scotland should have its own deal, since voted to Remain by 62 per cent to 38 per cent.

I am sure that Salmond genuinely believes the case he is making. And of course, I am also sure that if Dumfries & Galloway or the Borders vote in a second Independence referendum vote to remain in the UK, he'd also allow them their own special deal to stay in the UK. And pigs might fly.

There were two new books out this week which may be of interest to ConservativeHome readers. Sayeeda Warsi has written a book called [*The Enemy Within*](#), which is allegedly how some people described her when she was a minister in the Cameron government.

It's certainly not a kiss-and-tell account of her time in government. Instead, it's a thoughtful tome about the place of Muslims in Britain today. It's incredibly well-researched (and heavily footnoted), and I hope it gets a much wider readership than simply Muslims who are interested to read about the views of Britain's first Muslim cabinet minister. It deserves to.

Douglas Carswell has also written a weighty tome called [*Rebel*](#). It's a call to arms to overthrow what he calls the oligarchs and political interests that control our society. It's a powerful polemic, and ought to have a readership across the political spectrum. It's certainly not a right-wing treatise; indeed, at times you think you're reading the words of someone on the far left.

Some of his solutions for dealing with out-of-control capitalism could come from the pen of Jeremy Corbyn. Indeed, if the latter has any sense, he will read this book and adopt a lot of its conclusions. But as I say, the key phrase there is "if he has any sense". No doubt he and his little helper Seumas Milne couldn't bring themselves to read a single word of a book they would regard as being written by someone on the extreme right. And therein lies their problem. Carswell is far more in tune with the views of the ordinary Brit than they ever will be.

I like interviewing Amber Rudd, although I don't do it that often. On Wednesday, she was on my LBS show talking about triggering Article 50. I

asked her if she thought that people on both sides should moderate their language and stop the insults.

“Yes,” she said: “they should”. I immediately retorted, “Well, that’s enough about you and Boris.” She giggled and said: “Well, I rather let myself in for that one, didn’t I?” Good on her. It’s a pity that more politicians don’t react in the same way rather than go all hoity-toity.

[The ambition for home ownership is stronger than ever](#)

The annual [English Housing Survey](#) came out this month. It suggested that in the last financial year 62.9 per cent of English households owned their own homes. So that was very slightly down on [last year’s figure of 63.6 per cent](#). A fall of 0.7 per cent, after a rise of 0.3 per cent the previous year. Some media coverage suggested [the fall was significant](#) – although the survey itself suggested it was within the margin of error. At any rate there has yet to be any progress getting back to the peak of 71 per cent in 2003.

Furthermore this was before Gavin Barwell, the Housing Minister, sent out the [depressing message](#) that there was to be less emphasis from the Government on wider home ownership. A better response would be for the Government to redouble its efforts – notably with [a right to shared ownership](#) and a big expansion in supply to ease affordability with a crackdown on [state land banking](#).

The most startling figure in the survey was how the determination to buy has actually increased. The “proportion of renters who expect to buy” is at 44.1 per cent, up from 41.0 per cent last year. That increase is probably more than the “margin of error” (the survey is based on interviews with 13,300 households). It is also the highest since the survey began. One might have thought that the expectation of home ownership would decline as property prices rose. This indicates that the ambition is very strong. Politicians would be well advised to take note – rather than assume everyone on average incomes has just shrugged and given up on such aspirations.

Another point of interest is that the number of us living in tower blocks continue to decline. Those in “purpose built flat, high rise” consisted of 516,000 dwellings according to the 2014/15 estimate. The latest Survey puts it at 425,000. The number of Council tower block homes is down over the last year from 139,000 to 113,000. They were the future once.

[home ownership Housing](#)

Press release: Landmark day in devolution as powers pass to Welsh Assembly

Today marks an important milestone in implementing the Wales Act 2017 with powers coming into force that pave the way for the introduction of Welsh Rates of Income Tax, enable the Welsh Government to invest more in infrastructure and allow the National Assembly to decide what to call itself.

These important powers put more decisions into the hands of the Assembly and the Welsh Government and give them important new levers to grow the Welsh economy and to deliver better public services across Wales.

The provisions which come into force today:

- Remove the requirement for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax are introduced
- Increase the amount that Welsh Ministers can borrow to fund capital expenditure from £500m to £1bn
- Reaffirm the Assembly and Welsh Government as a permanent part of the UK's constitutional arrangements
- Enshrine the convention that Parliament will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Assembly
- Allow the Welsh Government and UK Government to agree a protocol for managing water resources that flow between the two nations

The changes also mark the end of the Secretary of State for Wales' annual address to the Senedd on the Queen's Speech and his entitlement to take part in Assembly proceedings.

Alun Cairns, Secretary of State for Wales, said:

Today marks the transfer of important new powers to the Assembly. These are powers which affect the lives of everyone living in Wales and are a major step towards the clearer, stronger and fairer devolution settlement that we are putting in place.

The Assembly and Welsh Government are, for the first time, formally recognised as permanent parts of the UK's constitutional fabric. There is no longer a need for a referendum before the Welsh Rates of Income Tax come on stream and Welsh Ministers will be able to borrow up to £1bn to invest in renewing Wales's infrastructure.

Devolution has developed significantly since 2010 and these powers mark the maturing of the Assembly into a fully fledged Parliament.

From today, the Assembly can decide on a new title if that's what Assembly Members want. I and my successors will no longer be entitled to a seat in the Assembly nor will we be required to give an annual address to the Assembly on the Queen's Speech.

Together, these changes reflect the coming of age of the devolved institutions in Wales and mark the beginning of the transition to the new settlement that the Wales Act will put in place. I look forward to these powers being used to deliver for the people of Wales.

The measures come into force automatically two months after Royal Assent. The Wales Act 2017 gained Royal Assent on 31 January 2017.

More must be done to place Syrian refugees; conflict sees worst violence in months – UN

30 March 2017 – The world's attention has moved away from Syria following the battle for Aleppo, despite the fact that the last few months have been "some of the worst" for civilians, the United Nations humanitarian chief today told the Security Council, reiterating calls for an end to the six year conflict.

"Violence continues to rear its ugly head in various parts of the country, even if it largely disappeared from the world's TV screens since the evacuation of East Aleppo," Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien told the Council.

"The last months have been some of the worst yet for civilians inside Syria," he added. "For Syria, that is saying something."

Today's humanitarian discussions in the Security Council come as political discussions are underway in Geneva, assisted by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The latest discussions started on 23 March and will last through the week.

In today's comments, Mr. O'Brien reiterated the importance of the [intra-Syrian talks](#) saying he "cannot emphasize enough how high the stakes are," and voicing support for Mr. de Mistura.

Civilians threatened in Raqqa and Ghouta

As the conflict enters its seventh year, hundreds of civilians are believed to have been killed in the past weeks alone, with tens of thousands displaced

and continued attacks on medical facilities and schools.

Mr. O'Brien expressed deep concern about the safety and protection of more than 400,000 civilians threatened by military operations in Raqqa governorate, which includes the de facto capital of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh).

As the fighting moves closer to Raqqa city, "concerns about the fate of civilians will only grow," Mr. O'Brien said.

"I urge all parties to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the effects of the hostilities as required, not just requested, under international humanitarian law."

The UN and partners have been prepositioning stocks to enable a rapid response "access permitting."

In addition, Mr. O'Brien also said he was extremely worried about the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the besieged parts of eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, where some 400,000 people are trapped by Government forces.

The tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta

No UN humanitarian convoy was allowed access since October 2016 to eastern Ghouta, with some areas cut off since June prior.

In the past 10 days, Government forces have also reportedly prevented commercial trucks from entering, hiking up prices of staples and cutting informal trade.

"This tightening of the siege has started a time bomb for the people of eastern Ghouta," Mr. O'Brien said, calling for immediate access.

Delivery of humanitarian aid has been difficult throughout the country, the senior UN official lamented. He said that despite hopes that 2017 would lead to greater entry to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, "the bottom line is, however, that with a quarter of the year gone, our current levels of access are no better than this time last year."

His comments come just days before an international pledging conference is due to be held in Brussels on 5 April. Entitled "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", the conference is co-chaired by the UN.

Mr. O'Brien thanked donors for going "above and beyond" this year, but stressed the critical needs in Syria and the neighbouring countries.

The UN and its humanitarian partners have released the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria which outlines requirements of some \$3.4 billion to undertake a comprehensive humanitarian response in Syria, including saving

lives, enhancing protection and building people's resilience.

AUDIO: The UN Refugee Agency, wants more countries to fulfill their pledges on resettling those fleeing the conflict in Syria, which is now in its seventh year.

Urging Governments to make good on promises of homes

Meanwhile, new figures show that fewer Syrian refugees were resettled in the past year than originally planned, even as the total number of people fleeing the violence surpasses five million.

"Despite the call during that meeting in Geneva on 30 March 2016 to resettle and facilitate pathways for 500,000 refugees, to date 250,000 places have been made available," said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His remarks reference the High-level Meeting on Syria, held in March 2016, where participating Governments agreed to resettle 10 per cent of all Syrian refugees by 2018.

UNHCR, the agency that Mr. Grandi heads, said that while 250,000 locations have been pledged, some have not yet been made available for the people who need them.

Mr. Grandi called on Governments to make good on their promises to find new homes for the most vulnerable refugees: "We still have a long road to travel in [expanding resettlement](#) and the number and range of complementary pathways available for refugees."

[Press release: National Lottery backs plan to save 20 species from extinction](#)

[unable to retrieve full-text content] 20 species including shrill carder bee, chequered skipper butterfly and ladybird spider will be brought back from the brink.