

What if Remain win by 51 : 49?

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I suggested [when posting yesterday](#) that I would continue to discuss the potential consequences of the EU referendum even though I have made [my own voting intentions](#) clear. I think this important because, as I noted yesterday, whether or not we vote to leave unprecedeted issues are subject to debate right now, and they are well worth pursuing because of their potential impact on the political economy.

One of those that is clearly exciting interest - including at a talk I gave last night - is what happens in the event of a 51 : 49 vote for Remain. I will deal with this before, in a separate blog, considering the immediate political ramifications of a vote to leave.

As things stand right now I think there are many at Westminster who would heave the most almighty sigh of relief if Remain did win by a margin as big as 51: 49. In fact I think they'd accept a win on the basis of cutting a pack of cards right now. But that, in itself highlights just how desperate things have got for a campaign that I am quite sure David Cameron thought he could win with ease or he would not have called it.

The first obvious point to make in that case is that if this is the best that Cameron can deliver his political career will have reached the point of failure, as it is said all do before they reach their end. And it will not only be Cameron's that will be in tatters; George Osborne's will also lie shredded all around him. Would there be an chance of either surviving in office? I think none at all if the Conservatives were to continue in this situation to try to hang on to power and see out their fixed term to 2020, as is now their right and, in fact, their duty.

The reasons for their need to go, and very quickly should, I think be obvious. The first is that it would have become clear that these two had, by the exercise of poor judgement, brought the country and, potentially, the European Union to a point of crisis which was wholly unnecessary. To describe it as incompetence is to be kind.

Second, in the process of doing this Cameron and Osborne have torn their own party apart: there is no hope of it being unified again whilst they remain in positions of leadership.

Third, it will be quite clear that such a narrow margin of victory will, in effect, be a vote of no-confidence in their judgement from the people of this country. They have destroyed their own mandate.

So, the first consequence of a narrow Remain win will be the end of the Cameron and Osborne era, and few will mourn that. Looking at it wholly objectively it has been a continuous exercise in misjudgment. The failure to meet any of the forecast economic outcomes that they have so confidently predicted is the best evidence of that.

But in that case, who will replace them? There are, of course, two options: either there is an internal change in the leadership of the Conservative Party, and hence a new Prime Minister, or there is a general election. Dealing with the second option first, this cannot happen without the agreement of Parliament. Given that Labour has not had a good referendum (another myth that should surely come to an end is the one that Alan Johnson would ever have been a good leader of Labour) and the Tories have torn themselves to shreds, and look likely to continue to do so, I can see no incentive at all for Labour to agree to an early election. An election can't be ruled out, but I think it very unlikely.

In that case who will lead the Conservatives and become the next Prime Minister? Most will speculate on either Boris Johnson or Michael Gove but I do not think that either are likely. After all, they will have just lost an election, and neither have exactly covered themselves in glory in the process. Gove is a very difficult political sell whilst I suspect that very many Tory MPs can think of nothing worse than having to actually work with Boris Johnson, and in the Conservative party it is definitely the case that MPs opinion still count. So who is likely? The obvious answer is Theresa May.

May has cannily disappeared from the political scene for the last few weeks. And, in situations like this reconciliation candidates are turned to: that would be her role. I strongly suspect she will be our next Prime Minister. I do not expect her to walk in the footsteps of Thatcher. It took her a decade into really bring that party into line with her thinking; May will not have ten days and it is riven with disputes.

Remember I am discussing Remain winning here. Such a win will, I am sure, mean we do stay for the time being. But May would then lead a party that is not going to deliver what a substantial part of the UK wants, and they will not forgive her for that. They will also remember this as a Tory campaign: Labour's back seat role may not look so odd in a year or two if Remain is to happen. I cannot see there being a Tory bounce after Remain.

In no small part that will be because the fractures amongst the Conservatives will have got worse. If May is the unity candidate there isn no guarantee they will unite. The divisions are real. Some MPs may consider following Carswell to UKIP. A substantial rump will not accept the result. Either way this government will look more lame duck than John Major's 1992 to 97 administration ever managed, and it was dire.

May will get no help from the EU in this: they will show no enthusiasm for working with a Conservative administration that has done them no favours. And they will be quite sure that the threat of the UK leaving will have gone away for the time being. From 2017 to 2020 a Conservative administration will have no hope of negotiating anything with Brussels.

Combine that with my continuing fear that we will have a recession, and that any new Chancellor will be more extreme than Osborne and the chances of a successful May administration look low.

But what of Labour and other parties? It's true that it usually takes a government to lose an election, but there has to be an opposition to exploit that opportunity. Can Labour do that?

There is no secret that Labour has been half hearted in its support for Remain. That was because, I am quite sure, it believed that a rough campaign would always inflict massive harm on the Conservatives and their intervention could only mitigate that effect. Whether that was responsible or not, given the importance of the issue, is open to debate. In the context of this blog what is, however, important is that if Remain now win then I have little doubt that Labour will claim a lot of the credit for that, having intervened at a late stage in the campaign when it was apparent that the Cameron/Osborne axis was not working. This is how, if Labour is to now claim any credit from what has happened, it will seek to do so.

How it will exploit this opportunity is uncertain. There is little evidence, as yet, that Labour has a coherent plan for managing a post-Remain crisis. In the last few days some senior Labour figures have put immigration onto its agenda, with mixed reaction amongst some members. There is, however, no coherent policy on this issue as yet and it is also not clear at present how Labour would wish to renegotiate European membership if other member states were willing to do so.

As a result I cannot see Labour wishing to force a general election as yet: it is simply not ready for it. What it has instead to do is work out precisely where it will go in this circumstance, and indeed, what it will do if Brexit happens, and I do not know if those discussions are taking place.

So what of the SNP? Where might they go in the event of a Remain vote, which is what they have campaigned for? I think they will take the very likely significant Remain majority in Scotland as an indication of their support, and use it continually to remind the government that they helped deliver this result that the Conservatives would have been unable to have secured by themselves, but I cannot see the SNP exploiting a Remain vote to do much more than that: unless and until there is a breakdown in the ranks of a Conservative government the opportunities for the SNP to demand a new stance towards Scotland will be limited in the case of a Remain vote.

This does not, however, mean that the Labour party, SNP, the Greens, the Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru and others should not be talking to each whilst the Conservatives go into a period of infighting, which is almost inevitable. I think it is vital that these parties do then talk to each other because, like it or not, the election demographics now suggest that unless there is complete Conservative meltdown replacing a Conservative government under the current electoral system would be difficult. In that case I think all these parties have a duty to talk to each other about their combined political vision for the UK as a whole, even if some of those parties are committed to leaving in the long term.

What no one can deny is that a very narrow Remain victory will be the clearest indication to date of a rejection of much of the current political process and these parties have all contributed to that problem arising. If the Conservatives are unable to come up with a coherent national narrative other parties have to do so. It's for them, I suggest, and together if necessary, to put forward how they will now seek to transform the body politic of the UK so that it is restored to a position where it can be said to be fit for purpose.

I believe that the challenge will be to create a short-term coalition of interests between these parties with the one, and only, focus of re-establishing a basis for government that reflects the best interests of the people of this country. Only by doing so can the credibility of these parties be restored, because this exercise would demonstrate to a deeply disenchanted population that politicians have listened to the message that they have been given.

People dislike their voices not being heard.

People want diversity inside the Westminster bubble.

People have had enough of the power of large corporations and want it to be constrained.

People have had enough of the petty squabbling.

And, to most people's surprise, they have discovered that coalition does not necessarily lead to disaster.

So it is my suggestion that if there is a very small vote for Remain it is the job of all political parties to join together (although I very much doubt that the Conservatives will) to do these things:

- * Agree on a basis for electoral reform
- * Agree on the future of the House of Lords, and its reform
- * Agree a broad programme of reforms to be demanded from the EU

- * Agree policies on migration

This is not about abandoning party politics: this is about dealing with a national crisis where democracy itself is under threat, which threat the government is deepening rather than relieving by the decisions that it has taken. But, and this is the key point, this will take time, and as a result I do not believe it is in any opposition parties' interest to force a general election now.

And all of this could be academic, of course: the country might vote Brexit. I will get to that soon.