

British politics caught in zugzwang

All sides fear that he who moves first will lose

by John Nugée in London

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Just as we return to work in January to find that, although it is a new year, the same old problems still confront us, so it is for members of parliament. Brexit has not disappeared, and MPs will soon have to settle the matter.

British politics is stuck with two unusual problems. First, MPs face a three-way choice (Prime Minister Theresa May's deal, a no-deal exit, and a second referendum on European Union membership) rather than the more usual binary one (to do something or not). Second, party discipline has collapsed. Neither the ruling Conservative party nor opposition Labour party has an agreed policy on Brexit.

The lack of party discipline means MPs are in the unusual position of being able to think for themselves. Many will be aware of how their constituents feel and voted in the referendum. Whether out of a sense of democracy or simply in an attempt to preserve their seat at the next election, not a few will treat that as more important than what their party leadership thinks.

The result of the three-way choice is that it is not just what MPs want most that they must factor in to how they vote, but also what they fear most. For many MPs it is not that one option of the three is much better than the other two, but that one is much worse, and must at all costs be avoided.

For May and her most loyal followers, a second referendum is the outcome they are keenest to avoid. Apart from the rejection of all of their efforts that this would signify, they have a genuine concern that it would be seen as breaking faith with the electorate, which could engender social volatility. Nor, with the example of France's 'yellow vest' protests, are fears of unrest necessarily exaggerated – copycat politics is not new and civil disturbance in the UK cannot be ruled out.

For many MPs (and not just those who would prefer to remain in the EU), a no-deal exit is the outcome that must be avoided, because of the potential economic harm. For the most ardent Brexiteers, it is May's deal that they really fear, because it raises the possibility that the UK might never escape from the EU's oversight. This is the 'Brexit in name only' outcome that hard-core Brexiteers fear more than a second referendum, which many in their ranks are confident they would win.

This sort of situation is known as a Condorcet paradox. The Marquis of Condorcet was an 18th century French political theorist who demonstrated that in any three-way decision, the resulting choice is neither guaranteed to reflect the wishes of those voting nor independent of the voting method. The outcome is likely to be against the wishes of more than half the voters. In a three-way choice where the majority of voters prefers outcome A to outcome B, outcome B to outcome C and outcome C to outcome A, the process is indeterminate and a rerun of the vote might give a totally different result.

What adds to the sense of uncertainty is that all camps in the House of Commons are caught in a sort of zugzwang, to borrow the phrase from chess – they are safe if they do nothing, but if they force a vote they may end up triggering exactly the outcome they fear most. This is why May postponed the initial vote on her deal, why Brexiteers repeatedly pull their punches, why Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn vacillates between threats and inaction, and why those favouring a second referendum (quite possibly the largest of the various groupings in the Commons) nevertheless do not dare move first.

The most probable outcome is that the UK will leave the EU with no deal, if only because that is what will happen if nothing else happens first. That undoubtedly gives the hard Brexiteers the initial advantage, though the mere fact that it is the most probable outcome makes it also the one many MPs will be striving the hardest to avoid at all costs.

Strictly speaking, because a default or 'do nothing' outcome does exist, the position is not a true Condorcet position. But Condorcet's analysis is still useful in its examination of the dynamics of the three two-way decisions that can be constructed as sub-decisions of a three-way decision – which, given that MPs can only vote for or against any given motion, is probably the way the situation will be resolved. The general

conclusion of his work is that the order in which any multiple voting is carried out is critical, and therefore that those who control the process are well placed to engineer the outcome.

So the prime minister may appear to have the initiative, in that she can control the business of the Commons and decide what MPs vote on, when and in what order. But the zugzwang nature of the situation remains. As long as she postpones a vote she stays in control. But whenever she makes a move, whatever that move is, she risks weakening her position. And she cannot do nothing forever.

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