



ABS POLICY PAPER No. 12

Arguments for and against a referendum on the outcome of the BREXIT negotiations

Paper written by The Senior European Experts London, summarized and published by Alexander Christiani

January, 2019

The Green Party, The Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party all have officially endorsed the idea of a new referendum; as have growing number of individual Conservative MPs. The Prime Minister, the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party remain firmly opposed. Labour would endorse the idea of the party supporting a public vote, if it cannot achieve its primary goal of a general election.

Arguments for a referendum:

- **A meaningful choice**
In 2016 it was not known exactly what “Brexit” means. Given how different Brexit looks today, it should be the people that decide whether the Brexit deal on Offer is what they really want. A referendum on the terms would not be a re-run Of 2016 because the issues would be different. It would not be an abstract debate between in or out but a concrete choice between the deal that had been negotiated or remaining a member of the EU.
- **No deal wasn’t on the ballot paper**
No deal was not on the ballot paper in 2016- indeed, the opposite. Leaving without a deal would have serious economic and political consequences and could provoke a national crisis. Knowing the consequences, it would be irresponsible for parliament to allow the UK to leave the EU with no deal without the people being asked to give their consent.
- **Trust in politics**
The 2016 referendum campaigns of the Leavers were deeply dishonest, based on divisive scaremongering and broke election rules. It would therefore be wrong If the Leave campaign was able to get away with it. A new vote is needed to give people a fair say. A further overlooked factor is that the 2016 vote was never binding on the Government or on Parliament.

- **Healing a divided country**
 The 2016 referendum exposed serious divisions in Britain. One of the most obvious divisions was between generations in 2016. Seventy-one per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted Remain while 64 per cent of people over 65 voted Leave. It is younger people whose lives will be most affected. They deserve a chance to vote on the final deal. A referendum is the only way to bring closure to this bitter debate. Without a referendum there is a danger of the argument continuing for years to come.
- **Economic impact**
 Nobody voted to make themselves poorer in 2016. After the 2016 vote the pound fell to almost 20 per cent below its summer 2015 value, leading to a sharp rise in prices. The UK went from being the fastest growing economy in the G7 to the slowest. Given the strength of concerns that Brexit would harm jobs, businesses and the Country's trading links, surely the public have a right to judge whether the final deal is as good as what the country has now.
- **Threat to the Union**
 One of the divisions exposed by the referendum was the difference in views between Scotland and Northern Ireland, which both voted to Remain by a clear margin and England and Wales voted to Leave. This division has raised the possibility of a new referendum on Scottish independence and raised concerns about the maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland.
- **A changed European Union**
 There have been significant changes in the EU which mean that the 2016 decision has partly been overtaken by events. For example, the Leave campaign claimed that Turkey and four other countries would soon be joining the European Union and that would mean five million new immigrants coming to the UK. Senior European politicians, including the Austrian Chancellor and the German head of Government are also opposed to Turkey joining and would therefore block Turkey's entry.
- **A more dangerous world**
 The election of President Trump and his attempts to undermine the rule-based international order and the global trading system makes it more likely that the UK will be at a disadvantage outside the EU. Trump is now attacking the very World Trade organisation (WTO) that leave campaigners argued Britain could rely on if it left the EU. Leave campaigners argued that Britain was going to be a leading player in global trade. The reality is that even the biggest international supporter, Trump, won't help Britain and trade wars could do serious damage to the country.

Arguments against a referendum on the outcome of the Brexit negotiations

- **The decision has been made**

You cannot keep holding referendums because you did not get the result you wanted last time. The decision has been made and Britain should get on with it. It would be unfair to allow a second referendum, because it was no part of what was promised in 2016. Advocates of a referendum today are in many cases people who opposed holding one on EU membership in the first place. It is hypocritical of them to demand a further vote now just because they lost the last one.
- **The terms of Brexit were clear**

It would be wrong to hold another referendum on the grounds that people didn't know what they were voting for. While people may not have known the detail of what Brexit meant, the broad outlines were made clear by campaigners on both sides, including for example, that Britain could not be in the Single Market if it left.
- **Trust in politics**

Many people voted in 2016 who hadn't voted for years, if at all. To reject their vote because you don't like the outcome would further undermine trust in politics and politicians. To reject the result of the 2016 referendum would be to question the basis of democracy. The best way to restore trust in Britain damaged politics is to proceed to implement the 2016 result and to do it with good grace and in a timely way.
- **Healing a divided country**

A new referendum would be even more divisive and painful than in 2016. Holding a fresh referendum would, as one academic put it "breed public resentment as well as fostering protest politics and extremism". A narrow win- which is that all opinion polls suggest is likely- would not settle the argument. Whichever side lost would just take up the fight again.
- **Not the time to vote on a new relationship with the EU**

A new referendum would not be a vote on a new relationship with the EU as that will not have been negotiated in time. Britain would be voting on the terms of the UK's withdrawal and on the contents of a political declaration about the future relationship with the EU. If you want a vote on the terms of the new relationship you need to wait until they have been negotiated in the future.
- **What would be the question?**

What question would be on the ballot paper? No deal or not Brexit? Referendums work best when there are binary choices-and that decision, in or out, was made in 2016. Parliament is perfectly capable of deciding the terms for Britain's leaving the EU(*what a fallacy as it had turned out...*)

- **There isn't enough time to vote before 29 March 2019**

The practical difficulties in holding a new referendum (adequate legislation etc.) Mean that there is not enough time to hold a referendum before 29 March. After all, it took seven months to get the necessary legislation approved in 2015-16.

- **The EU hasn't – and won't –change**

Supporters of Remain always argue that the EU is about to change. They said that before Britain joined in 1973; they said it before the Maastricht Treaty and after the Lisbon Treaty. The EU hasn't addressed the underlying problems of the Eurozone since 2016. It hasn't tackled the problem of migration. The reality is that the EU is set on a long-term goal of establishing a federal state, which this country rejected in 2016.
