Brexit: The Consequences Of Monumental Political Shift

It began during the 2015 general election, when David Cameron, the incumbent Prime Minister at the time, announced that his party would put a referendum to people on the European Union, asking them to choose between leave or remain. The former won by a slim majority of 51.9% in the June 2016 referendum, preceded by months of intense campaigning on both sides, with statements coming from both sides that haven't aged well – David Cameron's proclamation of WW3 (Steven Swinford, 2016), the infamous Brexit bus suggesting that the NHS would receive an additional £350 million a week (Vote Leave campaign) and that the entire population of Turkey (76 million) would migrate to the UK, should the country the EU (Vote Leave campaign). Following the announcement of the referendum, David Cameron, who had campaigned to Remain, stood down as Prime Minister and was succeeded by Theresa May, although she too had openly backed Remain.

Article 50 was formally triggered on March 29th 2017, which formally commenced the (originally) two-year countdown to our departure from the EU, during which negotiations began on the now infamous Withdrawal Agreement. Despite ruling one out initially, in April, May called for a June snap election as a means to cement her parliamentary majority, which she ironically lost in a shocking turn of events, where Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party received 40.0% of votes against May's 42.3%, producing a hung parliament. To remove the impact of having a minority Conservative government, the DUP agreed to support the party's decisions on Brexit and other policies, though some perceived May's promise of an additional £1 billion in funding for Northern Ireland as a "bribe" (Leanne Wood, 2017). The Withdrawal Agreement was put to MPs months before the original departure date but was rejected by the majority of MPs, who were discontent with it for various reasons. Remainers felt that it left the UK worse off than it was currently and that it gave the future of our relationship with the EU uncertainty, due to the absence of a customs union agreement, and Leavers felt that it left us too close for comfort with the EU, which could hinder the perceived potential of Brexit.

This game of parliamentary ping pong between May and MPs continued, with May's deal being rejected not once, nor twice, but thrice, albeit with a declining number of opposing MPs each time. A key issue for both Eurosceptics and Europhiles was the Irish backstop, which intended to prevent a border between Northern Ireland, part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland, part of the EU. May was forced to have to extend Article 50 from March 29th 2019 by an additional two weeks initially, which bought some time for May to decide her next step, to avoid a disruptive no-deal Brexit, where there would be no transition period, and all political and economic arrangements with EU countries would cease. May decided to extend the deadline to October 31st 2019, in order to "break the log jam", and insisted that the charade of delay could not and would not carry on. The log jam, however, did not break, and in May, May announced her resignation as Prime Minister, over her failure to deliver Brexit. Some argue that a Remainer should never have been involved in negotiations, whilst others commended May for not running away as Cameron did in 2016. Her successor, Boris Johnson, was elected in July as Leader of the Conservatives and subsequently Prime Minister, prior to parliament breaking up for summer recess.

Parliament resumed in September, but that resumption was halted quite quickly, following the

controversial prorogation of Parliament for 5 weeks. Johnson stated that this decision was made to allow more time for his government to renegotiate, and pointed to his infamous mantra “Get Brexit done on October 31st, do or die”, as an explanation. Many MPs felt that this was an attempt to force a no-deal, something that Johnson refused to rule out, fueling fears of what would happen on October 31st, in regards to Brexit and the UK, not Halloween. Following a legal challenge from MPs, the Supreme Court ruled that the prorogation was on unlawful grounds and that Parliament would resume immediately. In October 2019, Johnson put a “new” Withdrawal Agreement Bill to Parliament, which was criticised for being perceived as worse than May’s deal, and resulted in the DUP refusing to support it. Several Conservative MPs also opposed the bill and were sanctioned by having the whip removed, simultaneously making them Independent MPs, and giving the Conservatives a minority government. A bill known as the Benn Act forced Johnson to write to the EU and ask for a third Article 50 extension, in the event that the Withdrawal Agreement Bill hadn’t been given Royal Assent and placed into law. Despite proclamations that he would rather be “dead in a ditch”, and that Brexit was “do or die”, Johnson wrote to the EU and asked for an extension, which he infamously did not sign, and was also followed by a letter asking the EU to reject the request of the first, due to Johnson’s objections. The EU agreed to an extension until January 31st 2020 but was warned that it could be the last delay (Donald Tusk, 2019).

Following the extension of Article 50, and the loss of his majority, Johnson called for a December election, the third general election in 5 years. The battle was intense and unpredictable, and much like the EU referendum, gave us many more memorable moments – the Channel 4 ice sculpture mocking the Conservatives and the Brexit Party, the fake fact-check Twitter account and Labour Party manifesto, Johnson hiding in a fridge from journalists, and his mantra, “Get Brexit Done”. On Friday 13th December (a coincidence for those disappointed by the results of the election), the Conservatives had received a considerable majority of MPs, but to the disappointment of pro-remain and second referendum supporters, Labour was decimated and received their fewest seats since 1935, though they did receive more votes than Blair, Brown or Milliband in their general elections as leader of the Labour Party. The first past the post voting system contributed to this dramatic shift in parliamentary seats, which turned seats that had been Labour heartlands for decades into Conservative seats, but so did other factors, such as Labour voters lacking confidence in Corbyn, or concerns about their Brexit policy. Corbyn soon announced that he would stand down as leader of the Labour Party, following a period of reflection. The next leader will be announced on April 4th 2020.

The Withdrawal Agreement Bill finally passed through parliament, albeit with some scrutiny from the House of Lords, which did not have an impact due to Johnson’s majority overturning their amendments. Controversially, Boris Johnson announced that he wanted to celebrate “getting (the first hurdle of) Brexit done”, by fundraising £500,000 to create a temporary “bong” mechanism inside of Big Ben, which is currently being repaired as part of necessary parliamentary reconstruction and cannot bong at present. Some argue that bonging is necessary to commemorate such a pivotal moment in history, whilst others argue that the funds would be better off going towards reducing social inequality, and not a “vanity passion project” of the Prime Minister. At the time of writing we have yet to leave the EU, though until the transition period ends nothing notable will change, except for the fact that we as a school, and a country, we must accept that we have now left the European Union, whether we wanted it or not, and will have to adapt economically to the consequences of this monumental political shift, one that will have a considerable impact and influence on many aspects of our society for the rest of our lives.