

Here We Go Again?

A conservative party split over Europe. A Prime Minister devoid of charisma. A Labour leader staunchly socialist. A slim working majority empowering the extremes. An inevitable no-confidence vote. Sound familiar? How could we forget the early 1990s, when John Major faced increasing division within his own party and dwindling public support in his efforts to ratify the Maastricht treaty. The parallels to Theresa May's present-day perils are easily drawn. But what can Major's travails teach us about the destiny for Brexit?

The overarching similarity presented by both periods of government is the divisiveness over the Europe issue. The origins of today's Brexit saga can be traced back to the EU-driven political turmoil of the 1990s, a fault line which severely destabilised Major's time as Prime Minister. Many viewed the signing of Maastricht as a milestone on the road to European federation and, for a select group of Conservative MPs, it marked "*a treaty too far*" (Margaret Thatcher).

Both Major and May arrived at 10 Downing Street in the aftermath of the dramatic departures of their respective predecessors, the former in response to Thatcher's reluctant resignation in the 1990 elections whilst the latter succeeded in the wake of the tempestuous Brexit referendum of 2016. From the outset, both premierships have thus painted a chaotic picture of opposition and conflict, not least as a result of Cabinet disunity. Whilst Major notoriously battled with his so-called ministerial "bastards" before his leadership challenge in 1995, which politically tarnished his time in office, May faced the high-profile resignations of senior cabinet ministers David Davis and Boris Johnson in response to her Brexit stance.

The government turmoil ultimately derives from **the lack of significant parliamentary majority** for both Major and May. The 1992 general election resulted in a narrow majority of 21 for Major and, by the end of 1996, he led a minority government which granted the relatively small number of 22 Eurosceptic rebels a disproportionate influence. Likewise, Theresa May frivolously lost the small majority she had possessed when she called for a general election back in 2017, resulting in her current minority government which has made it difficult for her to brush away opposition to her stance on Brexit. Similar to Major, the PM has had to branch out to Northern Ireland's DUP in her quest for political support.

The key difference between the Maastricht saga and the current Brexit predicament is the presence of a **no deal scenario as the default position**. In the 1990s the decision for Parliament was clear: either we ratify the Maastricht Treaty, or we do not. This binary question meant that if Parliament voted against the treaty then it would simply not be ratified. We would fail to join Europe on its continued path to integration but not fall out completely. Currently, the lack of a Parliamentary majority for any option (Norway, Canada, People's Vote etc.) means that we are edging closer and closer to a no deal Brexit despite clear and potentially overwhelming opposition to such a proposition. Although May attempts to try and frame the argument as a binary decision between her deal and no deal, the multitudinous Parliamentary factions are not convinced.

The **time-sensitive** nature of the process could make it possible for today's predicament to come to reflect that of the 1990s. The awareness of both the public and of Parliament as to the default nature of a no deal Brexit means the dynamics we can expect to see develop in the coming weeks and months will be far more unpredictable than in Major's era as forces both inside and outside of Parliament become increasingly more desperate in their pursuit of a palatable outcome.

The ratification of the Maastricht treaty was eventually a binary one: yes or no. As a no deal Brexit looms closer and closer, it is possible that MPs will become more willing to accept their second or even third choice scenarios in order to avoid such an eventuality. As factions within Parliament begin to compromise in the face of a common enemy, **a binary decision could emerge** as it did in 1993. If a sufficient constriction of viable outcomes takes place either through a series of Parliamentary votes or by inter-party negotiations, then we may well be left with two options. Then, the similarities between the current Brexit turbulence and 1993 become clearer.

In light of this conclusion, it is tempting to argue that Theresa May should pursue the same strategy that Major did in order to garner similar success. However, Major's strategy is no longer legislatively viable. Major was able to force Maastricht ratification through Parliament by threatening to call a general election if the bill failed to pass. Conservative rebels soon fell into line for fear of a Labour government. Following

the passage of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011, the PM no longer has the power to make such a threat. The only way that Theresa May could force a general election is by supporting a vote of no confidence in herself. Given that this would afford Labour the chance to form their own coalition government before a general election could take place, it is unlikely that the PM would pursue such a risky strategy. And in any case, even if every single conservative MP fell into line after such a threat, **the PM still would not have the votes required** to approve her deal.

One key lesson that Theresa May can learn from Major's premiership revolves around the longer-term survival of the Conservative Party: Major's quarrelling and tired government was eventually punished by voters at the next election.

Although there are many shared elements between 1993 and the present day, it appears that the conclusion of the respective crises will not be one of them. If the PM is to enjoy success similar to Major's, she must do so by adopting her own strategy. With a Parliament, a country and a party even more divided than in 1993, it is difficult to see any resolution which does not involve both ideological and political sacrifice on a scale not yet seen.

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