

Outfoxing ERG – Speech to Lords 28.02.19 4.39 pm

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con)

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My Lords, it has been a habit in these debates to say at the beginning of each that there is nothing new to discuss, but this time there is a great deal to discuss, and I want to share my thoughts on it with your Lordships. In addition, we have had a new joke from the noble Lord, Lord Newby, which is always helpful and familiar.

From inside the Westminster bubble, I can see that things still look very confused, but if one stands aside outside and pauses for a moment, the situation is in fact as clear as daylight. In practice, the great binary choice on offer has shifted from the withdrawal deal or no deal to the withdrawal deal or Article 50 being delayed. The delay may be short and limited or it may be longer; it depends on what goes on in the other place. We have no control over that and no one really knows.

Obviously, the Prime Minister was always going to be reticent, to put it mildly, about what happens if she loses again before 12 March. That is entirely understandable. You do not enter a race announcing what you will do if you fall off at the first big fence; you enter the race to win. But this new situation, where the binary choice has changed, poses an acute dilemma for the European Research Group warriors, who now face an almost impossible choice. With the Prime Minister having nodded towards a short delay, as she did yesterday, the dilemma for the Brexiteers—the harder-line ones—is even deeper. The excellent Mr Nicholas Boles MP pointed this out in the *Evening Standard* the other night, and he is right, although he did not mention that this will also encourage some of the strongest remainers to oppose Mrs May's deal in the hope of ending up with no Brexit at all. That is their hope and they are quite open about it.

None the less, it seems to me that the Prime Minister has outfoxed her own rebels, half the media and now the Cooper-Letwin ensemble—we shall see about that this afternoon; it is going on now. Labour's new-found love of a second referendum—although on precisely what question is not at all clear—deepens the dilemma for the ERG rebels even further. If they vote with the Prime Minister, with or without add-ons to the withdrawal treaty and with or without a backstop softening or any other so-called alternative arrangement, she is over the hump, at least for the moment. If they vote her down, we delay and lurch into another bog

land of uncertainty with all sorts of outcomes, of which a second referendum is only one—that would please the Liberal Democrats—and no Brexit is another.

In all this, the group I feel most sorry for—well, not really, but almost—is the ERG warriors, with their marshalled ranks and drawn swords. We were just talking about the Ides of March. My mind went back to Lars Porsena and his glittering Etruscan hordes, who planned to capture Rome but found that things went rather differently when they got to the city gates and the bridge. Instead of taking control, they ended up with those behind shouting “Forward!” and those in the front crying “Back!”

Of course, the absolute diehards in my party will never give in. I read one ill-informed article, alas by a recently joined Member of your Lordships’ House, claiming that they had taken over the Tory party. In reality, they now risk losing everything. If even half the ERG breaks ranks now and just some of the Labour remainers who are waverers support the Prime Minister, she will win this round, contrary to all the predictions of the noble Lord, Lord Newby, and his friends.

This is what I believe will happen. The people worrying about shipping goods here by sea from Tokyo after 29 March need not worry. By April, we will either be on the path to frictionless trade and an admittedly slow journey out of the present customs union to a new form of free trade or still in the European Union. There can now be no crash-out, managed or otherwise. That does not seem to have been absorbed, judging by some of the comments made this afternoon. I am afraid the Brexiteers’ dream has, for the moment, gone up in smoke. My belief is that the Prime Minister, with her deal, the massive agreed treaty with the European Union and all those in this country—the majority, I suggest—wanting to settle matters now and move forward, will win the day. Any further concessions from Brussels may come before 12 March if Brussels is feeling helpful, or afterwards if not. Obviously the negotiators will not reopen the agreed treaty, but they may well agree to a codicil about its interpretation as time goes by. I gather they are now working it—the so-called joint interpretative instrument.

My prayer is that after this unhappy phase we will get on vigorously with building close relations—not just in trade but in security, defence, cybertechnology and even possibly in physical links such as the mooted second channel tunnel—with all our regional European neighbours, all as part of our new, unfolding international policy stretching out to Asia, Africa and the Americas, and to carefully balanced ties with China, where all the growth will be. For this we will need powerful networks and the know-how to nourish and benefit from these networks, the Commonwealth being foremost among them. Old alliances are

falling away and new ones are becoming necessary as we enter a new cycle in international history.

This morning your Lordships' International Relations Committee heard evidence that we were on the verge of a terrifying new arms race and the possible spread of tactical nuclear weapons, and that the limits on nuclear warfare that the world has hung on to since Hiroshima are now slipping away and could leave our cities in smoking ruins. Somehow our Brexit bickering, breakaways and gabbling interviews with excitable MPs all seem rather small in comparison.

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