

Will Brexit Happen?

Written by Christopher Hill

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Brexit may not happen. In the past weeks and months, the argument has been made, by Professor Ringen and others, that Parliament – the ultimate protector of the British people's interests and well-being – is moving towards preventing Britain from exiting the European Union.

Unfortunately, Brexit may still happen in some form if we rely on Parliament – and not just because of the unpredictable nature of parliamentary opinion on this most cross-cutting of issues, which Professor Ringen acknowledges. There may well be a failure of nerve when it comes to finally denying the verdict of the June 2016 referendum, whatever the logic of the matter, because it is all too obvious that such a move would itself throw Parliament into even greater popular disrepute than at present. It might not be the case that there would be an uprising, but there would certainly be much anger, deeper social divisions, and political turmoil. Those of us who think that leaving the EU is madness might comfortably assume that people would be secretly relieved not to have to face the consequences of their flawed 2016 decision, but this cannot be taken for granted.

It is for this reason that I believe only a second referendum can negate the legitimacy of the first. It would be difficult to deny that there are very good reasons for another vote given that the 'facts have changed', as Keynes put it, and that time will have done its work, for example, in awakening the anger of the young at what lies before them if we do exit the EU. Of course, Farage and the tabloids will still create an awful din, but here Parliament can play its role by deciding that a second referendum, is necessary 'in the national interest' – which it surely is. Labour under Corbyn has shown more tactical nous than I gave them credit for, in slowly and barely perceptibly inching their way towards acceptance of the need for another popular vote, while still holding their baseline vote together. For all the talk of a soft Brexit and a transition period, they and other conflicted groups certainly will have to recognise that the basic bind remains: if you want to be in the Single Market then you have to accept the four freedoms, meaning that a soft Brexit would simply absent the UK from any decision-making on how the four develop and are to be interpreted in the future.

The only piece of the jigsaw which would then still need to be put in place, and it is indeed an imponderable one, is a little movement on the part of the other 27 on migration and benefits, so as to provide an argument in the second referendum campaign to the effect that continued membership would not be as worrying to Leave voters as the deal obtained by David Cameron. Let us hope that the 27 are shrewd enough, and still well-disposed enough, to provide the UK Remain lobby with this bone.

About the author:

Prof. **Christopher Hill** is incoming Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and a Fellow of the British Academy. He is also Emeritus Professor of International Relations, University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.