

In June 2016, more than 17 million voters formed a clear majority to leave the EU, in a show of disapproval for politics in general and Brussels in particular. Cameron resigned, and was replaced by Theresa May.

The Brexit result led to predictions of disaster, but in the first year employment grew, exports thrived and the stock market reached record levels. The currency, however, fell sharply. The only certainty was that uncertainty could continue for years, or even decades.

Two and a half years after the referendum there was no agreement on the Brexit question. The UK parliament and public were split three ways; the Prime Minister did not have a majority for her agreed deal with the EU negotiators, who used the Irish border problem to make things as difficult as possible for the British.

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they did not make concessions to the eurosceptics. Thus Prime Minister David Cameron announced that, if the Conservatives regained an overall majority, he would seek to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU, followed by a referendum to confirm membership. Then things began to go wrong for Cameron: the Conservatives unexpectedly won an overall majority, so they had to go ahead with the renegotiation; the UK gained no real advantage from the negotiation, but Cameron had to keep his promise to hold a referendum, which almost everyone in the UK and in Europe expected to result in a 'Remain' decision, even if half-hearted.

The referendum was held in June 2016. The campaign on both sides of the argument was very negative: the Remainers warned of an economic and political disaster if the Leavers won, while the Leavers warned of a further loss of sovereignty and unrestrained entry of migrants from eastern Europe. A very high turnout of voters brought a majority of 52% to 48% in favour of leaving, with more than 17 million UK citizens rejecting EU membership. For those who had a special interest in remaining in the EU (government, industry, commerce, finance) on both sides of the English Channel, this was a disaster, while for the majority of the UK population, who had always been sceptical, it was a triumph. They had wanted to show the Establishment that they would not be pushed around by anonymous Eurocrats, and they succeeded. David Cameron resigned as Prime Minister, to be replaced by Theresa May.

So what happens now? There is much speculation, but the reality is that nobody knows how it will end, because no country has left the EU before. The immediate collapse of the UK, predicted by the experts, did not happen; the stock market remained high, exports grew and the UK functioned normally. The value of the currency, however, dropped sharply due to uncertainty about the future. By the end of 2018 there were still three possible outcomes: deal, no deal and no Brexit. Those who saw the referendum result as a disaster hoped a failure of the negotiations would allow them to remain in the EU; enthusiastic Brexiteers were happy to walk away with no deal, simply taking back sovereignty without an agreement; and the UK government led by Theresa May sought to stay as close to the EU as possible, while accepting the result of the referendum. Such a deal was finally agreed by the negotiators on both sides, in spite of unresolved issues such as the Northern Irish border, Gibraltar and fishing rights, but it seemed unlikely that the UK Parliament would ratify it. The PM reacted promptly by postponing the parliamentary vote, but then suddenly saw herself faced with a vote of no confidence by her own party, the Conservatives. May won the leadership contest, but her authority suffered as a third of her own party who did not support her deal with the EU voted against her (200:117).

In late 2018 Prime Minister **Theresa May**, who did not have an overall majority in Parliament, was forced to put her draft agreement for withdrawal from the EU to a vote. With very minor amendments she tried three times to get the deal approved, and three times it was rejected.

The proposed date for the withdrawal was postponed, with EU approval but with no concessions on issues such as the Northern Ireland border arrangements, Gibraltar and fishing rights. With a clear majority of Members of Parliament rejecting every attempt at progress, Theresa May had no choice but to resign, which she did in July 2019. Selection of a new Prime Minister was determined by a vote of all the members of the Conservative party in the whole country, not by Members of Parliament.

Boris Johnson was the favourite with the public, and he was duly elected. He still did not have a majority in Parliament and he went to work very quickly in trying to meet a deadline of 31st October 2019 for withdrawal from the EU. Proposed changes in Northern Ireland, which were seen by some MPs as risking the break-up of the UK, and a timetable for passage through Parliament which did not give members enough time for debate, led to a further delay, and it became clear that the only solution was a general election.

This third general election in five years, and the first in winter just before Christmas, practically amounted to another referendum on Brexit. The Conservatives were seeking to leave the EU and most of the other parties – Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists, Democratic Unionists (Northern Irish), Welsh Nationalists, Greens and Independents were in favour of remaining in the EU. In 2016 Labour had voted in Parliament to accept the result of the referendum (“leave”). Then during the next three years they simply opposed whatever the Conservatives supported, using the policy of “remain” as a means of stopping May and Johnson. As the previous referendum had a percentage result of 52 for leave and 48 for remain, the result might have gone either way. However, with his slogan ‘*Get Brexit done*’, Boris Johnson had a much better campaign than his main rival **Jeremy Corbyn**, who took Labour far to the left of the political spectrum, so Johnson’s risky undertaking paid off with an overall majority of 80 seats.

The pressure was now on to fulfil Johnson’s promise to the electorate to meet the latest deadline of 31st January 2020 for withdrawal from the EU – just seven weeks after the election, but three and a half years after the referendum which started the whole process. Within days the withdrawal agreement was again put to a vote in Parliament, and this time it was accepted with a majority of 124. The withdrawal meant that, after 47 years, the UK once again became an independent sovereign state, as it had been for centuries before it joined the EC in 1973. The process was not completely over, however; the relationship between EU and UK in terms of trade, citizenship, travel, finance and many other factors were still to be discussed and agreed, with another deadline set for the end of 2020.