

# HOW TO REALLY STOP BREXIT

## Finding a way to help enough leave supporters to save face yet switch to remain is the only way to halt Brexit now, says Adrian Sanders

A post being shared on Facebook asks: “What would you do if you could be the Prime Minister for a day?”

I suspect most Liberal Democrats would declare “exit Brexit” and I would be sorely tempted to say the same. Unfortunately the next day our country would still be divided with a majority who voted leave feeling they had been cheated and demanding a return to Brexit while our party would still be flatlining in the polls.

Let’s be honest, being defined as the anti-Brexit party has done nothing to assist our recovery as a party that was once firmly the nation’s third political force and recording at least 20% of votes at general elections. We may have gained a few members but we are now in competition with Nationalists, Greens and Ukipers for third place with fewer than 7% of people supporting us nationally.

We can win local council by-elections, on local issues, just as we did in the 1970s when our national poll rating was in single figures and we had a tiny number of MPs. But breaking into the national debate and consciousness eludes us while we are seen as anti-Brexit obsessives.

### TINY FRACTION

This is further complicated by the fact that our largest and most electorally successful local parties post-2010 happen to be in remain areas. There are exceptions, led by less than wholeheartedly remain Liberal Democrat MPs, but in both cases the numbers are tiny and a fraction of the party’s strength across the UK in the mid 2000s.

The challenge facing those of us who wish we were not leaving the EU is how to persuade those who do to change their minds. I fear, left to us, it is a test too far as no matter how hard we try, how much evidence of future problems come to light and whom they will affect, opinion is hardly shifting.

Whether the polls will shift further away from leave remains to be seen but there isn’t a great deal of time left to prompt a Government u-turn if indeed one could be influenced before March 2019.

“Even though it has become clear the leave campaign’s claims were wrong that Brexit could be harmlessly achieved without customs union or single market membership, with an end to freedom of movement and jurisdiction of the European Court and would result in a financial windfall for the chancellor, we now know to avoid crashing out of the EU we will have to pay into the EU around £40bn, maintain single market and customs union membership and with it freedom of movement and still, at least for the foreseeable future, be subject to the ECJ.”

While the lies over the colour of our passports being linked to our membership of the EU have been exposed they are still believed by many of those for whom the symbolism of the dark blue passport trumps the reality of who can determine it.

Sadly, the longer the Article 50 process drags on with little or no sight of a beneficial end game for anyone the more impatient leavers become for a no-deal exit and the less confident remainers are that the country will come to its senses.

Amending the EU Withdrawal Bill so that the UK Parliament must have a meaningful vote is a significant victory for democracy but makes not a jot of difference to the outcome that whether meaningful or symbolic will simply be a vote to leave with a deal or without one. That’s not exiting Brexit.

I remember during the referendum campaign I wrote a blog about the need for the remain campaign to be aware that for leave-minded voters to switch to remain they needed a way to save face.

This is just as true today. Constantly telling leave voters they were wrong, ignorant, or stupid when their favourite newspaper and politicians were telling them the opposite, and had been for decades, was never going to work then any more than intellectually credible reports and studies proving the opposite will make much difference now.

You cannot wipe out years and years of falsehoods, defamations and deceitfulness about an overseas set of institutions that because of their complexity and location can easily be blamed for many of the failings of UK governments.

One of the key reasons why the referendum was lost was that remain fought it on the compromise deal prime minister Cameron had obtained from the EU, thus confirming the complex nature of the EU and its resistance to reform while reinforcing the narrative that the UK cannot control its own affairs. What Cameron should have highlighted was the peace, security and prosperity membership gives us enabling us to control our own destiny.

Another was the failure of Jeremy Corbyn to engage with the remain campaign and repeat the most powerful image of the 1975 campaign of the party leaders sharing a stage to support a ‘yes’ vote. By refusing to share a platform with Cameron and others Corbyn effectively holed the remain ship below the water line before it set sail.

Those who have recently parted with £7.99, or less, on the paperback version of Nick Clegg’s *How To Stop Brexit*, will have read the same logical, evidence-based arguments that failed to persuade the nation to back the EU. What was needed back then as now to counter

the emotional case for leave is an emotional case to remain in the greatest force for peace, democracy, prosperity and security Europe has even known.

The people running the remain operation failed to recognise that perceptions trump facts and emotional arguments are often more powerful than rational for many people, especially those who feel hard done by, left behind or denied an entitlement they see going to someone they judge less deserving. A failure not unlike the 2015 Liberal Democrat general election campaign.

It's too late to refight the referendum campaign; that Eurostar left St Pancras some while ago. The only way I can see to stop Brexit now is for the EU to come to rescue. That is probably the only way to help some leave supporters reach their own conclusion that the best deal is the one the other 27 member states are offering us. And it needs to be a new deal, not the one we currently enjoy.

It doesn't need every leaver to reach this conclusion and back the case to remain, but it will require a much bigger and sustained shift in positions than so far seen, otherwise we are out of the EU for a generation or more.

## **BACK FROM THE BRINK**

So, if I were prime minister for a day I would write to the leaders of all 27 member states together with the president of the European Parliament and the current president of the European Council asking them to suspend Article 50 and allow all 28 member states and the institutions of the EU and their leaders to come together to find an agreed way forward that allows all sides to save face and step back from the brink.

It would require the 27 to state why they wish the UK to stay in the EU, to spell out the terms of our continued membership including our current opt outs and any changes they may wish to implement that address some of the common criticisms of the EU articulated in many member states. It would need the UK to declare that we wished to remain as a consequence of the new terms because they remove many of the criticisms of the EU that led to the referendum in the first place.

Given Nick Clegg's recent claim that the European Union were ready to change freedom of movement as a concession to Theresa May before she took her hard Brexit stance, there must be room within the leadership of the EU to make an offer that gets the UK, Ireland and those other EU countries whose citizens stand to lose from this mess off the hook while at the same time protecting the union.

A new deal for the UK within the EU to refresh the dream of Schuman and Monnet of nations working closer together to meet the common challenges their peoples face.

Such a deal is not going to win over the more hostile

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elements of the British media towards the EU but it would neuter many of the criticisms they have overblown and answer some of those they've made up.

It seems to me that as the UK government and leadership of the opposition won't, so only the EU itself can really stop Brexit now.

Now if I could be prime minister for a second day I could then turn my attention to how we rebuild support for the Liberal Democrats as a freedom loving, radical,

reforming, socially just, Liberal - without the neo-political movement no longer needing to be obsessed with Brexit.

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Adrian Sanders was Liberal Democrat MP for Torbay 1997-2015 and is a councillor in Torbay

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