

Leave voters' patience is starting to wear thin as they fear betrayal



[ALLISTER HEATH](#)

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Brexiters on the campaign trail in May CREDIT: ANDREW PARSONS

Just get on with it! That is the consistent message from Leave voters up and down the country. For such people, it's simple: "There was a vote, the Leave side won and now the UK has to leave the EU. No ifs or buts". It's an instruction that our MPs would do well to heed, and one that permeates all of the findings from a fascinating series of focus groups that I have been shown.

[Change Britain](#), a new Eurosceptic campaign, has been speaking to voters in Yorkshire, in the Midlands, in the North East and North West. One of the most striking findings is the complete absence of any buyers' remorse. Those who voted to quit the EU are happy; their frustration stems purely from the stalling of the Brexit process, and the return of finger-wagging, preachy Remainers telling them that it can't be done.

MATT



'It's a Brexit advent calendar'

Matt cartoon about the long wait for Brexit CREDIT: MATT PRITCHETT/TELEGRAPH MEDIA GROUP

Many have been supportive of Theresa May, who is saying many of the right things, but patience is wearing thin. As one Leaver put it last week: "Now I want to see something. You have said it, now do it. They seem to get there and it fizzles out like a Roman candle." Many are demanding "a plan" and some "action". Plenty are upset at the lack of communication, smelling a rat. "They asked us to make a decision. We've done what we were asked to do. They should let us know what's happening." There is a widespread suspicion that a deeply untrustworthy establishment is preparing to sell them out, that "there's obviously some wheeling and dealing going on".

The tragic, explosive reality is that "ordinary Leave voters", as they are often called by London-based commentators, are right: the Brexit process is on the verge of going badly wrong, even though the economy has been astonishingly resilient since the vote.

The Remainers are on the march, with Tony Blair and his vast financial and human resources [returning to the fray](#); the legal complications relating to Article 50 are becoming [ridiculously onerous](#); and foreign leaders are making the most of our divided, unsettled establishment to [humiliate Britain](#) as often as possible.

Barack Obama's infamous intervention ahead of the referendum backfired; it is a fair bet that reading about the Maltese prime minister who wants the UK to "be worse off" or the Polish foreign minister who said that [we may never leave the EU](#) will have driven many into an even greater rage.

Angela Merkel's [decision](#) to block any fast-track deal over European expats was a seminal moment this week, as was the news that some lawyers believe that the Supreme Court could yet allow Scotland or even [the European Court of Justice](#) to have the final say over Article 50.

The reason why so many Remainers now feel able so openly to undermine Brexit is because the government has allowed itself to portray Britain as a supplicant, a divided, rudderless country. To European diplomats, it looks as if our government's heart is not really in this, and that our strategy is purely defensive, a bid to retain as close links to the EU as possible



Theresa May with Angela Merkel during a news conference at the Chancellery in Berlin, November 18 CREDIT: KRISZTIAN BOCSI/BLOOMBERG FINANCE LP

Many leading pro-Brexit activists and MPs are furious, even though they remain loyal to the Prime Minister. An obscure decision by the UK to sign up to the European patent court [this week](#) was widely interpreted as another sign that the Government's Brexit could end up so soft as to be meaningless.

The first obvious signs of Eurosceptics flexing their muscles came in the form of a letter by [60 Tory backbench MPs](#) demanding a clean or “hard” Brexit, complete with withdrawal from the single market and the customs union.

As to Change Britain, backed by Michael Gove, David Cameron’s former guru Steve Hilton and Labour’s Gisela Stuart, it has already signed up close to 50,000 supporters; its best recruiting day was when the Government lost its case in the High Court.

Staffed by Vote Leave alumni, Change Britain is rebuilding a network of ground campaign teams and organisers across the UK, from Colwyn Bay and Lisburn to Aberdeen, Redcar, Chippenham and Nottingham; the stalls and leafleting have restarted, as has the digital and social media push. Crucially, the next action day in December will target constituencies of anti-Brexit MPs.

Ukip may be in a parlous financial state but the ability of its new leader, [Paul Nuttall](#), to connect with ex-Labour “working class” and lower middle class voters is being underestimated.

Some 137 Labour MPs hold seats that backed Brexit – more than half the party’s total. And at some point, if Article 50 ends up getting bogged down in parliament, somebody – perhaps Arron Banks – will begin to finance an aggressive, populist campaign group dedicated to ousting any MP who defies the will of the public.



New Ukip leader Paul Nuttall with Nigel Farage CREDIT: JAMES GOURLEY/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

All of this means that the Prime Minister will have to act quickly to prevent the situation from spiralling out of control if the Supreme Court rules against her in the Article 50 case, [which is being heard next week](#). A decision is expected in January.

She will first have to mount a public, vigorous and passionate defence of Brexit as a positive, epoch-defining choice that will make Britain stronger, more prosperous and more global. She will have to start to throw Britain's weight around, and slap down internal and external critics: her language must be at once assertive, patriotic and liberal.

She needs to explain that while it would be mutually beneficial for the UK and the EU to agree a transitional deal when we leave, an inability to do so wouldn't be the end of the world.

She will have to make it clear that she sees the possibility of a [free trade deal with the US](#) as a huge opportunity – one that she will start working on immediately – and that she wishes to diversify the UK away from Europe economically and geopolitically.

She will then have to apply maximal pressure on Tory MPs to back her and be prepared to be pitiless with the House of Lords. But most important of all, she needs to work out how she would engineer a general election early in the new year, if all else fails.

The Tories are more popular than anybody can remember, with the country in the midst of a historic shift to the Right, caused in large part by the fact that the pro-Brexit majority still believes that Theresa May will deliver for them. She cannot afford to let them down, even if that means taking the greatest gamble of her career.