Twitter Thread by Dr Phillip Lee ■



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@DrPhillipLee

This is pure revisionism, untrue and a dangerous, divisive reinvention of recent history that will stop our country from recovering. I was intimately involved in these events and will try to explain....

> Quite an admission by Mandelson https://t.co/yY2Ym0ggby pic.twitter.com/SSVXO9vc43
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> — Anand Menon (@anandMenon1) December 4, 2020

Let's put aside for a moment the rights and wrongs of a 'soft' Brexit. (Wrong mainly because no one voted for it in the 2016 referendum; it literally wasn't on the ballot paper.)

There was a fleeting opportunity for a soft Brexit in 2016 *if* the-then PM had chosen to make delivering Brexit a cross-party endeavour. This is what she should have done on an issue of such strategic national importance, and I told her so at the time.

There was a second missed opportunity after the 2017 General Election delivered a hung Parliament. That is as strong a signal as you get in our democracy that it's time for a cross-party approach. Theresa May chose to buy a confidence-and-supply agreement with the DUP instead.

By mid-2018, the political reality was that Parliament's choice was between a confirmatory referendum or a Hard ('No Deal') Brexit because enough of the Conservative party wanted a 'clean' Brexit and the rest either couldn't agree on an alternative or didn't care either way.

That is why I resigned as a minister in June 2018. I couldn't be part of a Government that was blind to the inevitable outcomes of its Brexit policy: Britain leaving the EU with a minimal deal and a change in the country's direction towards a more nationalist and populist agenda.

A few Tories saw this - Bebb, @Anna_Soubry, Grieve, me - and helped form a tight cross-party group of MPs to find a solution. The so-called "Trains and Buses" group had more impact at Westminster in 2018-19 than anyone realised. By Sept 2018, the group had a deliverable plan.

We had to respect the country's choice in 2016 & find a democratic way to avert the worst outcomes. In practice, this meant a confirmatory referendum (so people could give their informed consent) on a workable plan for soft Brexit that had

Parliament's support (likely May's deal)

We also had to persuade colleagues of all parties to act in the national - not self - interest. We knew that the great majority of Labour MPs would vote for a referendum & against any hard Brexit. 'Remain' Tory MPs held the key - fear of their Tory associations was the main issue

In mid-2019 a few 'senior' Conservatives finally decided to try and see off a Hard Brexit by pushing for a soft one. But the self-styled "rebel alliance" had failed to grasp that any version of soft Brexit was then politically undeliverable. At best, they delayed the inevitable.

(Another quick aside: there were *no* leaks from the Trains and Buses group until the "rebel alliance" joined us. Their posturing was at times self-serving, unhelpful and broke the wider group's trust. The lack of previous leaks is why the T & B group remains relatively unknown)

Tory leadership bids in June 2019 perpetuated the myth that the Tories could deliver a 'soft' Brexit in Govt. And predictably failed: the hard-Brexit European Research Group was controlling events and would never have supported a soft Brexit. Johnson was always going to win.

The 'Benn Group', which formed in summer 2019, successfully delivered an Act that stopped the Government from forcing through a No Deal Brexit. What it failed to do, mainly because of the early General Election, was agree a solution. In time, that would have been a referendum.

In short, we're where we are because 1) 'Remainer' Tory MPs (May, Tugendhat, Greene etc) and former MPs (Stewart, Rudd, Hammond etc) did not grasp the fact that the only politically deliverable Parliamentary outcomes in late 2018 were a confirmatory referendum or a hard Brexit. https://t.co/5hubeyrPUn

> Perhaps those who campaigned for a moderate Brexit deal (instead of a second referendum or a hard Brexit) may have had a point. Although at the time it felt as though they were abused as Remainers by half the country and Brexiteers by the other... https://t.co/Gw3WT9NHgX
>
> — Rory Stewart (@RoryStewartUK) December 4, 2020

(Also: The People's Vote realised too late that persuading Tory MPs was critical. Some of us started The Right To Vote campaign in early 2019 to help. We needed a Cabinet Minister to resign and three were receptive. Didn't happen though.)

2) Jeremy Corbyn's team were happy to create political chaos because, in their minds, from such chaos would come their revolution. Most Labour MPs knew this and realised there was no agreed soft Brexit compromise. Hence the growth in support for a confirmatory referendum in 2018

3) Jo Swinson's baffling decision to go for a GE in late 2019. This was heavily based on flawed polling analysis not political reality. We were slowly winning the Brexit parliamentary race, then one of our own side spiked it. Hubris won through.

We came very close, though. Those of us (from all parties) who recognised the political dynamics and realities early found a democratic solution the country could live with and were just nine votes short of the Parliamentary majority needed to deliver

it.

(Our whipping operation, impressively run by just two MPs (one Tory, one Labour), was on the mark through the entire saga, much more so than the Govt whips office.)

For some to try to rewrite events so as to absolve themselves is wrong. Predictable but still wrong. Plenty of people behaved badly. But ultimately, this is about systems failure. Our political system spectacularly failed our country.

Over my decades in politics, I have seen first-hand too much hubris, self-serving decision-making & appalling behaviour at Westminster; too little integrity & effort to get to grips with complex issues. The result of these personal failings is the #Brexit we'll get on 1 Jan 2021.

We need more people in politics and public life who are better-motivated. People who, when push comes to shove, can be relied on to act with honesty, care and diligence. And the electorate needs to support them.

Not everyone comes out of this badly. Brexit was always in the SNP's self-interest but they supported our collective effort with honesty, energy & integrity. A number of Labour MPs distinguished themselves. The ERG's determination, consistency & hard work is also to be respected.

The rest of the Tories are a case study in the depths to which political & public life has sunk. At best, they were intellectually & morally weak. At worst, they actively lied (to the nation & themselves), putting personal interest & the pursuit of power above the public interest

The sooner we recognise this, the sooner we can start to correct the flaws and heal as a country. When future political historians write about our times, they will conclude that our politics failed our nation - indeed our four nations. Let's accept this and do better.