

Article for The Japan Times 09.06.20

*The Tribe that Lost its Head*

Surveying the current British political scene brings to mind the title of a novel published fifty years ago by the famous story-teller Nicholas Montsarrat – *The Tribe that Lost its Head*.

Montsarrat's story was about a small Caribbean island where deep culture clashes, misunderstandings, leadership issues and divisions led to dreadful outcomes. Today's story is also about an island, the much larger UK, where the ruling tribe has indeed just lost its head and is searching for a new one.

The precise situation is as follows. Until recently Theresa May was head of the Conservative Party which in turn had a small and precarious majority in Parliament. This made it the ruling party and with her, as its head, as Prime Minister.

Under pressure from her mutinous troops in Parliament she has now resigned as party leader, remaining as Prime Minister until a successor is selected. That selection will be conducted through a series of votes over the next two weeks, purely amongst Conservative Members of Parliament, whittling down the number of candidates to two from the present eleven.

The remaining two will go before all properly paid up and registered Conservative party members, at present about one hundred and sixty thousand across the whole country, who will choose the winner. They will be, so to speak, the final electors. The successful candidate will be announced on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. He or she will then become both party leader and, for the moment, Prime Minister.

Whether and how long the victor remains as Prime Minister of course depends on maintaining enough votes in the House of Commons to

defeat any vote of No Confidence in the newcomer. If the rebels who ousted Mrs May can be kept in line, then he or she will stay in office.

If not, then the Government falls, a General Election follows and anything might result, ranging from a hard-line Marxist-led Labour Government to a mish-mash coalition of different parties, such as the centrist Liberal Democrats and other breakaway factions. Both major parties would be torn on half by voters turning to one extreme, crashing out, or the other extreme, staying in the EU after all.

But what is it that will keep the Conservatives together and therefore in power? And here we come to the real nub of the situation. One section of the Conservative Members of Parliament believe all they need a strong leader who can somehow guide the UK out of the European Union - they hope in an orderly way via a proper deal -which is what poor Mrs May was trying in vain to do with her carefully agreed Withdrawal Treaty.

But if not, and here's the difference, the UK should leave anyway, deal or no deal, on the date agreed all round, (and enshrined in law), which is October 31<sup>st</sup>.

Another section believe a 'No deal' departure would cause economic chaos and must be avoided at all costs. Their dream is that this new strong leader could go back to the European Commission in Brussels and somehow negotiate better arrangements, especially over the problem of the border inside Ireland between the South, which remains in the EU, and the six counties in the North which are an integral part of the UK and would be leaving.

Yet another section believe this is all fantasy. They point to repeated statements from EU leaders that the existing Withdrawal Treaty is the last word, and cannot be re-opened. So for them the only course would be to sign up to the Treaty, where Mrs May failed, and move on to the next step in UK-EU relations.

Yet another section – and all these groups of course overlap – wants the whole issue to be put to another referendum (which would require

united Commons support for the necessary legislation and decisions on the questions to be included – a unity which does not exist).

Yet another again would like to reverse everything a stay in the European Union after all. And yet another lot after that would just like to postpone everything again, seek another extension time from Brussels and carry on arguing.

So where is the magician who can satisfy all these different factions. Of course he or she does not exist. The front-runner, the colourful and popular Boris Johnson, promises to squeeze more concessions out of Brussels or leave anyway. The EU Commission has firmly rejected the former course and Parliament could well unite across the parties to stop the latter.

Another candidate has wildly suggested that in this case Parliament should simply be closed down while the Government and its new PM take the UK out anyway. This would, by the way, undermine the British Constitution and drag the Queen into the heart of the quagmire.

Another candidate, Michael Gove, has said he'll keep trying for a new Deal and maybe ask for a short extension while he carries on trying. Another candidate Jeremy Hunt (the present Foreign Secretary) has said that he, too, will miraculously get something better from the EU, but might, just might, go the No Deal route if that does not work. And another one promises, against all the odds, that somehow a referendum can be procured – although, with the divisions of opinion so deep and entrenched, it would probably settle nothing.

There is a common feature to all these endless positions and variations. They are all blocked - at least in the short time left before October 31st. Every escape door is locked and bolted. The audience waits breathlessly for the conjuror's next trick, which is impossible. Skills well beyond those of Houdini are needed.

Whoever the Conservative 'tribe' pick as their new head the dilemma remains exactly as confronted by the now dethroned Mrs May. In modern conditions, where public opinion is more empowered than

ever, yet more fragmented and more volatile the ever, the dream of a truly 'strong' leader who in one leap can free a whole society from its dilemmas, may be just that.

The more sober reality may be a leader who can regain respect, trust and esteem from the population not by dominance and shouting loudest but by sheer wisdom, absolute honesty and the minimum of unfulfillable promises.

Of such a leader just at present there is little sign.