

13.12.18- The Japan Times_ *The Children Take Over at Westminster.*

Like children squabbling over the possession of toys, the members of the House of Commons at Westminster, once seen as the cradle of democracy, have descended into indignant and unyielding conflict, each faction clinging to its favourite cause and refusing to give up.

Before them they have a sensible compromise arrangement , painstakingly crafted and agreed amongst all members if the European Union , to manage Britain's exit from the Union with the least disruption, and even some gains for all sides, allowing progress to further steps along the way in good neighbourly relations in the very different future that lies ahead.

But eyes have long since been taken off these wider prospects and turned inwards to a cacophony of arguments and plans by numerous the different factions that attack all compromises and insist that their own pet solution is best.

Parliament , claim the factions, has now 'taken control', as the Compromise withdrawal agreement espoused by PM Theresa May and her Government is denounced and her attempts at meeting the cascade of criticism from every side are derided.

But of course Parliament is not a Government. In its current state Parliament cannot possibly agree on any clear way forward. That is **the one thing** on which almost all are agreed – at least in private !

Parliament can say what it *does not* like – which would be a disorganized crashing out of EU membership with no deal at all, but it cannot possibly decide on what it *does* like. With both the main parties deeply divided and smaller groups holding the balance, parliament trying to be in control or in charge means no-one is in charge.

The rival 'solutions' are endless. - on group call for a relationship with the EU such as Norway's, another group swears by the Canada model.

Others demand a return to the European Free Trade Area, others again call for a yet another referendum -which would tear the country even further apart.

The main Labour Opposition call for a renegotiation with the EU , despite none being available. .And still more voices favour leaving with no deal at all , or making lots of ‘managed’ mini-deals , or dropping the whole project and applying to go back into the EU after all.

All these ideas and more are being advanced with dogged conviction and the hope they will somehow turn out to be the winners.

Yet the one certainty is that not ONE of these can command a Commons consensus.

The outcome is plain and staring the MPs in the face, whatever their favourite preferences. It is if they vote against the one Compromise proposal that *is* on the table, they will, with absolute certainty, be voting for chaotic impasse , with an outcome very likely to be the very opposite of what those so voting intended.

Moreover, since this Compromise happens to be the only agreement on offer from the EU – re-opening it risks losing even that. The idea that the 27 other EU members can suddenly come up with a further big concession as a sort of seasonal gift - well, you believe that only if you believe in Father Christmas.

As for the vexed question of a keeping invisible the land border between the Republic of Ireland (inside the EU) and the UK province of Northern Ireland, intense arguments rage about a matter which could be decided by common sense. With hundreds of remote crossing points no hard border would ever be possible, short of a solid wall across the whole of Ireland. No-one on any side wants a closed border anyway.

Yet opponents of the Compromise have convinced themselves, aided by lawyers, that there is some kind of trap here which would keep Britain in what they call vassalage to the EU . So a situation which in all likelihood will never arise is now depicted as a cunning device for tying Britain into the Union indefinitely.

Missing completely from this frenzied debate are two considerations which ought to be at its centre .

One is that Britain's exit is bound to take a long time. Patience is needed. You cannot expect two systems which have grown together over forty-five years to be untangled in one bound, or not without grievous damage to both sides. A rushed departure and would be like amputation without anaesthetic – possibly fatal to both body and limb.

The other is that the wider European situation is changing fast. Brexit may be only part of the turmoil throughout Europe which the *New York Times* describes as 'business as usual', a landscape of seething discontent, with no strong leaders to pull it together. In Germany Mrs Merkel is now fading. In France President Macron is embroiled in damaging domestic chaos. Spain and Belgium are rocked by political instability. Most of central Europe is in revolt against EU rule from Brussels , as is Italy.

The reality is that the digital age has empowered protest everywhere ,draining away the middle ground of moderate politics and elevating polarized debate and hard-line views, left and right.

In a year or so the Union which Britain is now leaving will look quite different, more dysfunctional than ever and possibly in need of total reconstruction on less hierarchical lines. This might be a new sort of Europe which is waiting to be born out of the on-going technological revolution and in which Britain could play a creative and constructive part.

True and mature statesmen and stateswomen would be able to see that this is a prospect towards which there can be gradual advance, step by step, with the current Comprise Deal as a good first one on the journey.

But such vision seems to be absent from the minds of too many of today's Westminster Parliamentarians . And for that immaturity and short-sightedness Parliament could have to pay a very high price.
