

Brexiteers' insults and death threats symptoms of toxic atmosphere

The abuse that has been heaped upon Tory MPs who voted to enable parliament to have a Brexit deal vote was shocking



▲ Tory peers Patience Wheatcroft, left and Ros Altmann. Composite: Martin Argles, Graham Turner for The Guardian

We are shocked at the vilification heaped on our Conservative colleagues who voted to ensure that parliament will have a meaningful vote before Britain leaves the EU.

Despite the strong-arm tactics of the whips, the MPs followed their consciences and the belief that, before Brexit is finalised, parliament must have the chance to assess the terms of any deal. The resulting appalling insults from Brexiteers, calls for their expulsion from the party and even death threats are worrying symptoms of the toxic atmosphere in our country.

These MPs have been staunch supporters of their party; some have never rebelled before and were desperately disappointed to find it necessary. Yet they believe their role is to act in the national interest and uphold our parliamentary democracy. They believe in party loyalty, but not blind obedience.

There are many moderate Conservatives in both houses of parliament who are deeply concerned that some in our party are so desperate to leave the EU, with or without a deal, that they believe any cost is justified if it brings Brexit. They maintain that "freedom is priceless" but this extreme view does not reflect public opinion.

The British people voted to leave the EU and parliament has been respecting that vote, triggering article 50 and empowering the government to try and negotiate the "deep and special" future relationship with the EU that the Leave campaign promised. But many Conservatives are deeply disturbed by the rhetoric that "No deal is better than a bad deal". They fear that, as the Lords EU committee concluded a few days ago, leaving without a deal could be disastrous, resulting in job losses across the country, dislocation for vital industry sectors and putting at risk the hard-won peace agreement on the island of Ireland. They believe it is essential that parliament should have a meaningful say before the country takes such a potentially momentous step.

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That the government should be intent on depriving parliament of its rightful role would be remarkable if it were not consistent with the approach that has characterised its handling of Brexit from the start! It is not how our democracy is supposed to work.

The amendment the brave Tory “rebels” supported was not about stopping Brexit, nor did it indicate, as some of the more hysterical critics have shrieked, a welcome for a future Corbyn government. On the contrary, a government which bypasses parliament might be the catalyst for an election result for which we would never wish. Dominic Grieve and his colleagues were merely calling for parliament to control Brexit and not the reverse.

We are relieved that the government has moved towards a compromise rather than face a second defeat in the Commons over its determination to **enshrine the date of leaving the EU on the face of the bill**. Committing to the date in legislation was not only inflammatory but it removed vital flexibility from our ability to negotiate, playing into the hands of those who favour no deal.

Next year the withdrawal bill will arrive in the Lords. The job of the upper house is to scrutinise and amend legislation the Commons sends us to achieve the best result. This bill will be subject to that process. If we believe something in the legislation is wrong, it is our duty to send it back to MPs and ask them to reconsider. Mindful of the monumental importance for future generations of getting Brexit right, the Lords is unlikely to be receptive to bullying over a restricted timetable or whipping to toe the party line.

The British people voted to “take back control”, but that has to mean control by parliament, not a small group with extreme views or an executive that will brook no challenge. It is parliament that must have the final say on whether the deal that is negotiated for breaking away from the EU is acceptable as in the UK’s best interests.

We are deeply disappointed that colleagues who have rarely if ever rebelled before but want the best for their country are being lambasted for standing up for their beliefs on this crucial issue. It is deeply ironic that the most ardent Brexiter Tory MPs, who are now rounding on the brave 13, have themselves a history of voting against their party on numerous occasions, often in pursuit of their Brexit ambitions.

Baronesses Wheatcroft and Altmann are Tory peers. Wheatcroft is a former journalist and Altmann a former Department for Work and Pensions minister



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