

## Politicians have already honoured the result of the 2016 referendum

By triggering Article 50 and passing Brexit legislation, parliament respected the Leave result. To continue further requires a new mandate

by Ros Altmann / January 29, 2019 / [Leave a comment](#)



Britain is set to leave the EU in a few weeks' time with no certainty about prospective arrangements for future trade and co-operation. This has significant implications for our democracy. 17.4m citizens voted Leave in 2016. Nobody knows what all these voters expected to happen, or can say with any certainty what they think now.

Of course, parliament must respect the result of that referendum. But the crucial point that has been lost in all this, is that it already has.

It is simply ludicrous to suggest we have not honoured the result. The government has established a whole Department for Exiting the EU, hired thousands of officials, spent huge sums on external consultants, triggered Article 50, passed legislation for withdrawal and negotiated at length with the EU, aiming to achieve a Brexit which can satisfy the British people. Those who claim the vote has not been respected are ignoring these realities—perhaps wilfully. Respect for the result should not be confused with blind obedience.

It is certainly the case that the outcome of the Brexit negotiations does not match the promises. The “easiest trade deal in history” is nowhere in sight. Brilliant new agreements with other countries remain pipedreams. Our services sector is being cut adrift. We will be excluded from the Galileo satellite system, jeopardising the effectiveness of military operations.

None of this was made clear in the referendum. In any normal circumstances, democracy would respect the new realities, but extreme Brexiteers are glossing over all such details. They never expected to win, or thought about how to achieve their stated aims. Yet they seem to have convinced much of parliament and the media that the country has no alternative but to “deliver the result” and have proceeded to impose their own views of what Brexit really means, onto the entire nation. To claim this is democracy is nonsense.

Given the enormous implications of leaving the EU, with citizens at risk of being stripped of their EU rights and protections, parliament must fulfil the duties of representative democracy. Careful reconsideration is called for, not slavish obedience regardless of changed circumstances.

MPs cannot know how many people would have voted for the current withdrawal agreement and non-binding political declaration—or for no deal. Nobody knows how many wanted to leave the customs union or single market. And nobody was asked whether they support weakening our nuclear safeguards and protections by leaving Euratom. How many Brexit voters were just protesting against the establishment because they felt left behind? How many prioritise abstract sovereignty above prosperity? How many prioritise ending free movement of workers over maintaining frictionless borders for business, or new trade deals over Northern Ireland’s security? Nobody knows, but these are the trade-offs involved in Brexit.

Having respected the referendum vote, but been unable to deliver what was promised, the only way members of parliament can know what the majority think now is by asking them. This is not an affront to democracy, it is the logical path to take. Millions of people trust our parliamentary democracy to look after their interests. But if citizens who believed the fantasies peddled by Brexiteers find out they were deceived after we have left, it will be too late to do anything about it. People will not take kindly to being told that parliament was merely obeying their instructions.

Currently the UK has a privileged position in the EU—benefitting from the budget rebate, opt-outs from the euro and Schengen, and participation in EU agencies which protect our

security, food safety, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, nuclear and aerospace industries. Once we leave, we lose all these benefits so parliament must be absolutely sure this is what the majority wants. The only way is to ask people to confirm they are happy to proceed. That is democracy in action.