

FT Series **UK local elections 2018**Opinion **FT View**

Local elections give no respite from a Brexit-induced stalemate

Poll leaves the main UK political parties with no reason to change track



Theresa May in Wandsworth, south London, where the Conservative party retained control in local elections © PA
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Local elections in England are a notoriously unreliable indicator of the parties' national standing. Voters can be torn between high politics and parochial issues. But the outcome can be the spur for a losing side to rethink its approach. Sadly this week's contest has simply entrenched the UK's political stalemate. Neither the Conservatives nor Labour have any great reason to sob or celebrate. To borrow a phrase: "nothing has changed".

For Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party, the elections were a missed opportunity. It gained ground but, aside from winning one significant local authority, it failed to take its key London targets. The disappointment is partly its own fault. Hubris from a strong performance in last year's general election led it to talk up its prospects too loudly.

Theresa May's Conservative vote held up tolerably given that the party has been in power for close to eight years and its policy efforts have been wobbling like a shopping trolley with a bad wheel. The Tories even made some gains in the heart of middle England — areas the opposition must win if it hopes to form a government.

One shift is significant: the collapse of the UK Independence party. The nonulist party that played

midwife to Brexit lost nearly all of its local councillors. Ukip's general secretary likened his party to [the Black Death](#): causing huge disruption before going dormant. Ukip's supporters have flocked home to Labour and the Tories, bolstering the dominance of two major parties (although the centrist Liberal Democrats showed a few flickers of life).

The overall consequence is that these results will entrench the main parties' strategies. Neither has done badly enough to change course. For Labour, the results were good enough to forestall any rethink of the Corbynite agenda. The party's momentum has slowed but internal support for the leader remains strong. The question for Labour is whether the results suggest Mr Corbyn's hard left platform is reaching the limits of his appeal.

The Tories, meanwhile, will see no reason not to continue as the party of hard Brexit, speaking primarily to provincial English voters. Mrs May's position is a little more secure although, alas, not secure enough to stand up to hardliners in her own cabinet.

On Wednesday, Mrs May [tried and failed](#) to persuade her closest colleagues of a plan to resolve the UK's customs union conundrum. Even Sajid Javid, her new home secretary, [defied her wishes](#).

Her "new customs partnership", which involves Britain collecting tariffs on goods entering the UK bound for the bloc then reimbursing the EU, is costly and technically challenging to build.

This publication believes remaining in a customs union is the best outcome. But Mrs May's customs partnership — for all its serious flaws — does represent an effort to mitigate the economic damage of her stance. It may also be her only option to stave off a parliamentary rebellion, a Tory party split and a breakdown in Brexit negotiations. If the prime minister can corral her wayward ministers to back the proposal, she can bring MPs with her a little further down this rickety road and buy herself some negotiating time with Brussels. It is suboptimal but little in this process is not.

Whatever the government decides, the general paralysis will not end until Brexit is resolved. Britain is a divided nation on questions big and small. The stalemate can only be broken when Mrs May shows some firm leadership. Continuing to equivocate and delay may be the safest option to protect her government in the short term. It is hardly in the national interest.

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