

Britain is a nation in desperate need

After a historic Brexit vote, the country requires a miracle of statesmanship. Too bad it has



JENNI RUSSELL

This week, as an anxious Britain prepared to witness Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit plan crashing to defeat, Nicholas Soames, Winston Churchill's grandson, tweeted out one of his grandfather's solemn warnings from the 1930s.

Soames, a Conservative politician, repeated lines from a poem, by Edwin J Milliken, that his grandfather had quoted to express his despair at Britain's political paralysis in the face of the Nazi threat: "Who is in charge of the clattering train? The axles creak, and the couplings strain. For the pace is hot and the points are near, and Sleep hath deadened the driver's ear, and signals flash through the night in vain. Who is in charge of the clattering train?"

Nobody knows. With May's cabinet, the country, political parties and Parliament all hopelessly split over how or whether to carry out Brexit, Britain's political universe is imploding and so are its political norms.

At any other time, a prime minister who lost her government's flagship policy would be expected to resign. On Jan. 15, May's Brexit

plan was defeated by a vote of 432-202. Immediately afterward, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition Labour Party, called a vote of no-confidence. That will almost certainly be defeated on Jan. 16. Nobody expects May to leave office this week.

Before the vote, she had told her cabinet that no matter how much she lost by, she intended to stay on and steer a form of Brexit through. She is hoping to keep her hands on the wheel, even though most of her passengers are rebelling against her destination. But now that the vote is over, all of the plots for and against her, and for and against each possible permutation of Brexit, will be unleashed.

Every faction in each of the two main parties will be fighting and scheming for its preferred result, from a "no-deal Brexit" to a softer departure that leaves Britain closer to the European Union to abandoning the idea of leaving altogether. Predicting who will win is impossible because none of these factions has a majority and no one knows how or whether they will form alliances.

Politicians and journalists are frantically trying to game the next few weeks. Every outcome is unlikely and most seem utterly implausible, yet everything — from another indecisive election to a national unity government — is being suggested.



Brits watch the news of May's Brexit plan defeat in the Parliament.

I recently asked three senior Conservative politicians at the heart of these machinations which future Britain would be facing in 10 weeks, when the Brexit clock runs out. "God alone knows," said one cabinet minister, a keen Brexiteer. "No one knows," said the second, a reluctant Brexit backer. "Haven't a clue," said one

of the key campaigners for a second referendum.

Everyone is horribly — or jubilantly — aware that if within the next few weeks Parliament cannot agree on May's deal, or on any other deal, or on throwing the issue back to the country in a referendum, then Britain will tumble out of the European Un-

ion at the end of March, smashing its economy and its relationships with its closest trading partners.

With the ruling Conservatives so divided, Corbyn's Labour is in a potentially powerful position. If it threw its votes behind the Tories backing May's agreement, or supported a second referendum, or decided to back a softer Brexit

that retained much closer links with Europe — "Norway Plus," as it's known — those proposals would likely pass. But so far, the party has refused to commit itself to any such solutions because it, too, is split between those who want to leave the European Union and those who want to remain.

I put my baby daughter in dinosaur overalls



VANESSA BARBARA

"It's a new era in Brazil: Boys wear blue and girls wear pink," our new minister of women, family and human rights, Damares Alves, said this month in a video. And she didn't stop there: Under the new government of President Jair Bolsonaro, she declared in her inaugural speech, "a girl will be a princess and a boy will be a prince."

Alves' message was meant to be an attack on "gender ideology," a concept created by conservatives to disparage the rhetoric of equal rights for women and LGBT people. The fight for gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights will lead to the collapse of the traditional family, Alves and others like her say. It will foster homosexuality and threaten Christian values. And so the correct response is moral panic: "Nobody will stop us from calling our girls princesses and our boys princes," Alves fiercely proclaims.

Except the conservatives have it backward: Not only is no one stopping them from making their

children into gendered royalty, but in fact, their take on children and gender is already effectively a national obsession — if not a global one.

I experienced this for the first time at the very beginning of my pregnancy, when I went shopping for tools for trimming the baby's nails. "Is it a boy or a girl?" asked the saleswoman. I couldn't possibly fathom what nails had to do with genitals, but I chose to be polite and said I didn't know yet. The saleswoman seemed puzzled. She ran through a series of blue and pink cases, but finally announced she didn't have anything neutral. When I decided to forge ahead and buy a pair of blue nail scissors anyway, she gave me a look of silent reproach. "Anarchist," she practically whispered.

In the following months, however, I'd learn just how important my baby's biological sex was to the world at large. My initial OB-GYN, for instance, seriously objected to my decision to not find out my baby's sex in advance. It's difficult to find neutral-coloured baby items, she protested — what-ever would the baby wear once it was born? Many seemed to agree with her. "But what if it's a girl?" a saleswoman at a thrift store asked when I bought a couple of dinosaur

overalls. (Then she'd be a future paleontologist, perhaps?)

When I finally gave in to curiosity and learned the baby was a girl, I had to keep answering "It doesn't matter" over and over at stores. No item was free from the boy-or-girl question: I got it while buying socks, hats, pants, books, burp cloths, teething devices, diaper bags, plastic bowls. Even nasal aspirators often came in pink and blue.

It was very exhausting. And now that I cut my daughter's nails with blue scissors and dress her in dinosaur overalls, I wonder if the end is near.

The Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby, in her show "Nanette," once joked that one of the ways you can tell that there's too much hysteria around gender from the "gender-normals" of the world is the habit of putting pink headbands on bald babies. "That's weird," the comedian said. "I mean, seriously, would you put a bangle on a potato?"

And yet, strangers in the street find it appropriate to ask why my daughter — who is adorable but, realistically, not unpotatolike at this stage — is not wearing delicate earrings, a ribbon in her hair or a pink tutu. It doesn't get any better when you dig into the reasoning



behind it: As Gadsby says, parents do it because they are tired of seeing their beautiful baby girl being mistaken for a boy because she has no hair. Why this would be such a bad thing doesn't have to be explained — it's understood that it would be a calamity. ("The thing is, I don't assume bald babies are boys. I assume they're angry feminists, and I treat them with

respect," Gadsby jokes.)

It would be bad enough if the gender hysteria was limited to the colour of strollers and kneepads. But sexism is often imprinted on clothes themselves, and here is where it becomes exceptionally insidious — because of the messages it delivers. Baby boys might be dressed in a onesie that says, "Chegou o terror da mulherada"

Tales of gender blasphemy from deep within the land of princess and princesses