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Impasse may force a massive realignment

Sir, Sean Magee perhaps underestimates the degree of divisiveness of Corn Law repeal in the 1840s; it was likely more contentious than Brexit today (letter, 4 September 2017).

Sir Robert Peel had become privately convinced of the rightness of free trade, not actually needing a prod from Richard Cobden. But his landowner-based, protectionist Tory party forced him to demur, until the advent of the Irish famine, which provided a useful pretext to repeal the Corn Laws. Free trade, so he argued, would allow a more rapid flow of food from abroad to a starving people (erroneously as it happened).

Tories remained unmoved, and Disraeli, leading the assault in Parliament, drove Peel and his followers out of the party. Following Peel's death from a riding accident, the Peelites (William Gladstone among them) drifted into the Liberal fold. The division over repeal of the Corn Laws, in other words, occasioned a major political realignment which lasted more than a generation.

Perhaps there is a lesson for Theresa May in this. The continued impasse of Brexit negotiations may force her to reconsider government policy that could precipitate a similar historic political realignment: the shedding of Eurosceptic Tories from the Conservative party and the consequent revival of the liberal political centre.

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