



Dual story The wider public is sceptical of Boris Johnson's Brexit plan even as he enjoys overwhelming support among the Conservatives
AFP/FRANK AUGSTEIN

STATES OF MATTER

Between Brexit and Boris

The UK's unending labour of carving out an existence outside the EU may soon end in serious self-harm



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He has played the genial bumbler with great effect and managed to erase a past scarred by scandal from the public record. Since quitting Theresa May's cabinet in protest at a deal that ostensibly failed to set down the terms he demanded for the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), Boris Johnson mobilised a dissident group to vote down May's proposals thrice over in the House of Commons.

One vote should have been sufficient to trigger May's resignation, but she hung on in defiance of parliamentary convention, finally offering her resignation as a parting gift if the Commons were to endorse her third iteration. Denied that parting courtesy, May quit in deep distress, opening the door for Johnson's ascent.

There are several who believe that May was deliberately set up by the Conservative Party grandees to fail, since that abject end was necessary to make a Johnson premiership halfway acceptable. The ploy may have succeeded in winning Johnson the overwhelming support of his party, but the wider public remains sceptical, abundantly so.

Johnson is a unique political creature in that few are able to tell where the pretence yields to wilful, cynical ignorance. He has been on record observing that it is "often useful" to exude an image of "deliberately pretending not to know what is going on", since that may well be the reality and "people may not be able to tell the difference".

Johnson made and unmade a career in journalism cooking up dubious factoids about the grotesque impositions of the EU bureaucracy. In deciding the question of the UK's continuing membership with a binary choice in the 2016 referendum, he waffled before opting for the exit option. Infamously, he campaigned on a bus which blazoned the fake claim that the UK paid out £350 million every week to the EU, which, following Brexit, would

be better deployed expanding the National Health Service.

As he entered the leadership contest to succeed May, Johnson faced the momentary inconvenience of a petition demanding his prosecution for misusing public office by pushing a false claim. Asked to appear in court, he was reprieved by a higher bench for reasons unclear.

Truth is evidently not a required attribute in political rhetoric. Neither, judging by Johnson's utterances since taking up the premiership, is consistency. The red rag for the hard Brexit crowd that Johnson leads is the so-called "backstop", introduced to prevent an unravelling of the peace in Northern Ireland. Brexit would have reversed the softening of borders between the restive province and the Republic of Ireland that was, within the broader programme of European unification, key to bringing peace.

In a conversation with his Irish counterpart Leo Varadkar soon after taking office, Johnson reportedly said that the UK would be leaving the EU on October 31, "no matter what". According to the official transcript of the conversation, he also proclaimed "steadfast commitment" to the Ireland peace accord and disavowed any possible restoration of "checks or physical infrastructure on the border".

Since the EU insists on the backstop as an indispensable part of Brexit, Johnson's locutions so far suggest that the October 31 outcome would retain this element. Yet immediately afterwards comes the rather confounding assertion that Johnson's "clear preference" was leaving with a deal, though "it must be one that abolishes the backstop".

The political leadership in Northern Ireland is convinced that the arrogance of the Brexit

lobby is creating a mood, even among Unionists in the province, for unification with the Republic. The first minister of Wales has warned of Brexit's potentially "catastrophic" impact in his province. And Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has warned that Johnson's "dangerous" approach could precipitate a chaotic exit with absolutely nothing agreed about the day after.

Johnson is on record saying that a "no deal" Brexit is a one in a million possibility. But the cabinet minister he has entrusted with the transition, Michael Gove, has been "working on the assumption" that the EU will never consent to ending the backstop, which made a "no deal" Brexit the "first priority".

The hard Brexit lobby is worried that the backstop would institute an interim regime of borderless trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic that could by default become permanent, keeping the UK in the European Customs Union for the foreseeable future. They concede the difficulty of a resolution and speak of a technological fix that the EU

has expressed its readiness to work towards. While that fix is devised though, they are unwilling to live with the risk of the backstop as a transitional arrangement.

Steeped in illogic, the Brexit posture is a reversion to a variety of "little England" chauvinism that remained concealed while the UK, as an eager understudy of the US, championed the cause of finance-driven globalisation. The collapse of that model has sparked a resurgence of the sentiment that is unable to say its name aloud without embarrassment, and seeks strange and specious forms of self-expression.

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