



Packing a punch
Boris Johnson and his fellow Conservatives have strong allies in large sections of the UK media
AP/FRANK AUGSTEIN

STATES OF MATTER

Ready for departure

The general election result shows that the UK is ready to press ahead with Brexit, unmindful of consequences



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

The British general election of December 12 delivered the most solid mandate for any party since 1987. After all the prognoses of continuing uncertainty in the UK's relationship with Europe, the outcome reflected an urgency about marching forward. All anxieties were banished as the simplicity of the promise to “get Brexit done” prevailed. After the purge of the less faithful among the incumbent Conservative Party, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had gained the numbers to deliver on the 2016 referendum for Britain's exit from the European Union.

On the other side was an elaborate plan by the Labour Party, which has, since the 2008 financial crisis, tacked leftwards and abandoned the simple formulaic route. The Labour manifesto, minute in its attention to detail, spoke of a restoration of basic industries and infrastructure to public ownership, the rescinding of tax breaks — stretching back three decades — for the wealthy, and a boost to public services. On Brexit itself, Labour promised a second referendum, since years of bitter internal debate after the first had exposed the folly of premising a complex decision on a binary choice between “yes” and “no”.

These complexities failed to gain traction in the battle for attention with the extravagant hype of the Conservative campaign. A few days before polling, an examination of Conservative campaign ads on Facebook found 88 per cent of them factually dubious or downright false. Among these was a promise to build 40 new hospitals under the National Health Service, the unshakeable foundation of the UK's social welfare system. Actual and projected spending plans revealed that a mere six hospitals had secured grants for upgradation. Another 34 had been given funds to explore upgradation options for possible implementation through the second half of the next decade.

Similar economy with fact was evident in

claims about the beneficial effect of Conservative tax cuts and the baneful impact of Labour proposals. Labour's offences against factual authenticity, in comparison, were minor: An instance being its misclassification of “transgender” hate crimes as race-based in a campaign ad, though the generalisation of an increase in both categories since the Brexit referendum was accurate.

The other side of this difference in scruple was a huge asymmetry in media scrutiny. Illustratively, when a Channel 4 journalist met senior Conservative leader Michael Gove and challenged him on the 40 new hospitals promise, he was fobbed off with questions about intent. Gove, himself a journalist prior to entering politics, also rendered him free advice on how he should pursue a like career trajectory, since his approach suggested political commitment rather than journalistic neutrality.

The media in the UK is dominated by the Murdoch-owned News Corporation and the Daily Mail group, both fiercely committed to the Conservatives. The marginal space that critical voices gained in other sectors of the media was effectively neutralised by a conspicuous failure of the fabled public service broadcaster, the BBC. There was in fact sufficient buzz over BBC bias to have veterans of the corporation fretting over a loss of public trust.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, for his part, was not one to play to the British stereotype of the stiff upper lip. He expressed regret in his first reactions over the erosion of the gains Labour had registered in the 2017 general election. That was a triumph of clarity in thinking through political and economic choices against the muddled Conservative promise to pursue Brexit even at the risk of widening the

schisms that emerged after the referendum of 2016.

Similar clarity and candour cost Labour dear in 2019, despite the intervening years showing that the Conservatives would rather dissemble and deflect, than address multiple ambiguities in their Brexit plan.

Brexit could disrupt the peace in Northern Ireland, premised upon a dilution of border regimes with the Republic of Ireland in the larger European economic space. Europe has unanimously set its face against a restoration of border controls. Johnson bitterly opposed his predecessor Theresa May's proposal to leave open a possibility that the UK would continue in a customs union with Europe if a better solution was not found. Once ensconced in the prime ministership, he has not hesitated

to go even further than May, effectively conceding the possibility of a customs check between the British mainland and the Irish island.

Documents leaked during the election campaign — which suggested that this would pose severe administrative problems — were hushed up in yet another media cop-out. Other potential sources of discord lie ahead, including the solid mandate received by the Scottish National

Party in Scotland and the decimation of unionist factions in Northern Ireland.

For these issues to be banished from public attention in the wake of the results speaks of the overpowering hold of “Little England” chauvinism, even among erstwhile Labour constituencies south of the Scottish border. With the economy on an erratic course, Johnson and his flock may not have much time left to indulge themselves in that vacuous fantasy.

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