

## AFTER BORIS JOHNSON, CAN THE UK REGAIN INTERNATIONAL RESPECT?

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*In the space of six years, the UK has gone from being an influential member of the world's largest economic block to a self-imposed outcast that is bent on picking fights with the EU, that keeps threatening Ireland's hard-won peace and stability. The road back to international respect will be long for the UK.*

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Without Boris Johnson, Brexit would never have happened. Johnson's personal brand swung the narrow win for Leave in 2016. Despite the hopes of critics who argue that **"everything tainted by Johnson's lies needs to be undone. That includes his Brexit"**, this is unlikely to happen. Johnson has reshaped the Tory party by the force of his political personality and pushed it closer to the Faragist fringes, at least when it came to leaving the European Union. The damaging economic consequences of Brexit, hidden for two years by the Covid-19 crisis are now plain to see but, more damaging than the hit to exports and long-term growth **"has been the intellectual corrosion of government required first to make such a deal, and then to continue to sell it to the public as a grand success"**. The personal mendacity that led to Johnson's downfall is ultimately a distraction from a much deeper-seated dishonesty with the public and has become a chronic condition for the British polity.

Defying political reality has, throughout his career been the hallmark of the Johnson trademark. When reporting for the Daily Telegraph from Brussels, an already Eurosceptic Boris Johnson was famous for misquoting the Financial Times and already dreamt of bigger things. "They don't put up statues to journalists" he famously quipped and went on to be elected an MP in 2001 and then Mayor of London in 2008. The puppet master is impossible to replace. An increasing number of electors have come to see the spectacle for what it is. European leaders gave up on treating the man with any seriousness, let alone respect. The contempt was shared by Jo Biden and Vladimir Putin.

It is unusual for a government to be determined to inflict damage on its own people but that is what successive Conservative governments have done since 2016. The government's own analysis, published in November

2018, concluded that under a bare-bones free trade arrangement which the UK government was then seeking, UK gross domestic product was likely to be 5% smaller than it otherwise would be, over the long term. It was possible that the UK would lose close to half its potential increase in GDP per head over the following decade, with grim implications for public revenue and spending. However, Boris Johnson's dismissal about companies' concerns over Brexit just about sums up the state of thinking in a party once proud of its ties with industry and the City of London.

Martin Wolf has never tired of pointing out that the big failings of the United Kingdom – its ultra-low investment rate, and long educational tail – never had anything to do with EU membership. **“Brexit is not the most important challenge confronting British policy makers.** What is the most important challenge is simple to describe and hard to solve. This is the longer-term stagnation in productivity and real incomes. If the country cannot solve this, it is unlikely to solve much that matters.” Neither tax cuts nor deregulation can turn the economy around. That will depend on higher investment. “It will depend on improvement in corporate governance and capital markets, which encourage investment and innovation. It will depend on exploiting the energy revolution, to accelerate growth and lower emissions.”

In the space of six short years, the UK has gone from being an influential member of the world's largest economic block to a self-imposed outcast that is bent on picking fights with its former club, that keeps threatening Ireland's hard-won peace and stability. Freeing itself from the shackles of Eurocracy, Johnson often said would allow the United Kingdom to ply the seas of global free trade. However, dreaming of a long-lost imperial past and quoting Winston Churchill cannot hide the fact that the departing prime minister has no dignity, not a shred of remorse for his legacy. He is arguably the worse First Lord of the Treasury (the official title of prime ministers in the UK) since the job was created three centuries ago. As Philip Stephens noted **“nothing befitted Britain's prime minister so much as the humiliating manner of his departure. For Boris Johnson, honour and integrity were always a distant country”**. Lying to the queen and parliament were part and parcel of a sustained assault on the values, institutions and the traditions which underpin British society. His government has done all in its power to dismantle the checks and balances embedded in the constitution and replace them with rule-by-mob populism.

Many senior Conservative party ministers and backbenchers have been complicit because, after the Conservative victory in the 2019 elections, Johnson was judged a “vote winner”. Yet he never had a plan for the nation, a vision for a different Britain. Brexit was but a vehicle for personal advancement. Practising Churchillian mannerisms could not disguise mendacity. Even Johnson's support for Volodymyr Zelensky in the war against Russia was the result of his domestic troubles as he turned his back on his rich Russian oligarch friends who had given so much money to the Conservative party, bringing the influence of a deeply corrupt adversary to the heart of the establishment.

The road back to international respect will be long for the UK. It will not be helped by slower growth than in other European countries. Regaining the trust of devolved governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast will be a tall order. For all the articles and books about the former prime

minister's education and sense of entitlement, many will continue to puzzle about how a man "utterly unfit to be prime minister" in the words of the respected former editor of the Daily Telegraph succeeded in getting into 10 Downing Street. Max Hastings added that "his elevation (to the post of prime minister) will signal Britain's abandonment of any claim to be a serious country". His conclusion, three years ago, is an apt postscript two and a half years of chaotic government.