

THE TALENTED MR JOHNSON?

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Can 'no deal' really be Boris Johnson's game-plan? He must know that 'no deal' would be disastrous for the UK and he would not survive long in No. 10 if he took the nation over that cliff. His likely underlying strategy is to keep the votes of the right together under the Tory umbrella by pushing no deal. At the same time he hopes to keep the opposition divided sufficient so that he can come through the middle and win a general election. The objective all along would be to maintain Johnson in power, not to do a no deal Brexit.

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Looking across the English Channel from Paris, Brussels or Berlin the Brits appear to have finally gone mad. That madness has now metamorphosed in physical form in the shape of Boris Johnson as the 55th first Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister. The tenor and thrust of the Johnsonian rhetoric is all about the preparations for and the credibility of 'no deal'. No deal to be clear means exiting the European Union on 31st October 2019 with no settlement of EU/UK financial obligations; no agreement of EU citizens rights in the UK and UK citizens rights in the EU and no agreement on the maintenance of an open Irish border. It also means Britain, which has been in the EU for 45 years, suddenly becomes a third country overnight, severing itself instantly from its deep market access to its largest market. Can 'no deal' really be Johnson's game-plan?

'No deal' is clearly very economically damaging. It involves leaving the European Union without any transition arrangement and no immediate prospect of any trade agreements. Whatever one's views of Brexit, sharply pulling the UK economy out of the common and then single market around which it has developed over almost half a century will incontrovertibly cause immense economic damage. The British end of Europe wide supply chains of automotive and other complex engineering businesses will be snapped. British services industries (Europe's largest services sector) will lose immediately a substantial amount of their market access to their most valuable markets. The agricultural sector will face immediate heavy tariffs cutting off access to their principal export market. Farmers in order to reduce costs of economically unsustainable cattle will quickly have to resort to mass culling of their herds. While fires are being lit all over England to burn marketless cattle, fires of different sort will be burning in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland even today before 'no deal' has the most intense terrorist activity of any part of the European Union. The resurrection of the border, a symbol of British rule and the unwanted symbol (by republicans) of the division of Ireland, will turbo-charge violence in the province. That is all before one considers the prospect of Britain spiralling out of all

its complex web of trade and facilitation agreements at one go and then having as much global market access as Mauritania (one of the few states to rely solely on WTO standard terms).

The not unreasonable question is therefore what is Johnson playing at by pushing 'no deal'? He must know that 'no deal' will be disastrous and he would not survive long in No.10 if he took the nation over that cliff. Unless he is actually mad what then is the talented Mr Johnson really up to?

One absolutely guiding light with the career of Boris Johnson is that he puts his own preferment and ambition above all else. And in particular Mr Johnson's great career aim of becoming Prime Minister and staying Prime Minister as long as possible. Actually *doing* no deal does not fit with that ambition.

However, *talking* about no deal may well fit with that ambition. Johnson is faced with an incredibly challenging political situation. On his far right he has the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage pushing 'no deal' and scooping up part of the Conservative Party vote. Within his own party he has the ultra Brexiter known as the European Research Group who are also largely 'no dealers'. In the centre he has the resurgent pro-EU Liberal Democrats, who potentially could pull in liberal conservative MPs and voters. And on the left he has, despite the many failures of Jeremy Corbyn, a Labour Party that can command around 20-25% of the popular vote. And he has a deadline of 31st October by which he has promised to take the UK out of the EU. And he has damned the only smooth exit route of the EU—the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Theresa May, which Brussels says is now not open to renegotiation.

A further problem often overlooked is that Johnson heads a minority government which depends on the Ulster-based Democratic Unionist Party to maintain a majority. And even with DUP votes he only has a majority of one.

In this challenging political context, the fundamental aim of the Johnson government is to survive and then prosper. Brexit itself is a secondary consideration. However, Brexit may help Johnson. His likely underlying strategy is to keep the votes of the right together under the Tory umbrella by pushing no deal. At the same time he hopes to keep the opposition divided sufficient so that he can come through the middle and win a general election.

It is in this context that the 28th August suspension of Parliament for five weeks in September and October should be seen. The aim is to project it as a decisive 'no deal' act by a resolute government to coax the support of all 'no deal voters into the Conservative fold.

The first limb of Johnson's strategy is to emphasise the value of 'no deal', and at least give the impression of no deal activity to support Johnson's contention that he is serious about doing 'no deal'. The mistake of many commentators is to think that this focus on no deal is to persuade the European Union that Johnson is serious about getting some sort of better deal than the Withdrawal Agreement. The EU is not the target audience of his 'no deal' rhetoric. The real target is his own voters, and those of the Brexit Party (and some Labour Brexiter voters). The no deal rhetoric is in other words aimed at quashing Nigel Farage and his Brexit Party and bringing the Brexit voting coalition solely under one Tory roof.

The second limb of the Johnson strategy is to ensure someone else is to blame for the fact that Britain has not left the EU on 31st October. In order to have a general election the UK will need to obtain an extension of its Article 50 negotiating period beyond the end of October. However, Johnson in his pretend role as the extreme 'no dealer' cannot be seen to voluntarily apply for an extension. He needs someone else to both take the rap for the extension and then be the target of his subsequent election campaign.

The suspension of Parliament while creating some risks in uniting the opposition also opens up the prospect of the opposition taking measures against his government. It would be ideal for Johnson if parliament, reacting to the suspension enacted legislation forcing him to obtain an extension of Article 50 from the EU Council before calling an election. A temporary government of national unity would also be welcome. It is likely that in early September Parliament, which is overwhelmingly against no deal, will take some such steps. Johnson can then blame them as the evil establishment parliamentary remainers for obtaining an extension and forcing an election. In either case Johnson (Eton, Oxford, and member of Her Majesty's Privy Council) can then run an anti-establishment election populist campaign, pitching himself as leading the people against the remainder led voter-denying Parliament.

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Tory strategists believe that as they have more cash available than all the other parties and most of the media on their side they have the means to swing a general election campaign. This belief is reinforced by the operation of the British first past the post (FPTP) electoral system. With the opposition divided probably between an ailing Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and a Liberal Democrat Remainer Alliance (with the Greens and Plaid Cymru), the Tories may be able to cut strongly through the divided opposition. Potentially Johnson can win a majority with only 30-32% of the vote. Johnson can increase his prospects of victory by making offers of huge increases in public spending on the NHS, housing and transport, combined with strong anti-immigration rhetoric. This part of the campaign is already in play with Johnson simultaneously making multi-billion pound election promises combined with heavy tax cuts.

This strategy is bold but the path to victory, despite the cash, electoral promises and media support, is narrow. Johnson relies upon the opposition parties to remain divided and for neither of the opposition parties to gain traction in the polls. For instance if moderate Tory voters put off by the Johnsonian anti-immigrant rhetoric, combined with disillusioned Labour voters, lent their votes to the Liberal Democrat led Remainer alliance, then the peculiarities of the FPTP electoral system could start operating in the Liberal Democrats favour. What also would alarm Tory strategists is if Farage's Brexit Party, despite the Johnsonian no deal rhetoric, holds onto a considerable slice of its vote, pushing the Tories below 30%.

The other problem for Johnson, as May found out in 2017, is that in a general election you cannot control the narrative. Events, and the voters' interest in a broader range of issues, from health care to social security through to housing and transport can end up dominating the campaign. In addition, Johnson is the third Conservative Prime Minister at the end of nine years of Tory power. He and his party, away from Brexit issues cannot evade responsibility for the last nine years. The danger for Johnson is that the election campaign starts off on the glories of no deal Brexit, but quickly mutates into a litany of complaints against the last nine years of Tory rule. Tory nationalist populism fades in the light of the social and economic reality of the last decade of Tory rule.

If Johnson's boldness however does in fact pay off, and he is returned to No.10 supported by a substantial parliamentary majority it does not mean he will go ahead with no deal. The objective all along was to maintain Johnson in power, not to do a no deal Brexit. If Johnson gets a majority he would no longer need the DUP. Therefore he would probably drop opposition to an open Irish border and would be happy to leave Northern Ireland effectively in the EU single market. He could then seek a cosmetic overhaul of May's Withdrawal Agreement and push it through the parliament. The game is after all to keep the talented Mr Johnson in No.10 not to do a crazy no deal Brexit.