

BORIS JOHNSON'S DAY OF RECKONING CANNOT BE FAR OFF

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Boris Johnson's Covid19 policy is, in the eyes of a growing number of British people, a mystery. The same is true of his Brexit strategy. For weeks, Westminster and Brussels have been consumed by the prospect of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. The prime minister's intention to rewrite the EU withdrawal agreement has raised a deep sense of mistrust towards Johnson in the EU and in his own ranks.

Brexit is not, by any measure, foremost on the minds of millions of British people. There is no end, here as elsewhere in Europe, to the huge fallout from Covid 19. Worries about a possible second wave, rising unemployment and how to keep schools and universities open weigh far more heavily on most people's minds than the latest twists and turns on the Brexit negotiations. Having voted to leave the European Union more than four years ago, people are simply exhausted by what has been a badly managed negotiation on both sides of the Channel.

The incompetence of the current UK administration hardly needs restating. That a breakthrough in negotiations might well occur, that the law-breaking clauses of the UK's internal market bill will be dropped is not out of the bounds of the possible. For weeks, Westminster and Brussels have been consumed by the prospect of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has sought to strengthen his negotiating hand by pushing a bill that would brake international law but failed to address the unlikely scenario that he publicly claims to be worried about, an EU food blockade of Northern Ireland.

The EU has not responded to the prime minister's latest move but its senior bureaucrats have, since 2016, done themselves no favours by trying to paint those who voted to leave the EU as people who did not understand what they were doing and had been so to speak "manipulated". Their disdain was audible across the Channel and chimed with those in the UK who were keen to remain. Never did Brussels express its absolute respect for what was a democratic vote. It is worth remembering Winston Churchill's reaction to the crushing defeat his Conservative party suffered in the 1945 general election, which was as stunning and unexpected at

the Brexit vote: democracy had spoken and the voice of the people had to be respected however bitter the pill for the man who had led the United Kingdom in the fight against Nazi Germany.

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The Brexit deal, if and when it comes will be very bad for the UK, whatever form it takes. Official estimates are that the British economy will be 5-7% smaller in fifteen years time under a Canada-style arrangement. Brexit could hit the economy more than Covid19. A deal will mean no tariffs and quotas on goods but will not remove the need for regulatory checks. It will do little to ease the sale of services to the EU, to the obvious detriment of the City of London and will result in a sharp increase in customs bureaucracy and duplicate products approvals.

A further twist has been added to the story. The conservative weekly *The Spectator* has, for nearly two centuries, been a fixture of the English media. It is iconoclastic and its political thrust has been pro-Brexit and pro-Johnson. It rejoiced in the prime minister's thumping majority in last December's elections. Yet last week, its editor, Fraser Nelson, expressed the bitter disappointment felt by a growing number of Tory hierarchs and members of the House of Commons at the lack of leadership of Boris Johnson, as they saw it, at a time when the risk of a no-deal Brexit and the confused and confusing handling of the pandemic makes the government of the UK particularly demanding.

"Physically" Nelson writes, "Boris Johnson is still around [...] this week he could be found contradicting other ministers in a parliamentary committee, or sulking on the front bench. But this is not the effervescent, bombastic, engaging leader MPs though they had elected. Its not just Boris; his whole government seems adrift, defined by its avoidable mistakes: Covid policy, Brexit, party discipline... in all these things there is a conspicuous – and baffling, lack of leadership."

Sending a minister into the chamber to say the government would "go rogue" and "break international law" failed to scare the EU and ended up appalling the Conservative Party as well as handing ammunition to the PM's enemies. He could have said that he would protect the integrity of the UK as he saw it and use the flexibilities built into the agreements he had already negotiated. Yet by the end of the debate, the prime minister softened his tone, insisting he was merely seeking a reserve power that he hoped never to use.

This was a damaging, avoidable mess as Tory MPs could not accept the idea of breaking a promise and renegeing on legislation Boris Johnson had

only recently asked them to pass. Their reputation and honour were at stake as the *The Daily Telegraph* - a great supporter of the government, reminded its readers. Fraser is not alone in writing that those who meet the prime minister say he looks “exhausted, broken and astonished at what he had unwittingly unleashed”. His skills as a communicator are being increasingly questioned. So often his public utterances blindside the cabinet and the country. His Covid19 policy is, in the eyes of a growing number of British people, a mystery. The same is true of his Brexit strategy.

As his closest adviser, Dominic Cummings continues to destroy the traditional civil service and forces the resignation of one senior official after another, neither he nor the prime minister offer the slightest blueprint on how to reform government. The Labour opposition meanwhile is led by the very able Sir Keir Starmer but too many of its young intake of MPs, while being idealistic and far removed from the ideological Left of the Jeremy Corbyn years, lack solid experience of government let alone international affairs.

The chief features writer of *The Financial Times*, Henry Mance believes that “Mr Johnson’s premiership will soon be further in deficit. His first significant legacy will be to have broken parts of the British economy – and the civil service – with a vague promise to glue them back together again even better [...] I lose track of which MPs and grandees re rebelling on which issues. The common theme is that they have no deference to the prime minister’s judgement [...] who can blame them? Mr Johnson’s views on every issue, from wealth taxes to environment regulation, appears up for grabs.” For all the laments from his political friends about his lack of focus, carelessness and love of bold words over the grinding detail, the weaknesses of Boris Johnson were always there for all to see. Campaigning is one thing but governing is quite another matter. His government is full of the acolytes of Dominic Cummings who have no regard for the institutions of the United Kingdom. His instinct might be to unite the country but the pitbulls around him know only how to divide. The Covid19 virus hit him much harder, last spring, than his officials allow for - as it did Dominic Cummings. If the two most powerful men in the UK have not fully recovered, they are unlikely to be able to steer the ship of state in the current turbulent waters for much longer. Sooner or later Mr Johnson will have to get rid of Dominic Cummings however much he relies on his chief strategist. The day of reckoning for the latter - or both, cannot be far off.