

“Misfits Baby Misfits”

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

So the new year is well and truly on us and “misfits” and “weirdos” are the No. 10 flavour of the month according to chief strategist Dominic Cummings in his recent blog “Two Hands are a lot”.[\[1\]](#) Legendary Australian band Cold Chisel penned the song “Misfits” back in the late 1970s:

*“Well youth is my advantage
Anonymity my reward
While the world’s being measured
For a uniform
It’s my luxury to be ignored”[\[2\]](#)*

Time it seems has not lessened the appeal of the “odds and spads” (just another turn on British eccentricity then?) and Cummings desires to connect with the young (“new thinkers” rather than “old thinkers”?)

Cumming’s quirky phraseology notwithstanding I found reading this blog quite illuminating, though not because of his desire to engage with intellectuals of a certain calibre, but rather because of its barely disguised assault on the perceived failings of the British state, specifically the Civil Service. Namely:

“There are... profound problems at the core of how the British state makes decisions. This was seen by pundit-world as a very eccentric view in 2014. It is no longer seen as eccentric. Dealing with these deep problems is supported by many great officials, particularly younger ones, though of course there will naturally be many fears — some reasonable, most unreasonable.”

For Cummings it appears that these institutions are ripe for the reshaping, although as noted by others (for example Jonathan Portes writing in *The Guardian*[\[3\]](#)) it wouldn’t be the first time that a PM and his team have sought to restructure the Civil Service and the British state has proven stubbornly resilient in the face of would-be reforming Prime Ministers.

However, more telling is the notion that any opposition to his desired changes can be safely disregarded by a Government with a commanding majority, at least in the short-term. Moreover, Brexit is seen as an opportunity to dramatically recast the state (and by implication wider society). I am not so sure, but Cummings is certainly emphatic in that regard:

*“Now there is a confluence of: a) Brexit requires many large changes in policy and in the structure of decision-making, b) some people in government are prepared to take risks to change things a lot, and c) **a new government with a significant majority and little need to worry about short-term unpopularity** while trying to make rapid progress with long-term problems. “*

We look forward with some degree of trepidation as to what these “large changes in policy” would be. Past comments from the Prime Minister on the regulatory approach of the EU in areas such as employment law suggest a desire for deregulation (that is, more market-oriented regulation) and to me Brexit really is a Trojan Horse for more deregulation.^[4] Take Johnson’s past comments on the EU Social Chapter of fundamental rights in the workplace as an example:

“We’ve got too much regulation, too much stuff coming from Brussels, too many laws that are promulgated by Brussels that make it hard for business... So I think we need to weigh in on all that stuff, all that Social Chapter stuff...” (ibid.).

If this is to be interpreted as a pretext to a “bonfire of the regulations” and means of out-competing the EU by a race to the bottom then Johnson will run into problems due to the EU’s insistence on “level playing field” regulatory provisions continuing to apply to the UK as a precursor to any trade agreement.

If the Brexit ultras in the Government win the day, then the UK could well exit the so-called Transition Period of de facto EU membership at the end of this year with no new agreement in place as they will bristle at having to comply with such provisions. I think the odds of this happening are significant, as the EU have cast doubt on Johnson’s timeline of 11 months to negotiate a new trading relationship – for example, EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier:

“It is unrealistic that a global negotiation can be done in 11 months, so we can’t do it all. We will do all we can to get what I call the ‘vital minimum’ to establish a relationship with the UK if that is the timescale.”[\[5\]](#)

Alternatively, it is possible that Johnson will secure a very basic Canada-style trade agreement that seeks to eliminate tariffs on manufacturing and a modicum of regulatory compliance in some sectors (automotive? Aerospace/aviation) but will exclude Single Market alignment and leave the 80% of the UK economy accounted for by services excluded.

Crunch time will come at the end of June, by which point the UK Government will have to notify the EU if it wishes to extend the Transition Period. Whilst Johnson says he will not do this, he has made much of getting an agreement in place, so it is distinctly possible that he will accede to the EU’s stance on regulatory equivalence.

And yet, he will still sell this to the public as getting Brexit “done” and a having new deal in place. Indeed, given the pro-Tory stance of the bulk of the mainstream media it is likely that it will be “sold” on such a basis and that Telegraph, Mail and Express readers will interpret it as such. Does this mean that the self-styled weirdos and misfits will succeed where Theresa May did not? We shall have to wait and see.....

[\[1\] https://dominiccummings.com/2020/01/02/two-hands-are-a-lot-were-hiring-data-scientists-project-managers-policy-experts-assorted-weirdos/](https://dominiccummings.com/2020/01/02/two-hands-are-a-lot-were-hiring-data-scientists-project-managers-policy-experts-assorted-weirdos/)

[\[2\] https://www.songlyrics.com/cold-chisel/misfits-lyrics/](https://www.songlyrics.com/cold-chisel/misfits-lyrics/)

[\[3\] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/03/dominic-cummings-whitehall-civil-service-no-10](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/03/dominic-cummings-whitehall-civil-service-no-10)

[\[4\] “Brexit: revolt against the elites or Trojan horse for more deregulation” by Arantza Gomez Arana, Jay Rowe, Alex de Ruyter, Rebecca Semmens-Wheeler and Kimberley Hill. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1035304619881271](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1035304619881271)

[\[5\] https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/johnson-to-open-post-brexit-trade-talks-with-ursula-von-der-leyen/ar-BBYEnhi](https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/johnson-to-open-post-brexit-trade-talks-with-ursula-von-der-leyen/ar-BBYEnhi)