

And so this is Christmas...

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

So penned John Lennon, way back in 1971, musing or hoping over an end to war, racism, poverty and many other bad things aside. I paused to reflect briefly on these things, whilst depositing items at the food bank the church at my son's junior school had set up.

I guess like most of us, thoughts at this time of year turn to an impending break from the grind of work and the promise of time spent with loved ones (or alternatively loved ones looking forward to workaholics being forced to take a break from their career passion to give some much-needed balance to their lives).

Into this incipient Winterval the prospect of an election come December 12th for many seems like little more than a rude interruption, the prospect of having to trudge out after dark in the biting cold to go and cast a vote for a political party they may only have lukewarm sympathies for, at best.

Maybe. I have felt that way myself, but the notion that a vote is precious weighs heavily on me and so I will be "taking my democratic duty seriously" as it were, and cast my vote come election day.

Whatever your political sympathies, the UK does appear to be facing a fork in the road as it were and I can't help shake the feeling that the outcome of the election will be a decades-defining moment. Best to cast your vote than absolve yourself of the notion afterwards that you should have voted....

And so back to Christmas. And food banks (lest you thought that was just a passing remark up above). I wondered about a political party whose election slogan of choice is "Get Brexit Done". Kind of like a quack physician telling you that to "chop off your foot" will make the pain go away.

For the many of us suffering from "Brexit fatigue" this may well seem like an appealing cure. Only that when Mr Johnson utters these words (*ad nauseum*) he must know that he cannot just "get Brexit done".

Should his government be returned with a majority and Parliament pass his withdrawal agreement, it will only be Stage One, as we are then confronted with having to negotiate a new trade agreement with the EU (assuming Mr Johnson genuinely wants one).

The crunch time for these negotiations would be next June (at which point we would have to notify the EU of any desire to extend the so-called transition period of *de facto* EU membership, beyond December next year for a couple of years under this withdrawal agreement).

Far from chopping off one's foot curing the Brexit malady, we could well wake up next year to find ourselves having a rotting gangrenous leg stump. Yup, my money is on the Brexit pain lasting a lot longer if "Boris" gets back in.

So I thought, just supposing the above had any kind of credibility, what would getting Brexit "done" do to change the lives of those dependent on food banks? Or those who have to hold down more than one job to pay the rent? Or the school that doesn't have the funding to meet basic educational needs? Or the worker at an Amazon distribution centre on a zero-hours contract, who can't get a mortgage, because their earnings are too unstable?

The simple answer is "nothing." Nothing positive anyway.

At the moment, all we can glean from trade talks with the US regarding a putative post-Brexit trade "deal" for example, is the prospect that US drug companies want the right to charge higher prices for drugs to UK consumers than would be possible under current NHS rules^[1].

Imagine having to, say, pay twice as much for prescription drugs – yet all this is implicit in US trade objectives under the oblique headings of "*Procedural Fairness for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices*" and "*State-Owned and Controlled Enterprises (SOEs)*"^[2].

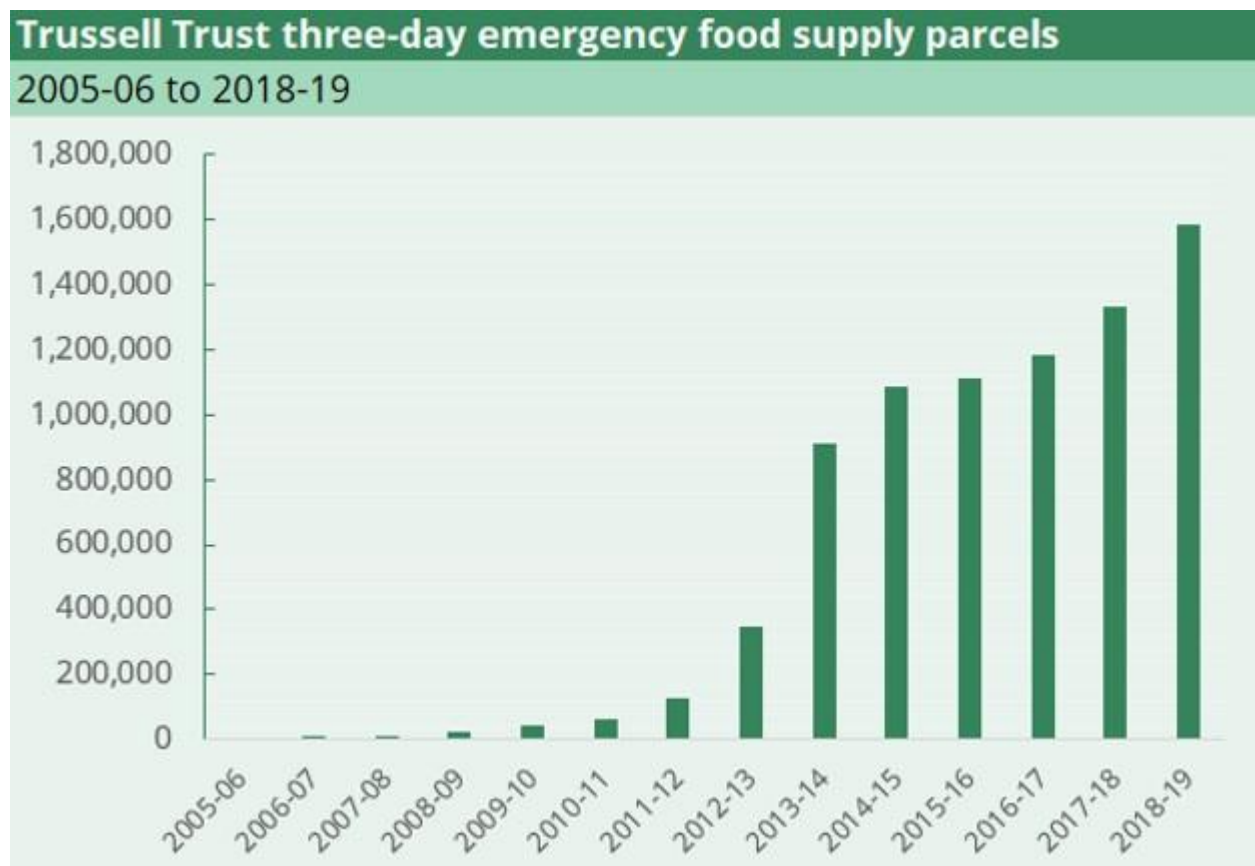
Is this something that people who voted ostensibly to "take back control" really want? And who knows what else might be sacrificed by a Johnson government in terms of UK labour standards,

environmental standards and consumer protection laws in the rush to a trade agreement with the US, or China, or India for that matter.

Speaking of food banks (again), their use is now at a record level in the UK[3] – alongside a rapid growth in levels of homelessness, or “rough sleeping” in our cities and towns since 2010[4].

The Trussell Trust (the biggest provider of food banks in the UK) reported a 19% increase in use of their three-day emergency food supply parcels between 2018 and 2019 (and of these, about one-third were for children).

The growth of use of these food parcels over the last 13 years is reproduced below. In trying to understand the growth in the use of food banks, low earnings (with median real wages still not having returned to pre-2008 levels), benefit delays or changes, and the rise in indebtedness are seen as the key culprits behind their increased use.[5]



Source: <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/>

To put this in context, over much of the same period, the rate of company tax in the UK has been slashed – from 28% in 2010, to 19% today. Have these savings to corporations resulted in any significant increase to productivity or business investment into new plant and equipment or skills in the UK? No.

According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), labour productivity “was lower over the past decade than at any time in the 20th Century”. [\[1\]](#)

Similarly, for business investment, according to the British Chambers of Commerce, “business spending in the UK was due to decline by 1.5% in 2019 and by 0.1% next year as companies put their investment plans on ice amid the global political turmoil..... Paving the way for the longest period of annual declines in business investment since the turn of the millennium.[\[2\]](#)”

And so this is Christmas. And the polls still point to a comfortable Conservative majority as being the most likely outcome of the election come December 12th.

However, what is interesting from the latest Politico (www.politico.eu) “poll of polls” (as at November 30th) is that the current Conservative predicted vote share is at 43%[\[3\]](#). This is only 0.7% above the actual Tory vote share obtained in the 2017 election.

Given the tanking of the Brexit Party predicted vote share (now at 3% according to the same Politico poll) there seems little opportunity for the predicted Tory vote base to grow any further unless they can attract further support from Labour voters.

In contrast, Labour’s predicted vote share has increased significantly over the last four weeks (from 25% to 32% according to Politico). If they continue to claw back support from the Liberal Democrats (or otherwise mobilise non-voters) then a recurrence of the 2017 “hung Parliament” result becomes distinctly possible.

If this is to happen, it will only be because basic “bread and butter” issues such as the state of the NHS, schooling, poverty and public services will gain more traction with voters than just that of “Get Brexit Done”. And so this is Christmas....

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47826195>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/sep/16/britain-facing-most-prolonged-investment-slump-in-17-years>

[3] <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/#93130>

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/02/uk-election-halt-us-trade-talks-until-nhs-off-table-corbyn-tells-johnson>

[2] See https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Summary_of_U.S.-UK_Negotiating_Objectives.pdf

[3] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-bank-uk-benefits-trussell-trust-cost-of-living-highest-rate-a8317001.html>

[4] https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/240419/the_homelessness_monitor_england_2019.pdf

[5] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-bank-uk-benefits-trussell-trust-cost-of-living-highest-rate-a8317001.html>