

Spectacle Brexit

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My very first column for this blog back in 2018 was a plea to manage Brexit well, addressed mostly to the UK but also the EU. In order to restore, or safeguard whatever was left of, trust in politics and public institutions. Once the 2016 referendum had served up Brexit, whatever that was taken to mean, it was imperative on all sides to carry it through and make the best of it. Clearly, the first part happened, the second didn't, whatever the situation will be on the 1st of January.

The main reason for this is domestic UK politics, which is not a criticism, merely a statement of fact. Brexit is a political project and from the very beginning was one of the tools used by mostly right-wing and Conservative politicians as a battering ram in their quest for power. It was crude and relied on a mix of nationalism, economic unease and anger at politics as usual, which helped unify a broad coalition of the dissatisfied. There was no reason for anyone, neither in the UK nor in the EU, to assume that this would change in the course of the negotiations on a future relationship. My appeal was naïve.

Outrage, fear and nostalgia are some of the most powerful tools in a politician's belt, now and in the past. Boris Johnson has for a long time been one of the masters of the dark art of employing them, like the defeated US president, adapting them to modern times with a blend of irony and humour and an understanding of a new form of nihilism. It is the politics of side against side, in which arguments don't make the slightest difference. What it comes down to is how fired up you get your side's supporters and hence turnout. That was the message of the recent US elections. The pursuit of power as an end in itself is not new, what has changed is that our politicians are no longer even expected to pretend that they have any other, more uplifting, motivation. Johnson could have gone for either Leave or

Remain, whatever offered him the best outcome. Voters don't seem to mind.

There is a certain logic to this: All that counts is that your guy (almost always a guy) is in charge and the other isn't. This is an unsurprising reaction to the devaluation of truth, facts, expertise and other types of authority that were once located in academia, parts of the media and institutions such as the judiciary and a professional civil service. This loss of faith in politics and authority is by now well-established. The fact that in the US both sides were able to mobilise unprecedented numbers of supporters, does not contradict this. Yes, people did show up to vote and thus seemingly endorsed the democratic process. But there's a sense on both sides that this election cycle has done further damage to the democratic fabric in the US and it's hard to see how this will be repaired. It seems more likely this rip will widen, even if Joe Biden miraculously gets a senate majority.

But back to the situation in the UK. Johnson's large majority puts him in a difficult position. He does not have a parliament to blame if he decides to water down parts of his program. He is more than able to overcome opposition in the House of Lords. He can try blame the EU, and does, but the question is if that will really fly; most people understand that the UK initiated this process and that negotiations are a two-way street. Ultimately, if there's no deal, it will be seen as Johnson's doing, for better or for worse. And despite his protestations that a deal can be done, the subtext of his statements and actions gave voters the impression during the elections that he was likely to go for no-deal, and this remains the case. Since both a deal, with its inevitable critics on the right of his party and in the media, and no-deal, with possible even worse economic damage and chaos, will be seen as his responsibility, the question is once again which will offer him personally the best outcome?

Here, current popular attitudes as reflected in opinion polls showing voter hesitancy on Brexit might play a role. But new general elections are still far off, if Johnson even wishes to be re-elected. Things can easily change by 2024. Who knows what the world will look like? Of more immediate concern should be the state of his party, in the Commons and farther afield. While he has a large majority and should be able to weather rebellions both from the left and the right, governing could become very unpleasant the next couple of years if

he were to face the same constant sniping from let's say the ERG as his predecessor did. This is by no means a prediction but right now, the internal Conservative party balance seems to foreshadow a no-deal exit on the first of January.

But everybody knows that this is not the end of it. There might be some kind of fudged extension to the transition, to keep goods moving for a short grace period, probably conditional on continued UK compliance with EU regulations. Partial agreements would then follow over the course of 2021 for the most urgent areas and possibly beyond for others. Even with a minimal deal on the first of January, many areas would remain to be negotiated. What's clear at this stage is that the economic and reputational damage to both sides will be significant. The kind of close relationship that might have prevented this no longer seems possible.

This will no doubt satisfy part of the British electorate. It could be argued that the more visible the rupture, including long lines of lorries in Kent and lines of UK travellers at European airports, even shortages and other real hardship, the more of a catharsis Brexit would be to its proponents. Anything short of that and it might be interpreted as another betrayal, a stab in the back. The need for a spectacle could well outweigh other considerations.