

Johnson and the Spectre of Unmet Brexpectations

By Ferry Biedermann, Amsterdam

One has to hand it to Boris Johnson, at the time of writing still the UK's Prime Minister and if current form continues, also for years to come. Over the years, and this probably goes way back, he must have shrewdly built up a reserve of scandals and affairs that when needed can be called upon to divert attentions from more serious shortcomings in his management of the country. How else to explain the convenient and ongoing gifts of partygate and now poochgate just as his Brexit-provided political armour is starting to show chinks, the latest of which are the new queues of lorries for Dover.

Getting Brexit done was his greatest selling point, allowing him to romp home to victory in 2019. He did take the UK out of the EU and just to be sure, he followed through with a version of Brexit so hard that it wasn't anywhere on the horizon during the 2016 referendum. Why? Because it was good politics. It's great politics in England, and some other countries still in the European Union, to pick a fight with the EU on almost anything and blame Brussels. This has even gone on after the official end of the transition period on 1 January last year. Fishing and the Northern Ireland Protocol, to name but a few issues, provided great fuel for such manufactured rows.

But there's also been a slow and increasingly corrosive trickle of adverse news on Brexit. Consequences are always difficult to attribute to a specific cause and Johnson's been very 'lucky' with the corona pandemic, which muddies the picture even more. Even shortages in supermarkets and at fuel stations were not enough to change the public's attitude towards Brexit. Calculations of the economic loss due to Brexit outweighing that of corona were met with a shrug. Labour shortages were just proof that Brexit had worked in reducing migration and now the up to ten mile queues of lorries in Kent are actually not at all because of Brexit, or so claims the government. They just happen to coincide with more onerous border checks coming into effect. The situation in Calais is even worse, with queues double as long as on the Kent side.

None of that apparently matters to an electorate that is mostly doubling down on the choice it made in 2016. So, why the need for a distraction in the form of cake and pet scandals? Well, there can also be something like 'too much of a good thing'. Plus, the Brexiteers were promised so much that any government would be hard pressed to meet all of their Brexpectations.

Too much of a good thing is the idea that if the focus remains on Brexit-connected kerfuffle for a few more years, it will eventually make the public immune to its charms. It could come to define Johnson in a negative way, as if he were a one-trick pony, not much good for anything else, rather than it being an asset. In this it follows a bit the Winston Churchill post-WWII defeat line of thinking. Yes, he was a great war leader but we want something different now, thank you very much.

The issue of having over-promised on Brexit is possibly an even greater threat to Johnson, especially given the hard-Brexiteer contingent within his own party and parliamentary faction. When the Spectator starts publishing articles titled ['The abandoned revolution: has the government given up on Brexit?'](#) it is time to start worrying about being Theresa Mayed, or rather Johnsoned, out of office. Add to that the departure of David Frost, the Brexit negotiator, over, cough, concern over "coercive" pandemic rules, and the picture becomes even clearer. A not unthinkable imminent climb down over the Northern Ireland protocol would compound Johnson's troubles. The letters to the Tories' 1922 committee asking for a vote of no confidence in Big Dog, because like Frost they didn't agree with "the direction of travel" of the Johnson government, started arriving well before the start of 2022.

Is it not better then to create a crisis that may very well lead to a Conservative Party leadership contest over some high-jinx pandemic rule breaking and a pet intervention? If he wins, which is still the expectation should a vote be triggered, he gains a year's immunity from being challenged. That will bring us much closer to the 2024 general election, if Johnson doesn't choose to have one earlier, which is still possible despite the fixed-term Parliament Act. He's much more likely to survive a leadership challenge due to his well-known, and to some even endearing, rowdy ways than one that's caused by Brexit nostalgia.

A few parties and a few, ahem, dissimulations? It's not something either his party or in the long term the electorate is going to hold against him in these post-truth times. And decency? Keir Starmer sounded almost comically Victorian when during Prime Minister's Questions he said: "This is a Prime Minister and government that has shown nothing but contempt for the decency, honesty and respect that defines this country." This, it seems, is not what most Britons now primarily self-identify as.

Johnson knows he can probably brazen it out. Just follow every outrage with an even greater one, in the mold of Trump or Putin. The Russian leader must be gleefully watching as Europe is distracted and divided. To be fair, the UK at least had a relatively solid response to the Kremlin's aggressive moves, other than the French and the Germans. The latter can probably not be relied upon in this potentially greatest of post-Cold War crises, caught as they are in a trap set by their own former chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, now chairman of the shareholders' committee of gas-from-Russia pipeline consortium Nord Stream.

In fact, if Johnson does end up unemployed anytime soon, it doesn't bear thinking about what his next career step will be. Although in the UK the path from PM to working with authoritarian petro-regimes has already been trodden by Tony Blair. It will be interesting to see what Johnson comes up with but, alas, probably not yet.