

Trade deal or trade blame?

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I don't know about you but on the morning after the UK elections, just over a month ago now, I hit the snooze button on my phone and hibernated straight through until just a few days ago when duty and work called me back to this veritable winter wonderland.

Gone was the government's no-deal Brexit planning along with all discussions on second referendums, Lexit, and Norway models. Granted, Jeremy Corbyn was still around, which surprised me, but Boris Johnson seemed transformed from a Brexit-breathing ogre into a responsible adult, exuding trade-deal bonhomie.

I rubbed my eyes, went into the kitchen and made myself a strong cup of coffee. Surely, the Europeans must be freaking out by now, I thought, they can't regard the situation with the same equanimity as the UK? I barely remembered who Ursula von der Leyen was and, indeed, my search for her strongly-worded defence of the EU position drew a blank but then when I widened the search a bit, there was some guff about "when the sun rises again on 1 February, the EU and the UK will still be the best of friends and partners."

It was the same "friends and partners" feint that Johnson had employed when he successfully bullied the EU into accepting the deal itself had offered the UK at the outset of the Brexit negotiations.

But the momentary flicker of hope this sparked in me, that here was a Commission President who was ready to shovel the same load of bullsh*t back over the UK's fence, was extinguished quickly by the self-pitying turn her speech to LSE-students took, talking about Europe's population decline, the need for cooperation on climate and terrorism issues and her appeal to a new generation. Yes, we know all that but it's never healthy to take the approach of a supplicant.

The coffee kicked in and I started considering what was going on. I took a deep breath, there was nothing new under the invisible wintry sun. Not only was Jeremy Corbyn still around, but under Boris Johnson's magnanimous-in-victory lamb clothing there still lurked the wolf of deregulation and non-alignment with the EU. And von der Leyen was a soberer version of Juncker, from a much bigger country but with a much smaller vision, so that worked out at about the same too, I calculated.

We were still flying full speed, head-first towards a brick wall. What had changed was that everybody was pretending that it would all be OK. In the remainder media, project fear had been replaced by bland reassurance: Brexit: 10 things UK citizens can still do in the EU after 31 January. And readers sharing their "last fling" with Europe (yes, you, *The Guardian*). As for the pro-Leave part of the country, the attitude seemed to be Brexit? What Brexit? After the election's Get on with Brexit slogan, now it is Get on with business as usual.

Since interrupting my winter sleep, I've been stroking my beard to comprehend this collective burying of heads in the mud, on both sides of the channel. The only explanation that makes sense that I could come up with is that this is a giant political game of chicken, or a bluff if you trend vegan.

Both sides are pretending that all is well and that of course close friendship and partnership will continue, blah blah blah. But this is nothing more than a gambit to deflect blame onto the other for the inevitable implosion. Johnson and von der Leyen are both preparing the 'it's not me but them' defence.

How can it be otherwise? In between all the manoeuvring for the moral high ground, both sides have set out their base line demands: "We will work for solutions that uphold the integrity of the EU, its single market and its Customs Union. There can be no compromise on this," said von der Leyen in a passage of her LSE-speech buried in blandness.

And Johnson staked out his position when in the Commons he set out his vision for "our future relationship with our European neighbours based on an ambitious free-trade agreement, with no alignment ... on

EU rules, but instead control of our own laws...” Not wishing to be a Cassandra here, but these positions seem mutually exclusive.

There’s not much use in wasting my time before I turn in for another bout of hiding from this midwinter’s tale to speculate on Johnson’s ultimate gambit. But as he has just won a landslide with a hard-Brexit message, I cannot imagine him and his strategists watering it down. The real battle for the Tories is how to heap the blame onto the EU’s shoulders, which should not be that difficult as their electorate has proved receptive to such reasoning.

The EU is more of a conundrum, as it’s still acting as if there’s a public opinion to influence in the UK. That boat has sailed, sunk and won’t be very seaworthy for the next 10-20 years. Whether the EU gets blamed for future negotiation debacles and resulting economic pain should no longer matter to it in the UK, but all the more on the continent. Pro-EU politicians of all stripes still claim that the UK’s Brexit debacle has strengthened pro-EU sentiment in other member states and has spiked the guns of leavers elsewhere.

I seriously doubt that and I think the EU leadership does too. Just as the Tories play mostly to a domestic audience, and a bit to the Americans, the EU is now also playing to its domestic critics. It needs to make leaving the EU as unattractive as possible, while at the same time avoiding the blame for a relationship turned sour and resulting economic hurt in the member states, to say nothing of making sure Brexit doesn’t add to the populist rot from the inside.

It’s not pretty but this is what happens when demagogues run amok and start spreading magic potion on people’s eyes, making them fall in love with asses. Call it a midwinter’s nightmare.