

Can Brexit Get Any Worse?

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In the ongoing process that is Brexit, every week, there has been a sense that we've reached the point at which the situation surely cannot get any worse. And though the patterns over the last year of so has tended to be a continuation of what has gone before, with the odd 'curve ball' thrown in, the last week has been, at times, literally jaw-dropping.

For the government to have withdrawn the Conservative 'Whip' from some of the longest-serving and most dedicated MPs including 'Father of the House' Kenneth Clarke and 'grandee' Sir Nicholas Soames still seems incredible. Those who rebelled against the government were cognisant of the punishment of support for the Benn bill that has mandates PM Boris Johnson to, if no agreement with the EU emerges after he attends the next Summit on 17th October, avoid 'no deal' by seeking an extension.

Nonetheless it is something for a party that, even with the support of the DUP on a 'confidence and supply' arrangement, only had a wafer-thin majority until the defection of Philip Lee who defected to Lib Dems midway in as public a way as possible during Johnson's speech, to lose 21 of its MPs. In normal times this would have brought the government down. To be fair, Boris Johnson attempted to call an election but, as he's discovering, even in winning his first vote he was defeated by the abstentions among the opposition resulting in there not being a two thirds majority of MPs as required under the Fixed Term Parliament Act.

Last week turned out to be dreadful for the PM. Johnson demonstrated that he is far from being a master orator in Parliament and in his exchanges with the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn and the leader of the SNP Ian Blackford, appeared to come off second best. Embarrassingly, during the debate on Wednesday evening, he was lectured by Kenneth Clarke, an ex-Chancellor and Home Secretary, who accused him of being 'disingenuous' and told him to stop playing games over Brexit.

On Thursday, Johnson demonstrated that those who warned that making him leader of the Conservatives and, by virtue, PM, were correct in their belief that he is not good on detail and can appear bumbling. At what was presumably intended to have been the first speech of an election campaign at a Police Training College in Yorkshire, Johnson appeared incoherent and bumbling. This may have had something to do with the fact that his own brother, Jo, who has Cabinet responsibility for Business, and has always been happy to declare he voted to remain, had earlier announced that he intended to resign citing “unresolvable tension” over his brother’s Brexit policy.

To say the Johnson family are as fascinating as they are overtly-ambitious is an understatement. The rumour that has since emerged that Jo was instructed to leave by his wife Amelia who apparently, told him “It’s me or Boris.” Amelia is daughter of “anti-establishment artist” David Gentleman, and as well as being a journalist for *The Guardian*, is a member of the Labour party and, perhaps significantly, is close to Boris’s estranged wife Marina Wheeler.

Friday was turning out to be a relatively quiet day and there seemed the possibility that Boris Johnson might enjoy his day campaigning in Scotland without any more bad news. This was not to be. In the afternoon former Energy minister Claire Perry announced her intention to resign as an MP when the inevitable general election occurs. Perry’s announcement followed an announcement by former Defence Secretary Michael Fallon and London Minister Nick Hurd that they did not intend to seek re-election.

As was being widely reported at the end of last week, other resignations by ministers were likely. Sunday’s headlines were dominated by the resignation late on Saturday evening by former home secretary and work and pensions secretary Amber Rudd. Though commentators pointed out that Rudd might find it difficult to serve in Cabinet under Johnson given that he’d stated his willingness to take the UK out of the EU with no-deal and would negotiate with Brussels on that basis, she accepted a role in government.

This may have given hope to many who mused that despite his proclamations of being entirely comfortable with a no-deal, he was in reality developing a deal. Rudd’s resignation and the accompanying statement undermines this optimism in the ferocity of the

condemnation of what she believes to be the government's approach to Brexit. As well as asserting that Johnson's government was having no "formal negotiations" with the EU about an effective withdrawal deal, merely "conversations",

Worryingly, Rudd, an insider in government until Saturday, described her beliefs that 80%-90% of work dedicated to Brexit was in preparation for an "inferior" no-deal. For good measure, she accused Boris Johnson of "an assault on decency and democracy" and "an act of political vandalism" in sacking 21 of her colleagues.

Amber Rudd's resignation is part of a steady stream of moderates leaving the party which some believe is shifting inexorably to the hard-right in an attempt to be seen as being willing to contemplate a 'hard', no-deal, Brexit. Former justice secretary David Gauke argued in *The Guardian* on Friday that Johnson, who may contend is working to the playbook of leave-Svengali Dominic Cummings, is pursuing a strategy that is deliberately divisive that risks turning the Conservatives into a "Farage-lite" party. The danger of this is he, also asserted, alienates millions of traditional Conservative voters.

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Interestingly in the civil war that is raging, senior Conservative, Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, tweeted that the party has "always been a broad church shaped by those within it" and though "Gutted to see Amber leave" hoped that other 'One Nation' Tories would "stay and fight for the values we share."

Philip Hammond, another of the 21 who was stripped of the Conservative Whip, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer until Johnson replaced Theresa May as PM in July, replied to Hancock with a tweet that even in the context of everything that has gone is incredible in its stridency and willingness not to pull punches:

"Sorry Matt, I'm afraid the Conservative Party has been taken over by unelected advisors, entryists and usurpers who are trying to turn it from a broad church into an extreme right-wing faction. Sadly, it is not the party I joined."

The 'Benn Bill' requiring Johnson to seek an extension rather than allowing a hard-Brexit to occur by 'running the clock down' so that the

default position of crashing out on Halloween has been described by some Ministers as “lousy”. The fact that the Government is willing to contemplate what would be a wilful disobedience of a lawful instruction and, at the least, to “test to the limit” what Johnson is required to do undermines what was already almost non-existent trust.

That Johnson has, once again, not managed to achieve his wish that an election takes place on 15th October, gaining 293 votes for and 46 against but not achieving the 434 votes necessary under the Fixed Term Parliaments Act is unsurprising. Opposition parties are distrustful of him shifting this date until after the deadline for leaving of 31st October. Indeed, there are widespread rumours that the government is seeking ways to allow Johnson to avoid carrying out the legal mandate he has been given by Parliament, and which achieved Royal Assent on Monday, to avoid a no-deal.

Additionally, Parliament passed a Bill by 311 votes to 302 to publish no-deal plans and advisers’ messages sent between nine advisers, including Dominic Cummings, including texts, WhatsApp messages and private emails, sent from 23 July, when Johnson became PM, relating to the prorogation of parliament as well as all documents prepared within government since 23 July 2019 relating to operation Yellowhammer and submitted to the cabinet or a cabinet committee. This means that Johnson has been defeated on every bill that his Government has put before Parliament since he became PM.

And so, we have entered the peculiar situation of Parliament being prorogued, until 14th October in the midst of what is the greatest crisis since the country was at war with Adolf Hitler. This, as some suggest, is an insult to democracy. Johnson increasingly finds that he is running out of options and, of course, time. Like his predecessor, Theresa May, he recognises that the only way to avoid no-deal is to negotiate a withdrawal deal with the EU which, of course, ultimately raises the thorny issue of what to do about the North of Ireland.

There is a talk of a return to the option of a backstop that applies only to the six counties of Ulster that was created by Partition almost a century ago and, of course, was part of the destruction and tragedy that occurred during the troubles of 1969 to 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement creating peace was signed by all parties apart from

the DUP. This option was rejected by Theresa May as being likely to be deeply unpopular among Unionists and, in particular, the ten MPs of the DUP she relied on to ensure a majority as part of the a 'confidence and supply' arrangement.

In Dublin on Monday, Johnson's tone had, not for the first time, altered when he stated to journalists that he'd "looked carefully at no deal" and assessed its consequences," and very significantly, claimed, "Be in no doubt, that outcome would be a failure of statecraft of which we would all be responsible. I would overwhelmingly prefer a solution."

His Irish counterpart, Leo Varadkar, warned on two occasions that that any alternatives to what was included in the withdrawal agreement would need to be legally binding; "What we cannot do, and will not do, is replace a legal guarantee with a promise."

The big problem with Johnson is that he flip-flops and, as the last week has demonstrated, there are very few who are willing to trust in him and take his commitments as more than bluster to please whichever audience he happens to be 'entertaining'. Moreover, it's worth recalling that in late June his former boss at the Telegraph, eminent historian and journalist Max Hastings in an article in *The Guardian*, 'I was Boris Johnson's boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister' stated his beliefs in a way that left no room for doubt:

"I have known Johnson since the 1980s, when I edited the Daily Telegraph and he was our flamboyant Brussels correspondent. I have argued for a decade that, while he is a brilliant entertainer who made a popular maître d' for London as its mayor, he is unfit for national office, because it seems he cares for no interest save his own fame and gratification."

On Johnson's belief that he considers himself to be comparable to Winston Churchill and that his destiny is to save the UK from the current crisis of Brexit, Hastings stated that similar to other "showy personalities" and being of "weak character", "in reality [he's] closer to Alan Partridge."

One paragraph in particular is so utterly damning that if this was a character reference for any mundane job, let alone the person

campaigning to become the leader of Her Majesty's Government, the individual's application would be doomed:

“Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade. Almost the only people who think Johnson a nice guy are those who do not know him.”

In a summary to this article and with a degree of prescience that should give us all cause for concern, Hastings predicted that Johnson's failings would be exposed once he became PM:

“I have a hunch that Johnson will come to regret securing the prize for which he has struggled so long, because the experience of the premiership will lay bare his absolute unfitness for it.”

Though Johnson may achieve hero status among those who believe a hard, no-deal, Brexit is the most effective way to fulfil the result of the advisory EU referendum of June 2016, it will come at a tremendous cost. In the process Johnson will have split his party, undermined democracy and divided the UK.

Arguments that a bright future awaits the UK once free of control and overweening interference by the EU are based on what becomes ever more apparent as based on nationalistic ideology. Their logic is risible and have no credibility among the vast majority of economic experts.

The ultimate tragedy for this country is that if Johnson does indeed fail in terms of achieving a negotiated withdrawal deal and, as a consequence the utter economic and social calamity of no-deal becomes our fate, apart from the clique of leave campaigners who have will make fortunes by 'shorting' the pound, we all become losers.

In that sense, Brexit could get an awful lot worse.