

Fly Me to the Moon

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Writing in Monday's *Telegraph*, putative Conservative leader and, accordingly, as the party currently in government, 77th Prime Minister (PM) of the United Kingdom (UK), Boris Johnson states his belief that in order that the UK leaves the European Union (EU) by the deadline of 31st October, it is essential that the country develops a sense of "national self-belief".

As Johnson claims, technology provides an answer to the challenge of finding a solution to avoiding a border between the Republic of Ireland and the North of Ireland – an essential component of the 'Good Friday Agreement'. The issue of this border bedevilled Theresa May in achieving a Parliamentary majority for the withdrawal deal (WA) her government painstakingly negotiated over a considerable period of time following the triggering of the process to leave (Article 50).

Johnson, ever savvy, employs the retrospective zeitgeist of anniversary of the first human beings to walk on the moon 50 years ago to suggest that leaving the EU, something regarded as extremely difficult, can be considered to the Apollo 11 mission. As he asserts, in his *Telegraph* column those who have argued that it is going to be extremely difficult to use innovative methods to resolve the issue of checks on goods on the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland – "technological pessimists" – are wrong and should be inspired by what NASA achieved in successfully achieving missions that allowed human beings to walk on the moon and return to earth:

"It is absurd that we have even allowed ourselves to be momentarily delayed by these technical issues. If they could use hand-knitted computer code to make a frictionless re-entry to Earth's atmosphere in 1969, we can solve the problem of frictionless trade at the Northern Irish border..."

Getting rockets out of the earth's atmosphere, and which provides the absolutely vital protection that allows life to exist, and which has signally not yet been discovered anywhere else, despite extensive searching, requires immense force from rockets providing propulsion. In effect it's like being strapped to a bomb. As those engaged in developing commercial space travel will attest, it's extremely dangerous and incredibly expensive.

Where Johnson is completely wrong is in claiming that the objective is frictionless re-entry. If he'd checked his facts, Johnson would have discovered that friction is precisely what is needed to slow a spacecraft down from the approximately 17,500 miles per hour it is travelling at on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. However, this friction causes intense heat; over 1,600 degrees Celsius which requires the objective to enter at exactly the right angle and to have shielding that is designed to cope.

As many commentators are pointing out, Johnson's inability to grasp such technical issues is typical of a man whose willingness to devote himself to the details is legendary. Last week's stunt involving packaging of a kipper he claimed was subjected to rules from the EU which was not actually true goes back to his days as the *Telegraph's* Brussels correspondent when he exaggerated or made things up to 'ginger' a story.

More pointedly, the objective of successfully getting human beings on the moon and ensuring they returned to earth was, though phenomenally dangerous and eye-wateringly expensive, a technical feat that took over a decade and involved the best brains available. Johnson's objective of concluding the withdrawal of the UK from the EU with a deal, which though partly technical is primarily based on trade, legal agreements and politics, within three months is a tall order.

Critics of Johnson claim that his claims as to the ability of technology to create a solution to the border in Ireland is flawed as this is something the UK and EU spent considerable time examining and concluded was not possible in the short-term. This was the reason that the 'backstop' was developed as a way of allowing frictionless trade to continue until a solution is developed.

There are over 200 crossings 310 mile on the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This means that it's always been difficult to monitor traffic. During 'The Troubles' many 'unauthorised' roads were blocked or blown up by the British and Iris armies only to be reopened by the local community. This became an effective and, for the British army, in particularly dangerous border areas such as South Armagh, deadly game of 'cat and mouse' due to the ever-present danger of landmines and snipers.

In the aftermath of the vote to leave the EU referendum of June 2016, and especially with the prospect of a no-deal exit, attention on the way in which the Irish border operates. It is estimated that over 100,000 cars cross the border each day. The view is that these vehicles could be monitored using number plate recognition that is already employed on all major roads and motorways in both the north and south of Ireland. The challenge would be in protection of what would be seen as intrusive surveillance equipment that would be seen as part of a 'hard' border.

In the event of the UK leaving the EU monitoring vehicles of carrying goods and equipment across the Irish border presents an even greater challenge. This border would represent the only land-based frontier between two trading blocs that would, particularly under a no deal Brexit, trade under different tariffs and regulatory arrangements.

In a Parliamentary Report produced last year the Irish Revenue Commissioners estimate of 177,000 heavy goods vehicles and 208,000 light vans crossing the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland every month was quoted.

However, in February 2017 the then-Ambassador of Ireland to the UK, Daniel Mulhall told a House of Commons committee that any figures produced were estimations and that they were likely to be conservative. For example, in a report commissioned by The Department for the Economy and written by Eric Pickett and Michael Lux, 'The Irish Land Border: Existing and Potential Customs Facilitations in a No-Deal Scenario' research monitoring of the 42 main crossing points indicated that over 25,000 heavy goods vehicle (HGV) cross the border each per day.

Crucially, all goods crossing the border would need to be checked. Notably the total value of export sales from Northern Ireland to Ireland is at least £3.4 billion and businesses in Northern Ireland with fewer than 250 employees accounted for 80% of the cross-border sale in goods. As the Parliamentary Report continues, “Dependency on cross-border trade is most notable in the agri-food sector [and] The Government acknowledges that North-South cooperation on agriculture means the island of Ireland has become “A single epidemiological unit for the purposes of animal health and welfare.” 108 Agricultural goods in different stages of production cross the land border for processing and sale. For example, annually:

- over 400,000 pigs are exported from Ireland for processing in Northern Ireland;
- almost 400,000 lambs are exported from Northern Ireland to Ireland for processing; and
- over 800 million litres of milk are exported from Northern Ireland to be processed and then exported from the Republic of Ireland.”

The key objective is to find a way to maintain cross-border relationships that fulfil the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement in that ensures trading continues effectively but in the absence of a return to a ‘hard’ border with explicit checkpoints on crossings that, given the delicacies and tensions among some communities would require an (armed) security presence. This is what Boris Johnson is alluding to with his references to technology and misunderstandings about how re-entry to the earth’s atmosphere is achieved. Therein lies the incredible difficulty.

Over 18 months ago Last year Katy Hayward, a political sociologist at Queen’s University, following analysis of how technology might work in terms of the Irish border stated her view that it would not be possible to achieve the much desired ‘frictionless’ after Brexit that is claimed possible by its advocates. Hayward claimed that whilst technology can be useful in “enhancing efficiency” once regulations are no longer aligned, far more checks are required due to the strict EU rules to control food safety and, as we’ve heard so much about, avoid chlorinated chicken.

Indeed, on 16th April this year, Karen Wheeler, head of the UK Border Delivery Group, in addressing hundreds of businesses at a Brexit

advice conference in Belfast, acknowledged the apparently insurmountable difficulties in finding technological solution to the issue of the border in Ireland. As she made clear:

“There is no technology solution which would mean that you could do customs controls and processes and not have a hard border”

There is no magic solution that would make that go away. If there was, trust me, we would have found it.”

Mrs Wheeler in an interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* was cognisant that the sort of technology claimed by Brexiteers as a solution to the Irish border existed but that there were aspects of practice where it had been applied that would cause particular problems:

“There are of course lots of technologies which can help make it more efficient, Norway and Sweden for example have a lot of traffic going across their land border and they are one of the more technologically advanced land borders, they still have queues and people still stop because there are still things to go through.

“There is no such thing in the world at the moment at a land border which doesn’t have queues and processes and technologies. It may be that over a number of years more of those technologies will emerge. But some of those things are quite hard to avoid.”

It is to be noted that when Mrs Wheeler is asked by the journalist from the *Belfast Telegraph* what, beyond revoking Article 50 would achieve a ‘frictionless border’, she made clear her view that it would have to be very similar to the sort of arrangement that was being mooted as a way to achieve Labour support when Theresa May proposed cross-party talks just before Easter:

“What you need is, at the very least, something that looks like a customs union, plus something that looks like a single market, which has no customs or tariffs or regulatory standards or controls, if you are going to have completely free movement of goods across the border.”

Wheeler’s view chimed with reports that a presentation had been prepared up by the Home Secretary’s Policy Unit which was received by HMRC and the Treasury. This presentation was based on

examination of technological solution to keeping the border open and, significantly, without any checkpoints that would be a target for Irish Republican dissidents, and essential to maintenance of the Good Friday Agreement.

As is concluded by the Home Secretary's Policy Unit any technological solution would be extremely expensive to develop, install and update (reports suggest at least £20 billion). The report recognises that for this technological solution to work, companies would upload data by way of innovative block chain technology and the need for sensors along the route there would need to be 'machine learning' and automated revenue collection that would achieve "seamless collection and analysis of the data" as well as providing the ability to "target interventions away from the border itself."

As this presentation states, the reality, however, is that practical implementation and execution of such technology would be very challenging to achieve in the seamless way that is regarded as essential to success:

"No government worldwide currently controls different customs arrangements with no physical infrastructure at the border."

Other significant reasons for potential difficulties that would exist include the fact that any fully integrated and seamless system "must operate with 28 government agencies and a myriad of interconnected existing and planned IT systems" and that cooperation and commitment would be needed from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the EU. Perhaps in a statement that is honest but, under Johnson if he becomes PM is seen as too pessimistic, the presentation includes the statement that such a "big and complex project, with possibly tight deadlines," should, on the basis of previous experience, not be implemented lightly:

"Government does not have the strongest track record on delivery of large tech projects."

Were it not for his association with the disastrous consequences of the invasion of Iraq, Tony Blair's greatest legacy would undoubtedly be the signing of the Good Friday Agreement between all political parties in April 1998 (apart from the Democratic Unionist Party).

Nonetheless his views still have the validity of someone who understands the pressures that any new PM will be under and the importance of seeking compromise to achieve solutions to intractable problems.

Blair was extensively interviewed on Monday's BBC Four Radio breakfast programme, *Today*. His view on the thoughts Johnson's presents in his latest *Telegraph* article indicate disdain for the lack of willingness to fully appreciate the complexity and detail in what he has suggested:

"It's a very Boris Johnson approach to thing which is to say 'Look, never mind the detail, but if we only believe in ourselves, we can do it'. I found the article this morning – it's one of these things where essentially he was saying was, look, the Americans put a man on the moon, and therefore surely we can find a way round the Irish border problem. To which the obvious response of the Europeans will be, 'Well, if it's that simple, why are you opposed to the backstop?' But in any event the two things are obviously rather technically different."

If Johnson was a student submitting a piece of work to his lecturer, he might be commended for imagination but criticised for his failure to justify the basis of his argument. However, barring an outcome that would be similar to finding Elvis Presley is alive and well, this is a man who is now Prime Minister of the UK. That he and the individuals who form the coterie of ministers in his new Cabinet is profoundly worrying.