

Some preliminary reflections on PM Boris – DUDE or DUD? First Impressions Count!

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So yesterday we alighted to the news that Boris Johnson is our new Prime Minister. I have been asked on numerous occasions now as to what I think is likely to happen with him in the helm as it were. So here goes...

PM Johnson's first "actions" on Brexit are likely to be a whistle-stop tour of Brussels, Dublin, Berlin and Paris to try and garner support for reopening the Withdrawal Agreement and neutering provisions relating to the Northern Ireland (NI) backstop, given his professed faith in "technological solutions" as providing a ready alternative to a legally binding agreement to prevent the return of a hard border.

In comparing the NI border to the 1969 achievement of "flying to the moon", however, it will take more than exhortations to make technological solutions to this "real" – a point noted by Jeffery Donaldson of the DUP, who acknowledged the practical difficulties entailed of finding viable "technological solutions" to the NI border problem; given that we have had three years now to find them..

Rather, I think it is more likely that PM Johnson – if his demands on the Backstop are rejected – would agree with the EU to NI having a different regulatory status to the rest of the UK and thereby effectively putting the border on the Irish Sea so the UK could pursue its own "trade deals".

However, it is difficult to see such an approach succeeding whilst the Government relies on the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland to maintain a majority in the House of Commons. They would attempt to block such a move (and I suspect they can see the risk of this coming) and in so doing there would go Johnson's Commons majority.

So, EU leaders are unlikely to budge in regards to the NI backstop, and so the best he could hope for here would be a rewording of the Political Declaration on the future economic relationship that expresses to never have to enact the NI backstop. I don't think this would be enough to satisfy the hard-core Brexiters.

So now we have Boris extolling Parliament and Country about upholding the "will of the people" and "getting on with Brexit" come what may. His "victory speech" yesterday was notable for coining the acronym "DUDE" (a self-reference?). This term however, is not to be conflated with his prior mention of "DUD" – that being "Deliver Brexit" "Unify the Country" and "Defeat Jeremy Corbyn". To this "DUDE" adds "Energise"[\[1\]](#).

Such throwaway lines aside, he is already widely regarded by his detractors (e.g., Rafael Behr writing in yesterday's Guardian) as someone who is seen as prone to:

"laziness, inattention to detail, contempt for relationships, congenital unseriousness and dangerous indiscretion. Johnson could not be trusted to stay focused in national security briefings, nor to keep their contents secret."[\[2\]](#)

Parliament will not make it easy for him to pursue his Brexit goals in this regard and if he tries to proceed with leaving the EU with no deal then he will most likely face a motion of no-confidence in September and lose; possibly precipitating an election and a change of government.

We have already seen Parliament enact an amendment to a Northern Ireland bill requiring it to meet in October to debate issues and this certainly makes any attempt by him to suspend ("prorogue") Parliament much more difficult – and the scale of Tory rebellion (e.g., Phillip Hammond, David Gauke as current Cabinet Ministers abstaining on that vote) gives a good indication of how difficult things could be for him.

So, would he really risk this given that the last YouGov poll conducted over July 16th – 17th only had the Conservatives on 25% – albeit ahead of the Brexit party at 19%? Many Tory MPs clearly think that he can revive their poll fortunes. However, the same poll suggests that

support for Labour is at 21%, whilst the Lib Dems are at 20% and the Greens at 8%.[\[3\]](#)

How the vagaries of such polling figures would play out in individual constituencies is anyone's guess, with some suggesting that the only course of action would be some type of Conservative-Brexit party agreement or coalition. However, this would cause more turmoil within Conservative ranks and the prospect of Tory "Remainer" MPs leaving the party to join the Lib Dems (as a number are already rumoured to be contemplating).

There is also the prospect that such a move could lead to "Remainer" parties (Greens, Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru etc.) agreeing to divide up constituencies to give themselves the best chance of winning. Indeed, we are already seeing this with the agreement by Plaid Cymru and the Greens not to stand against the Lib Dems in the forthcoming Brecon by-election, for just this purpose.

In any event, the YouGov polling figures above, depending on the individual constituency electoral calculus, also raise the possibility of a centre-left "Rainbow Coalition" (Jo Swinson's ruling out of a "Pact" with Jeremy Corbyn notwithstanding).

As a final reflection on whether PM Boris is a "DUDE" or "DUD" it is worth noting a YouGov poll conducted over last weekend that found that of the 1,655 "adults" surveyed, 50% said that he would be a "poor" or "terrible" PM compared to only 20% of respondents who agreed he would be "good" or "great". Notably, 46% of respondents thought he would "worsen" the UK's image abroad whilst only 16% thought he would "improve it". [\[4\]](#)

Hence, given these polling figures, and PM Boris' clear polarising effect on the electorate, I don't think an early Westminster election is in the offing and it is more likely that faced with a hostile Parliament it is distinctly probable that he would be forced down the route of another referendum and asking the EU for another extension for this purpose...

It promises to be interesting times over the next three months.

[1] <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-theresa-may-jeremy-hunt-dude-or-dud-conservative-party-leader-brexit-no-deal-withdrawal-agreement/>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/23/boris-johnson-britain-pm-prepare-bad-government>

[3] https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/sjg6udq97x/TheTimes_190717_VI_Trackers_w.pdf

[4] <https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/uk-news/2019/07/23/boris-johnson-tops-tory-members-but-poll-suggests-public-feel-differently/>