

Further and Further Down the ‘Rabbit Hole’

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Just over six years ago, on 23rd June 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) voted by a narrow majority of 51.9% of the 72.2% turnout to leave the European Union (EU). This effectively ended membership of an organisation this country joined when it was the EEC (European Economic Community) in January 1973.

Six years on from the referendum, and well over two years since this government, at the end of January 2020, having decisively won the December 2019, ‘Get Brexit Done’, general election, agreed the so called ‘oven ready deal’ Boris Johnson led the Conservative Party campaign on, it’s increasingly clear where leave is taking us.

There’s no way to sugar-coat what’s befallen this country as a consequence of the way Brexit has, under Johnson and his government, proved increasingly disastrous in a range of ways, most particularly, economic (Jolly, 2022), as well as socially. Arguably, most dreadful of all is the way that the standing of this country, one which used to enjoy almost universal respect as a staunch upholder of international law, is being eroded (O’Carroll and Stewart, 2022; Parker and Foster, 2022).

The fact that the government has moved ahead with legislation to unilaterally rewrite the Northern Ireland Protocol suggests Brexit is far from being ‘done’ (BBC, 2022). Indeed, as many, including, significantly, former PM and immediate predecessor to Boris Johnson, Theresa May, stress the government’s willingness to “rip up” an international treaty agreed with the EU and which came into force on 1st January 2021, following the expiration of the ‘transition period’, will ultimately prove unlawful.

It’s poignant that May claimed during the Commons debate for the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill which seeks to implement major alterations it argues is necessary to protect democracy in that part of the UK, that enacting this legislation will prove difficult because the EU will not wish enter renegotiation with Johnson (Gutteridge and Diver, 2022).

As May claimed, the current PM will be considered to be a “lame duck” leader and supporting unilateral changes to the Northern Ireland Protocol to appease MPs within his party who’ve always believed that nothing short of a complete break with the EU represented ‘true’ leave. May made plain her stance during Monday’s debate:

“As a patriot, I would not want to do anything that would diminish this country in the eyes of the world. This Bill will not achieve its aims and it will diminish the standing of the UK in the eyes of the world and I cannot support it.”

When, in future years, students and scholars reflect on what occurred as a consequence of the UK referendum vote to leave the EU, it’s highly likely they’ll ponder on the wisdom of by former Conservative PM David Cameron, who preceded May, in holding this vote and the fact it was a binary decision.

Though the outcome was to leave, a question that may be asked is why the UK government under Johnson wilfully chose to leave the EU on such poor terms? What will those in the future considering Brexit make of an arrangement to deal with Northern Ireland, the only part of the UK with a land border to the EU which Johnson’s government now claims is creating “practical problems” (Gov.UK, 2022)?

Undoubtedly, those studying Brexit will conclude the decision to be taken, remain or leave, was far too simplistic. As such, voters could decide to either continue with the existing arrangements with the EU or, as advocates of leave recommended, depart from provisions of membership which had progressively developed over the previous 43 years explicitly intended to improve trade and social relationships.

Crucially, what leaving the EU would actually mean was never entirely clear.

Like the world-famous tomato ketchup, one could be forgiven at the time for thinking it came in 57 varieties. In the heat of a fractious debate during which a member of Parliament, Labour's Jo Cox, was murdered by a far-right extremist, the arguments made by advocates of leave revolved around a mixture of woefully flimsy economic logic and, at times, nationalistic fervour based on the catchphrase of "Taking back control".

If many, possibly the vast majority who voted, were confused as to the complexities of what giving up membership of the EU really meant, they can be forgiven. Key questions, particularly how trade with the EU would be maintained, or in how dealing with question of respecting the Good Friday Agreement, intended to ensure the significance of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, was minimised, were skirted over.

History will attest, treating such major issues as if they were inconsequential was a major mistake and have left us with problems that will only intensify with time.

Those advocating remain, especially the then PM Cameron, may be criticised for being far too complacent in their need to convince voters of the wisdom of remaining in the UK.

Many Brexiters, on the other hand, were only too willing to spin their arguments or, as critics would contend, to simply claim benefits that were never going to be possible.

Some might suggest lies were presented as outcomes that could be expected by leaving the EU.

Leaving the EU, according to leave, would mean dissolution of obligations to adhere to rules and regulations EU membership required. This, they claimed, would confer considerable economic benefit to citizens of the UK.

One benefit, it was asserted, would be the ability to dispense with every vestige of freedom of movement enabling any citizen of any EU country, including those of the UK, to live and work in any other EU state. This was to address concerns felt among those living in 'left behind' communities that their future prospects and prosperity were being undermined by EU citizens, they believed, were taking their jobs and willing to work at lower rates of pay.

This argument, advanced by the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had increasingly undermined the Conservative Party, found great appeal among many of those who'd traditionally been regarded as 'solid' Labour supporters.

As many were seduced to believe, by voting leave you'll employment prospects and wealth will increase.

History clearly demonstrates that when times get tough economically there's a dangerous tendency for governments to engage in action which, as cynics argue, flirts with a populist agenda resonant with fascism.

It would be foolish in the extreme to claim Johnson's government is deliberately fascist. However, as Umberto Eco in his *New York Times* essay 'Ur-Fascism' argues, "the fascist game can be played in many forms" (1995).

Eco's essay includes 14 characteristics (features) which, he explains, though they "cannot be organized into a system", some being contradictory, are "typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism" (*ibid*). Critically, Eco contends, "it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it."

Eco's 14 features of fascism are:

1. *The cult of tradition*
2. *The rejection of modernism*
3. *The cult of action for action's sake*
4. *Disagreement is treason*
5. *Fear of difference*
6. *Appeal to social frustration*
7. *The obsession with a plot*
8. *The enemy is both strong and weak*
9. *Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy*
10. *Contempt for the weak*
11. *Everybody is educated to become a hero*
12. *Machismo and weaponry*
13. *Selective populism*
14. *Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak*

The campaign to ensure the UK's departure from the EU has always had resonance with some of the above. It's been convenient, especially among Eurosceptic members of the Conservative Party, to portray the EU as an overbearing and overly bureaucratic 'enemy'.

For those holding this view, membership of the EEC/EU led to the subjugation of a once-great nation which used to control large swathes of the globe when it had an Empire.

Escaping the clutches of the EU would allow the UK to reclaim its greatness. Hence slogan 'Global Britain' which the Johnson's government has adopted following Brexit being 'done'.

However, as we're increasingly witnessing, Brexit is far from done. Moreover, as long as Johnson and those who support his erratic and illiterate economic philosophy remain in control, it will never be done.

Continuing to cast the EU as the enemy is a useful trope to play to those within the Conservative Party who, despite achieving what they wanted, leaving the EU, are still disaffected.

For Johnson, a leader beset with internal party questions as to his morality and integrity, as well as overseeing extremely serious economic problems which, though not entirely caused by Brexit – the pandemic and war in Ukraine being instrumental – has not assisted the UK's position.

Johnson and members of his government claiming intransigence by the EU in willingness to renegotiate a deal he himself agreed to, including the Northern Ireland Protocol, is calculated to play well and creates a distraction to ongoing problems surrounding leadership of the country by the PM.

Arguments intended to present a simple solution to problems caused by 'others' are seductive. This is the basis of the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe and with such dreadful results, the rise of Naziism in Germany under Hitler.

That the use of others is being played out against the backdrop of Northern Ireland, which, because of the intractability of 'otherness' experienced between the two main factions, Loyalism and Republicanism, and which led to the ethno-nationalist conflict known as the 'troubles' lasting almost thirty years during which 3,532 people died and over 47,500 were seriously injured (McCabe, 2019), is reprehensible in the extreme.

Cabinet Minister with responsibility for overseeing the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, who harbours aspirations to replace Johnson as leader of the Conservative Party, informed Parliament on Monday she supports this legislation because she's "a patriot and a democrat" may certainly be viewed as resonated with some of Eco's 14 features of fascism.

As popular LBC morning show host, James O'Brien tweeted, "Boris Johnson is in Bavaria pledging allegiance to the 'rules-based international system' while Liz Truss is in Parliament confirming his government's determination to crap all over it. What a time to be alive" (Mellor, 2022).

Though the bill to unilaterally alter the Northern Ireland Protocol was passed by a vote of MPs of 295 to 221, it's notable 76 Conservative MPs abstained. May, arguably a truer patriot than Truss, was one of those who abstained. This indicates a level of concern felt among many Tory MPs with Johnson's 'direction of travel'.

Seminal *Guardian* commentator, Simon Jenkins, believes that what we're witnessing, despite all of the economic data demonstrating the error of leaving the EU and, unquestionably made worse by the withdrawal deal with the EU Johnson agreed to, will become worse as the PM doubles down on rhetoric used successfully to achieve leadership of his party and to win the 2019 general election. (2022).

Jenkins argues Johnson, "like all populist leaders" in his use of 'Trumpism in action' to deliberately "promote his own person" and beliefs about what *he* considers will ensure he remains in power.

As such, Johnson, as well as those who continue, at least in public, to support him and the self-destructive policies he wishes to introduce, are going further down a very deep and increasingly dark rabbit hole so figuratively described in Lewis Carroll's classic, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

Devastatingly, in doing this, we're collectively taken down the 'hole' with them.

Inevitably, therefore, this will result in making the vast majority of UK citizens poorer and more isolated from the EU. Regardless of what Brexiters may continue to assert, during membership of the EEC/EU the UK's economic profile improved.

Following Scottish leader Nicola Sturgeon's setting of 19th October 2023 for a new independence referendum, assuming it's declared legal and, respected by Westminster, extremely unlikely whilst Johnson remains as PM, who'd blame the Scots for wanting to leave the UK and, it would be assumed, applying to re-join the EU? (Mnyanda and Cameron-Chileshe, 2022).

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