

Polishing a Pool!

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James O'Brien, whose morning show is one of commercial radio's most popular – according to Official RAJAR figures regularly attracting over 1.3 million who tune in for “his lengthy critiques of Boris Johnson's government” (Waterson, 2022) – is unafraid to call it as he sees it.

Indeed, one of the reasons he chose not to continue presenting BBC Two's flagship programme *Newsnight* was, as he stated in a tweet in January 2018, to be able to retain the ability to “criticise Brexit and Trump” in his capacity as presenter on LBC Radio (Todorova, 2018).

On Monday, O'Brien spent an hour considering the impact of Brexit and, in particular, a prospective speech to be delivered later that day by Labour leader Keir Starmer, in which he'd explicitly rule out any possible commitment of returning the UK to the single market or customs union.

Brexit, which I've been writing about for almost the last four years, continues to be a subject which divides in a way that creates a deep fracture in society in general and, worryingly, politics in particular.

Discourse from all political parties, even six years after the referendum vote on continued membership of the European Union (EU) was held, continues to be judged through the lens as to their stated belief about how successful departure has actually been.

For Boris Johnson, who achieved leadership of the Conservative Party precisely because of his proclaimed willingness to negotiate a 'hard' deal with the EU, including 'no deal', there's not the slightest expression of doubt that Brexit has been a success.

As should be acknowledged, Johnson's leadership and, especially, his claim that the 'oven ready' deal he'd personally negotiated with the EU, effectively Theresa May's but tweaked to allow Northern Ireland to remain within the single market for goods in order to avoid any border in Ireland, ensured he won massive majority in December 2019.

Expecting Johnson, or any of his ministers, who he selected because of slavish devotion to him and his position on the EU, to murmur even the merest reservation the UK's situation following its departure from an organisation it'd belonged to since joining the EEC (European Economic Community) in January 1973, appears pointless.

In a recent *Financial Times* article, 'The deafening silence over Brexit's economic fallout', despite whatever travails he was suffering as a consequence of various allegations of wrongdoing and mismanagement, Johnson warned Conservative MPs they should avoid a “hellish, Groundhog Day debate about the merits of belonging to the single market” (Parker and Giles, 2022).

Brexit, on this basis, might appear, is 'done'. That is, apart from the parts, such as the Northern Ireland Protocol which Johnson agreed to with the EU as part of the overall withdrawal deal, and which it's claimed, must now be unilaterally revised to protect democracy in that part of the UK.

Despite the wealth of evidence that leaving the EU has been economically, as well as socially, self-destructive, Johnson and those around him simply refuse to believe the evidence (Springford, 2022).

As Parker and Giles point out, there's little argument we're collectively poorer as a consequence of no longer being in the EU. As they explain, the Office for Budget Responsibility, which provides independent economic analysis and forecasts of public finances, predict that the in the long-term, no

longer being in the EU will be likely to result in a reduction of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) by 4% compared to if we'd remained a member (*ibid*).

The UK's GDP has dropped by 2% already.

However, as many point out, the pandemic has ensured the full economic impact of Brexit has been masked (BBC, 2021; Michael Ellington, Marcin Michalski and Costas Milas, 2022). Duncan Weldon, economics correspondent for *The Economist* contends that by the end of this year "Brexit, rather than covid-19" will be what causes policymakers most trouble (2021).

Crucially, it's estimated by the Bank of England, the long-term impact on the UK's economy resulting from the pandemic will be 1%. Therefore, if the OBR's prediction indeed turn out to be accurate, worse is yet to come:

"That level of decline, worth about £100bn a year in lost output, would result in lost revenues for the Treasury of roughly £40bn a year. That is £40bn that might have been available to the beleaguered Johnson for the radical tax cuts demanded by the Tory right — the equivalent of 6p off the 20p in the pound basic rate of income tax." (Parker and Giles, *ibid*)

Though Johnson may claim Brexit is not an issue to be reopened, despite how poor the deal he negotiated is turning out to be, even though he claimed at the time it would be great for the UK, many, especially 'Eurosceptics' within his party continue to argue it was not as 'pure' a 'no-deal' would have been.

Johnson, like a gambler having won earlier in the evening and convincing themselves they've got the Midas touch and that luck is on their side, continues to bet wildly in the expectation he'll eventually be proved right.

Unfortunately, as we're experiencing, things are getting worse.

Accordingly, Johnson, well-known for self-belief in his ability combined with an inability to make tough decisions until it's too late, will continue to double-down on the line that whatever costs Brexit produces, they're a price worth paying for in order to achieve 'freedom'. As long as Johnson's administration remains in power, we'll continue to hear that economic issues are short-term.

In the 'fog' of dubious claims which have characterised Brexit since the referendum, it's hard to discern what counts as fact and/or truth. Notably, though, as O'Brien pointed out in his phone-in on Monday, Jacob Rees-Mogg, then chair of the European Research Group of backbench Conservative MPs, when interviewed by Krishnan Guru-Murthy on Channel 4 News two years after the referendum took place as to whether there would be a financial hit to the UK due to leaving the EU at the end of the transition period, admitted it might take 50 years for the "full economic consequences" of Brexit to become known (Demianyk, 2018).

As to what happens in the intervening period, Rees-Mogg, a long-time advocate of the UK's departure from the EU, in this interview simply ignored any claims of economic problems that might occur. Like many advocates of leave, Rees-Mogg dismisses such concerns as whingeing by so called 'remoaners' who're frequently portrayed as sore losers.

If the emerging economic situation weren't so potentially dreadful, there might be amusement to be gleaned from Rees-Mogg, now Johnson's Minister of State for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency and, following a consultation with readers of the *Express*, regarded as the most vociferous and trenchant critics of the EU, producing a list of nine 'Brexit opportunities' which one commentator believes to be "both pitiful and dangerous" (Bloom, 2022).

If you've not seen the full list of these nine opportunities, it's worth a few moments of your time if only to wonder at the increasingly warped mentality of those who continue to believe in Brexit and its potential to make us better off. It may be asked, how will abolition of "EU regulations restricting vacuum cleaner power to 1400 watts" or "rules around the size of vans that need an operator's licence" as well as reducing "requirements for businesses to conduct fixed wire testing and portable application testing" repair the economic damage caused by leaving the EU?

Many commentators wonder whether if, as the negative consequences of leaving the EU become more manifest, there will be willingness to by the government to admit Brexit is producing very serious economic damage and that reproachment with the EU is necessary.

Though it's hard to see any immediate change in the attitude currently being displayed by the Johnson government, there are whispers of some within his cabinet becoming increasingly concerned that the trade terms Johnson agreed with the EU are hurting the UK and, more particularly, making the cost-of-living crisis worse than it is already.

Nonetheless, and though Johnson has regularly demonstrated Olympian standards of 'U turns' on policies which prove unpopular with the public, it's all-but-impossible to imagine him admitting that the approach he adopted to negotiating hard with the EU, a stance utterly instrumental to his accession to leadership of his party as well as becoming PM, was a mistake.

Admitting to mistakes is not a trait Johnson is known for.

Instead, it must be assumed, the only way that there's likely to be any positive change as far as relationships between this country and the EU is concerned, is for Johnson to be replaced as PM.

Given the current allegations as to what Johnson knew about allegations concerning Chris Pincher before appointing him as a Deputy Chief Whip suggests this might occur sooner rather than later.

Moreover, the fact that on Tuesday morning, former permanent secretary at the Foreign Office, Lord McDonald, accused those in Downing Street of making untruthful statements with respect to the PM's handling of the Chris Pincher scandal would indicate a hastening of the process of Johnson's removal by MPs within his party.

Which brings us back to Labour's position on Brexit under Sir Keir Starmer.

Starmer, assuming he's not forced to honour his pledge to resign if fined by Durham Police for breaking lockdown rule, hopes to become the PM at the next general election. His history as a shadow Brexit Minister is well known.

As the *Guardian's* Brexit Correspondent, Lisa O'Carroll, describes, Starmer in June 2016 as a junior shadow minister under then leader Jeremy Corbyn, "felt so strongly about the Brexit referendum result" that he resigned (2022). Notably, however, he was convinced to return to the shadow cabinet a couple of months and became shadow Brexit secretary.

In his role as shadow Brexit secretary, Starmer passionately continued to claim leaving would be hugely detrimental and actively sought to influence Theresa May's government to implement a withdrawal deal that which would be as benign as possible for the UK economy and its citizens.

Having replaced Corbyn as Labour leader in 2020, Starmer is acutely aware of accusations he's still a remainer at heart, something Johnson and the elements of the media which still supports leave use as a stick with which to beat him.

Having experienced humiliating defeat in December 2019 by losing the support of Labour voters in former 'stronghold' as a consequence of being regarded as less equivocal in wanting to leave the EU than Johnson, Starmer may be seen as wishing to close this line of attack down. There's clearly a calculation that this will be sufficient to ensure former Labour voters who supported Johnson in getting Brexit 'done' in December 2019 will return to his party.

As far as Starmer argued in his speech on Monday evening, Johnson's government has made a "mess" of Brexit. Starmer believes that, if elected, his five-point plan would enable the country to improve its prospects. These five points are:

1. Settle the Northern Ireland protocol
2. Cut down paperwork
3. Support services and scientists
4. Seek a security pact
5. Invest in the UK

Unsurprisingly, many within his party as well as other political leaders as well as those campaigning to rejoin the EU are extremely disappointed with Starmer's current position (Pickard, Foster and Bounds, 2022). As such critics claim, Starmer's unwillingness to offer a more fulsome proclamation of a desire to rejoin the EU or, at the least, become part of the Single European Market, requiring freedom of movement which proved so toxic during the referendum and 2019 general election, ignores economic and social reality.

By adopting the approach set out on Monday evening, Starmer is in danger of falling behind the growing consensus that Brexit was a dreadful mistake. This is particularly the case among younger voters.

Lord Michael Heseltine, writing in the *Financial Times* last month, happily admits to coining the phrase "If Boris goes, Brexit goes" (2022). In this article, he argues the economic and political mess are entirely Johnson's fault. Crucially, he claims, British people are now recognising they were "deceived".

As a result, Heseltine enthusiastically believes Johnson should be "undone, and the quicker the better" (*ibid*).

Given the ongoing narrative, Starmer might reflect on the direction of travel as to the realities of Brexit. He might consider whether he should be more willing to appreciate that there's an opportunity for him to shift the debate.

Rather than trying to move on from Brexit and claim he can make it work, Starmer could, as James O'Brien might typically suggest, understand he's attempting to polish a turd (poo). Scattering glitter may make it seem more appealing but, ultimately, what it consists of is still fundamentally flawed.

As the consequences of leaving the EU are more obvious, the economic reality of the UK eventually rejoining the EU, or at least the Single Market, become inescapable by the day.

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