

Europe Watches the Dysfunctional Soap that is British Politics

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Sure, it ill behoves us Europeans to be smug spectators of British political and societal woes that keep the sceptered isle snagged in political and international travel gridlock. It's not as if the Dutch for example do better, with Amsterdam airport having an ongoing series of coronary episodes this summer. Or the Italians, who're once again flirting with fascism. Yet, the British do such dramas so much better than us continentals. The lies are more absurd, the plots more convincing and the acting, as always superb. Because the main characters of the moment, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, surely cannot be real?

We have said our farewells years ago and memories of the UK as an EU-member are rapidly fading. Only the lingering resentment over decades of British obstructionism and exceptionalism remains, mirrored as it is by the continued attempts to bully neighbouring countries. The European Commission last week took more serious action, with four so-called infringement procedures against the UK in the wake of the Truss-designed Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. Originally, Sunak was the Brexiteer and Truss the Remainer but both are hostages to a Tory membership whipped up by rabidly anti-European Express headlines and, when victorious, to the ever more little-islander nationalistic foibles of the ERG-faction of Conservative MPs.

So what plotlines will European viewers of the soap that is British politics be watching out for? Both major political parties in the UK are still in the throes of Brexit, despite repeated denials and much talk about missions accomplished, Brexit done and dusted, oven-ready deals, moving on etc. The Conservatives, as the party in power during this whole fiasco have much to answer for, not least reducing the terms served by recent Prime Ministers to Italian proportions. Ever since David Cameron took the coward's way out, refusing to clean up the mess that he had made, internal Tory politics have, if anything, resembled the Jacobin Reign of Terror, albeit bloodless thus far. This would all be highly diverting, were it not for the fact that every time a Conservative leader gets the chop, the UK becomes more rudderless and the next leader will have to bow down even lower to the Brexiteers' demands.

How low, is low enough, many a Eurocrat must wonder. After the UK's total disregard for the Northern Ireland protocol, a deal that Boris Johnson sold as a great achievement, what other aspects of the bilateral relations will a Conservative government be willing to undermine? Both Truss and Sunak are trying to lure Leave voters with a bunch of jingoistic policies, main among them the scrubbing of all or part of thousands supposed EU laws and regulations. Apart from the damage that this might do to a whole range of British interests, from air quality to equal rights, it is bound to create even more distrust in Brussels. The EU's Brexit negotiator, Maros Šefčovič, has already warned that the bloc would "be watching developments closely," to make sure that the UK sticks to agreed level playing field rules. On recent British form, Brussels has reason to be worried. Both Sunak and Truss are liable, in their peculiar robotic ways, to mechanically stumble towards an even greater breakdown of relations.

The problem with watching the British Game of Drones unfold is not that it starts to get repetitive and boring, although the storyline can use an upgrade, it's that the consequences are not limited to one isolated and crotchety island. Apart from the disruption that Brexit has caused also to some European businesses and individuals, the world and the West are facing huge challenges that need more, rather than less international cooperation. The Russian threat to Ukraine and possibly beyond, should already have been on the radar screens in 2016, particularly after the annexation of the

Crimea two years prior. And let's not even talk about the climate emergency, the harbingers of which have been with us for so long that it should probably have been included in the Magna Carta. But back to Ukraine, because that's where the UK's dearly departing Prime Minister has expended some effort on. So far, so good, let's not quibble about good things possibly coming from questionable motives etc. But the idea of this then being leveraged into him heading NATO is preposterous, not least because Johnson has proved that he cannot even run his own Tory kindergarten, let alone an international organisation. Nor would the rest of Europe be happy to have the architect of mendacious Brexit disunity manage the ultimate in international cooperation. Though, as spectators we have to be grateful for the added zing this storyline gives to the 'Boris partying with former KGB-agent' gambit.

Lucky Labour, to be able to so easily stroll towards victory in the next general elections, one might be tempted to think. The classic storyline of a much put upon but evidently endlessly more talented rival at last making good because the villain finally reveals his true face. But the current high polling numbers are not a given. Labour too is consuming itself with a story infighting, of which the plotlines are actually far less convincing than the Tory psychodrama. I understand that the whole false dichotomy of antisemitism vs racism is a proxy for the fight between Labour's centre and hard-left wings. But it's appalling that this is happening over the backs of minorities and shows us that there's something deeply wrong with how both sides see the world, mostly in terms of raw power, it seems. If Keir Starmer is unable to take quick and decisive action on this, it will keep haunting the party. At the very least it undermines its claim to stand for fairness. But the bigger problem, from a European viewer's perspective, is Labour's capitulation on Brexit. Starmer's vapid plan to "make Brexit work" echoes the worst of Tory Brexiteer dogma. Rather than taking a principled stance, he has all but admitted that this is mostly inspired by electoral opportunism. But why would any Labour Leave voter who switched to the Conservatives, especially in the former Red Wall seats, believe that Starmer will keep his word about freedom of movement, for example. In his leadership campaign he still argued for that, now he's abandoned it. Maybe when elected, he'll turn again? The best-case scenario from a European point of view is that Starmer realises that he will not be able to form a Labour government but that a coalition with the resurgent Lib-Dems is in the offing. In that case, Labour will mop up as many of its former Leave voters as possible while the Lib-Dems will get the Remainers. Once in power, he'll have to 'compromise' on Europe in a coalition agreement. It ain't pretty. But it does fit right in with the dysfunctional soap opera that is British politics at the