

Brexit's Comic Pay-Off

Ferry Biedermann

You can take Europe away from the UK, you can take 'dual access to both markets' away and then bestow it as a miraculous gift on Northern Ireland, you can even take tomatoes and cucumbers away but what you can never take away from the good denizens of Great Britain is their sense of humour. Well, you have to laugh, don't you?

Humour even appears to be government-sponsored, or at least abetted. How else to explain the running 'don't mention Brexit' gag that had 'even' the BBC, and use the term even loosely in this context, firmly rule out Brexit as a contributing factor in yet another round of food shortages. Clearly, this is meant to tie in with the announced reboot of Fawlty Towers. Brexit has replaced 'the war' as the unspeakable thing. Although, where once it was thought gauche to bring up the war in the presence of Germans, now it's seen as curmudgeonly to mention Brexit to the whole of the British electorate, even when it's clearly relevant. Some twisted humour that is.

To be fair, for me it was the BBC correspondent in the Netherlands who delivered the perfect comic coup de grace to the 'don't mention Brexit' crowd in Sunday's edition of Broadcasting House on BBC Radio Four. "Soooo many tomatoes", her six-year-old daughter, clearly a budding reporter, marvelled in their supermarket in The Hague. In the end they were drowning in tomatoes, wandering what to do with all of them, tomato soup, everything tomato?

Look, if the whole sorry Brexit saga will somehow deliver a huge comic pay-off in the coming decades, I might change my mind and agree that it was all worth it. I'm starting to think that this Tory government has come to the same conclusion: People are starting to sour on Brexit, let's divert them with something we Brits have always been superb at; our mix of self-deprecating irony and absurdist humour. How else to explain Environment secretary Theresa Coffey's let them eat turnips line? I know, maybe she just seized her one chance ever to be compared to Marie-Antoinette, but even then, she must have realised the comic potential of her suggestion. It was a line that unleashed a thousand memes, and I have been told that memes are often ironically humorous in order to express an underlying feeling of dread, well...

There are other things that Brits have traditionally been brilliant at, besides humour and the subjugation of distant peoples, things such as literature and the theatre. Possibly, the government is not putting all its Brexit eggs in one comic basket and is also exploring ways to engage the arts. Rishi Sunak played a clever 'will they, won't they' gambit with the Northern Ireland protocol agreement that briefly turned into a cliff hanger with all the makings of a long-running tv-series, about lawyers, or the City, or maybe coppers. At some point it threatened to turn into Waiting for Godot but then Sunak did pull the rabbit out of the hat and it turned into something entirely different: high self-parody.

Even King Charles gamely impersonated his own mother to EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's Paddington. Tea with the King to seal the deal was a brilliant, subtly comic marketing coup, which illustrates the point that renegotiating the Northern Ireland protocol was actually a piece of cake for EU and UK representatives. They must have had half an hour's work last year, using some brightly coloured pencils to go through the main points rather jadedly, sighing, "well a bit of this, and a bit of that, what's the big diff." And then the next four months were spent on devising a marketing strategy to sell the emperor's new clothes to an ever more discerning public. I picture the EU negotiators being active partners in this and it was probably they who came up with the idea of using that quintessential British asset: absurdist humour. I know the Europeans have their own line

in that, with the theatre of the absurd, Charlie Hebdo etc., but credit where credit is due, just as with military aid to Ukraine, when it comes to absurdism, Britain is miles ahead. It's just that sometimes you need an outsider to point it out: "you guys are great at this, why not play to your strengths, rather than try imitate, let's say, the political chaos of Italy. Leave that to the Italians who're much better at it, you do your thing and be absurd."

That was the easy part, it must have been much harder to then either get the Brexiteers to go along or trap them into participating unwittingly. I suspect, going on form, that the unwitting scenario is what happened. It started with rumours that the likes of Suella Braverman were threatening resignation if the new agreement didn't live up to their blood-red lines. Sunak must have been roaring with laughter at that, what an extraordinary chance that would have been to rid himself of that particular albatross. As far as threats go, it must have been one of the funnier ones ever delivered. But the Brexiteers really got into their absurdist stride when they saw which way the wind was blowing, did a 180 and scrambled to line up behind the agreement. The best line was Steve Baker's on Radio 4 on the morning after the agreement lauding the "extraordinary opportunity for Northern Ireland: dual access to both markets". As wags on Twitter pointed out, that was something the whole of the UK had before Brexit.

The clever thing about using absurdist humour to deflect Brexit anger is that it is so ingrained in the British DNA that its permutations are endless and can be found in almost every single detail of government policy. Take for example Sunak's name for the mechanism to give Northern Ireland's assembly a veto on new EU rules, brilliant. Nobody in their right mind would ever want to go on a Stormont Break. What a way to pre-emptively make it sound like a dreary, unattractive way to spend your summer. Let's not even go there, most people will think.

It's heartening to see a younger generation of UK politicians so committed to humour and wittingly or unwittingly paying tribute to their hero, surely smiling at them from comedians' heaven; Alan Beresford B'Stard. It comes just in time to reassure those who're dreading the imminent Fawlty Towers reboot. You know what? Let's not mention the war, Brexit, and that reboot.