

Blessed are the Cheesemakers!

Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

On ITV 'News at Ten' there used to be a tradition of having the vaguely amusing story at the end of the programme to, it must be assumed, provide some light relief from the serious items. This blog will reverse that convention.

Those who've seen the 1979 controversial religious satire, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, better known as *Life of Brian*, will know that '[Blessed are the Cheesemakers](#)' is based on a mishearing of something said by an unseen preacher believed to be a messiah.

As George Parker in the [Financial Times](#) reports, the much vaunted trade deal between the UK and Japan that was close to being signed, and exclaimed a proof that leaving the EU allows the UK to "take back control", is stalled because of cheese.

In particular, Trade Secretary Liz Truss has insisted that Stilton cheese must be part of the trade deal and not subject to tariffs. As Parker suggests, Truss appears to want to be able to show that the deal she achieves is better than the "cars for cheese" agreement created between the EU and Japan last year.

Those who advocated arguments for the UK's departure from the EU claimed we'd be better off.

Parker's final paragraph makes Truss' defence of cheese (Stilton), as many commentators point out Japanese people don't tend to eat a lot of, all the more bizarre:

"According to UK government figures, a "modelled" trade deal with Japan might add 0.07 per cent to Britain's GDP in the long term, compared with the loss of 5 per cent of GDP growth associated with the UK leaving the EU single market and customs union."

It is hard to see this as being anything but another confected crisis.

According to data provided by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, in 2019 this country exported £18 million of blue cheese globally. Significantly, only £102,000 of blue cheese, made milder to suit local tastes, went to Japan.

It has never been a secret that I believe leaving the EU was likely to be disastrous for this country; arguments to the contrary that would be economic benefit appeared simplistic and with no basis.

It's increasingly obvious that leavers are conveniently forgetting such arguments. Instead, they concentrate on what Brexit has always been about; an English nationalistic project. Using the perceived threat of migrants attempting to cross the English Channel becomes the latest device to instil fear and loathing.

It's ironic that Home Secretary Priti Patel, desperate to assuage whipped-up anger of readers of certain hysterical newspapers, given she's the child of immigrants forced to leave Uganda in 1972 when tyrannical and murderous leader Idi Amin expelled the country's Asian minority giving them only 90 days to leave the country.

The very same papers she so willingly wishes to gain support from now, carried headlines in 1972 stating how unwanted her parents were.

Nothing changes but the faces it seems.

Like Brexit, if the implications of what is going on under the patronage of this government were not so serious it would be funny.

Some might suggest that what we are seeing is a farce; seminal Observer economic commentator William Keegan in [this week's column](#) suggested such.

Keegan in considering how the current government has dealt with the pandemic, once again draws attention to Johnson's chief political adviser, Dominic Cummings, hypocritically breaking lockdown rules he himself helped to draw up and, of course, the ludicrous explanation his trip to Barnard Castle "to test his eyesight".

Keegan passionately restates his belief that Brexit will be a calamity:

"...this duumvirate face not only the unexpected event of the Plague but their own "oven-ready" event called Brexit. And what they are finding is that in real, as opposed to fantasy, life, Brexit is not the breeze they convinced themselves – and far too many unsuspecting souls – it would be."

Much depends on what the outcome of the continuing negotiations with the EU.

The portents are not auspicious.

The fact that leading Brexiter, Iain Duncan Smith (IDS) is now claiming that the Withdrawal Act he voted for contains liabilities in the detail he now claims to be unfair to the UK doesn't bode well.

IDS was an enthusiastic supporter of Boris Johnson, his "oven-ready" deal and, following last December's election result, happily endorsed the Withdrawal Act, with indecent haste and little scrutiny, to finally allow Parliament to fulfil the will of the people.

IDS was a cheerleader of many who claimed MPs, by wanting to carefully examine the contents of the Withdrawal deal Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, agreed with the EU, and which was effectively plagiarised, were enemies of democracy. He tweeted that whilst the UK would like to achieve an effective trade relationship with the EU as a sovereign state, "the EU has different ideas":

"They want our money and they want to stop us being a competitor. The Withdrawal Agreement (WA) we signed last year sadly helps them. To avoid their own budget black hole, the EU gets £39 billion as a "divorce payment" from us, reflecting our share of the current EU budget. But it gets worse. Buried in the fine print, unnoticed by many, is the fact we remain hooked into the EU's loan book."

Jack Peat's article in [The London Economic](#) included acerbic criticism of IDS by users of twitter such as Chris Grey, professor in Organization Studies at Royal Holloway university:

"So, in 2016, despite having no detail on what Brexit meant, people knew exactly what they were voting for. But in 2019, despite having a detailed Withdrawal Agreement, MPs didn't know what they were voting for."

The consequences of this country leaving the EU, never fully explained during the referendum campaign become more patent by the day.

Promises made, including the infamous one on the side of a bus of £350 million savings made by no longer a member of the EU would be passed on to the NHS are forgotten.

Whatever else may say about him, Johnson's lucky.

So far, voters seem willing to forgive him for the breaking of the many solemn declarations he made during the 2016 referendum and, more pointedly, his campaign to become leader.

Notably, he stated to Ulster Unionists, there'd never be a border down the Irish Sea.

Few were surprised when, characteristic of his approach life and relationships, Johnson found this commitment inconvenient what could realistically be achieved in striking a deal with the EU.

The need to have a border between the six counties of Northern Ireland and neighbouring Republic to inspect goods would, as he discovered, be hugely problematic and would undermine the Good Friday Agreement covered by an international protocol signed by the British Government.

As [reported last week](#), up to £355 million of taxpayers' money will be required spent to help companies in Northern Ireland deal with additional bureaucracy that will be essential to comply with the rules that are necessary.

For the likes of IDS this is another example of the EU not playing fair and insisting on rules that surely should not have to apply to the UK.

As cynics may claim, English exceptionalism at its best!

At least in this regard the potential tragedy of a return to violence in Ireland that was endemic during 'the Troubles' may have been avoided.

However, Brexit may result in genuine tragedy.

As [LBC reported](#), pharmaceutical firms have been advised by the government to stockpile six weeks' worth of medicines and drugs because of potential disruption at the expiration of the transition period which ends on 31st December this year.

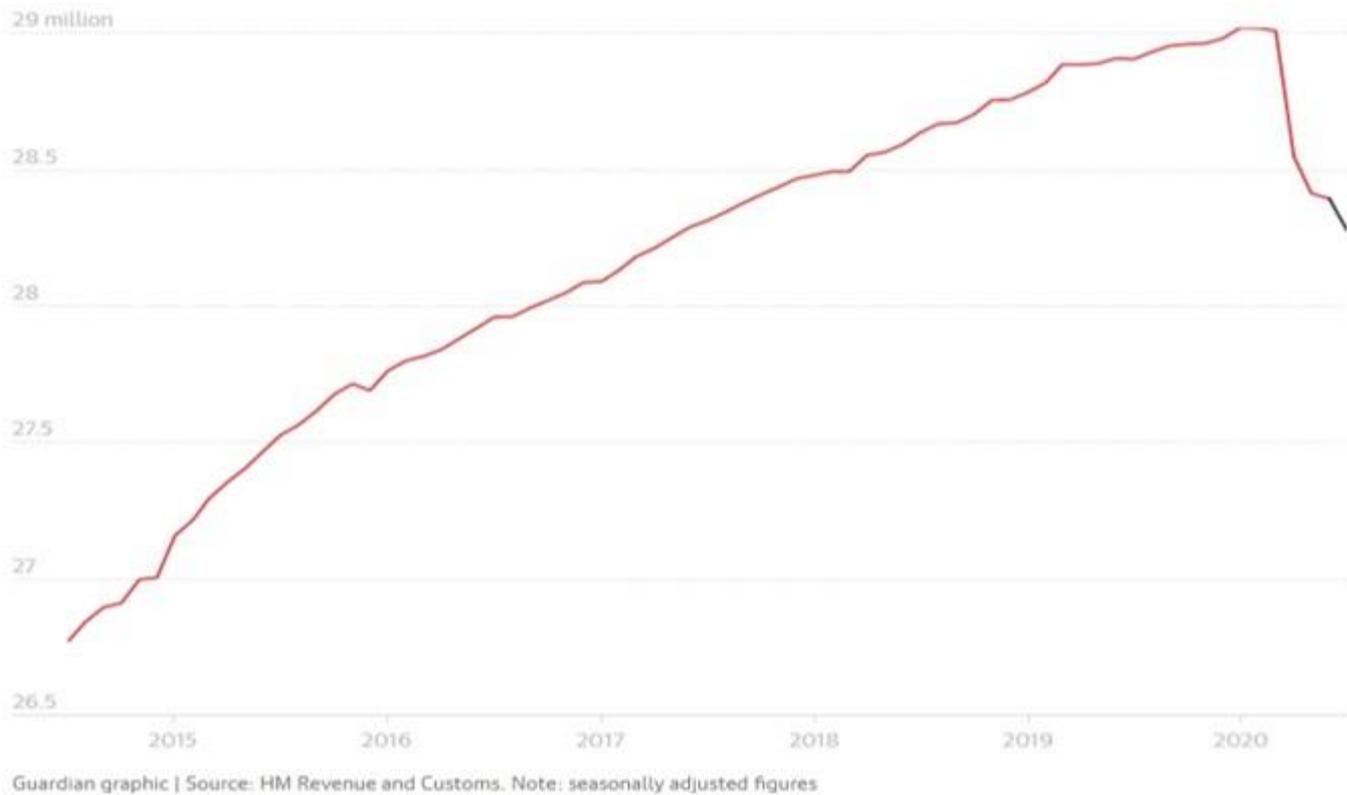
Given that we are still in the throes of dealing with Covid-19 and the indications are that we are about to enter a second phase or, at the best, the current one will simply linger on throughout the winter, any disruption to supply chains for food and medicine from next January becomes for some a literal matter of life and death.

Not for the first time I draw attention to the book *Britannia Unchained: Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity* published in September 2012. Notably among the authors of a treatise advocating the need to more fully embrace the principles of Thatcherism through more lax employment laws to deal with British workers, "the worst idlers in the world" are three current members of the Cabinet; Priti Patel, Dominic Raab and Elizabeth Truss

As [The Guardian](#) reported on Tuesday, economic data published by the Office for National Statistics shows that 730,000 jobs have been "lost from company payrolls" since March due to covid-19 suggests that things are going to get a lot worse.

The following three graphs taken from the Guardian demonstrate the unfolding unemployment crisis that confronts the government:

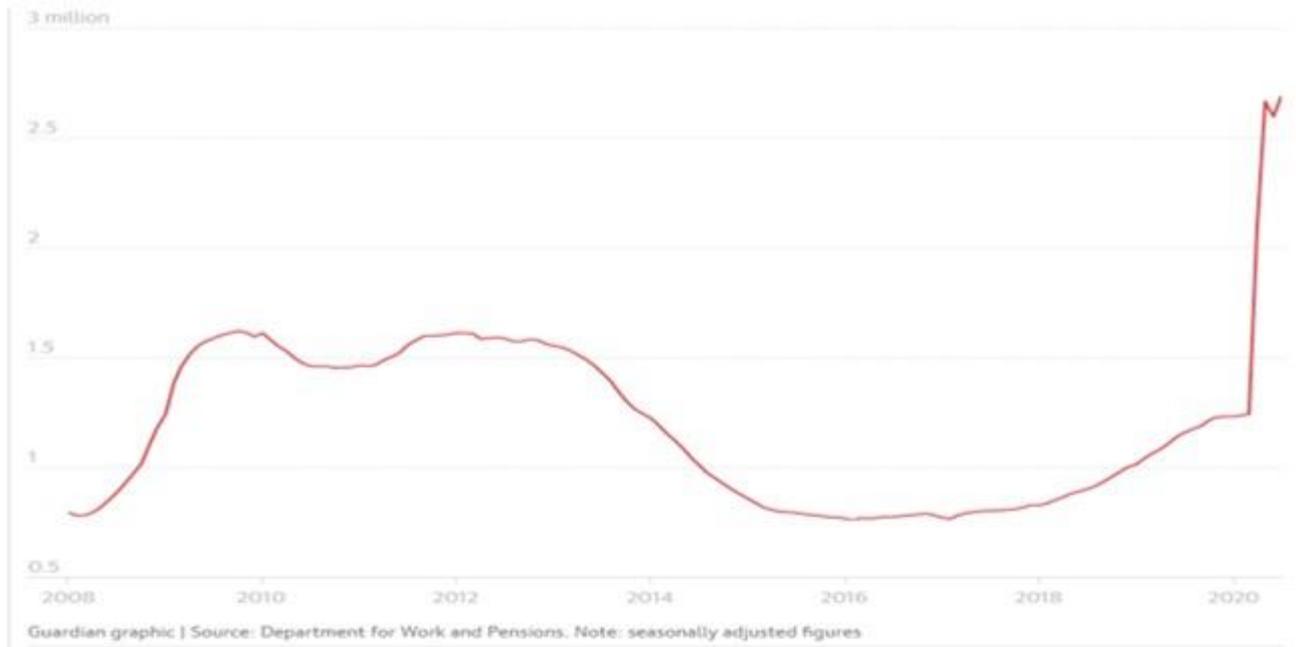
Number of employees on the payroll



This graph indicates there has been a dramatic drop in those on the payroll. However, as ONS acknowledge, the rate of unemployment remains at 3.9% which is due to many being on 'furlough'. When this ends in October the fear is that unemployment will rise rapidly.

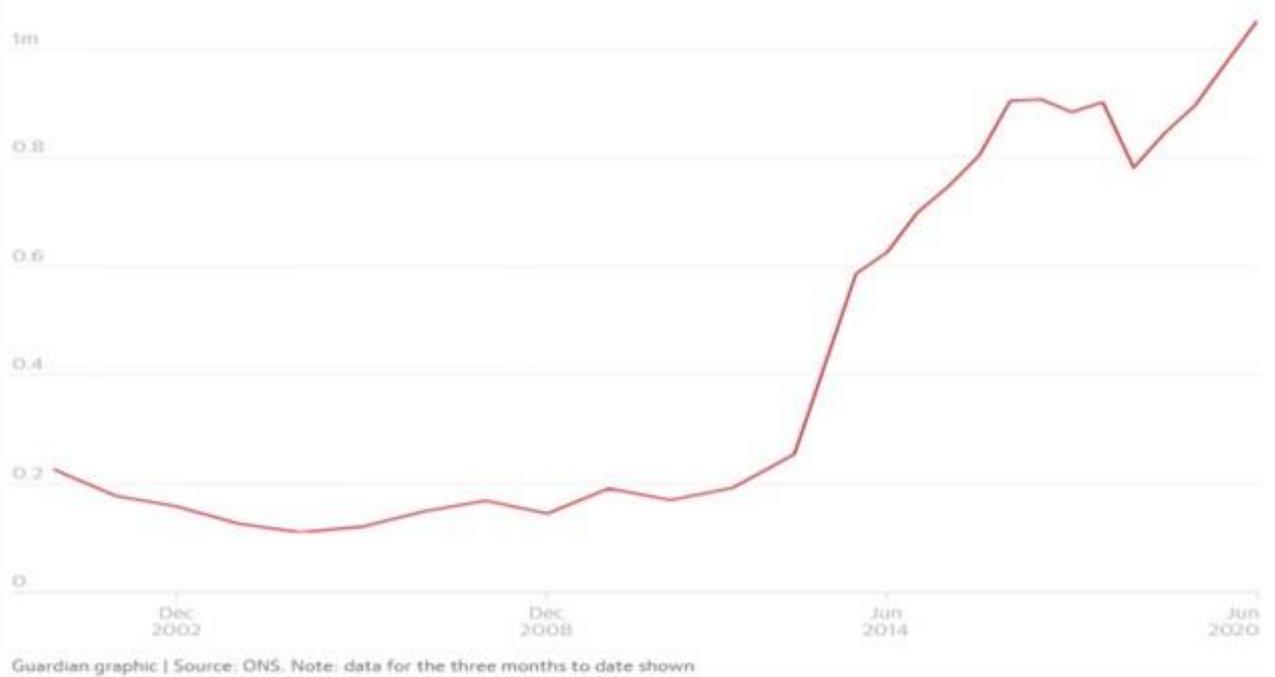
Accordingly, the next graph, claimants of benefit, regarded as a reliable indicator of developing trends is worrying. It shows that the number of those claiming benefits has increased by 1.4 million since the outbreak of Covid-19 in March. That is a whopping increase of 116.8%.

Number of people claiming benefit



The Guardian pointed out that the young are likely to be worst affected by rising unemployment and borne the brunt of the rise ONS recorded in zero-hours contracts “to the highest level on record.”

The number of people on zero-hours contracts has increased to more than 1 million



Wednesday’s announcement that the UK’s GDP declined in the second quarter by 20.4% – the greatest quarterly drop since comparable records began in 1955 – and the largest of any of the G& countries and worse than any of the major EU members suggests tough, really tough, times ahead.

When Liz Truss argues on behalf of the cheesemakers it may be asked whether she still subscribes to the contents of *Britannia Unchained*? She put her name to this book arguing in 2012 that the UK was a “bloated state” in which taxes and regulations were “excessive”.

British workers, it was claimed in *Britannia Unchained*, as well as being idle, retire too early and their lack of effort means UK productivity is inadequate when compared to other countries.

No one would argue that Truss could have foreseen the worst health crisis in a century.

What will be reprehensible, though, is she is part of a government elected to “get Brexit done” in order to unleash entrepreneurial dynamism and create opportunity, ends up overseeing a worsening of the prospects of so called ‘left behind’ communities promised improvement through “levelling up”.

Enjoy whichever cheese you prefer, wherever it comes from!

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807), contributor to *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644), *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824), *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Paul Hindley and Paul Hishman (published by Social Liberal Forum), *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by John Mair (forthcoming to be published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power*, jointly edited with Beverley Nielsen (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099).