

Making Heavy Weather: Boris Johnson the Despoiler

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*There is a certain haunting similarity between the President of the United States and the now former foreign secretary of the United Kingdom, **Boris Johnson**. This does not merely extend to mad, oddly positioned hair, and misshaped mullets. Both share a philosophy of upending the order and permanent disruption, impossible for those on their putative side of politics to measure, predict or contain.*

Last Friday, **Prime Minister Theresa May** thought that her cabinet, moulded by cabinet responsibility, would be able to go forth with the bare bones of a plan for negotiations with the European Union for Britain's departure. Johnson, with characteristic muddling, had signed on to the Chequers statement, but had issued public utterances about his dissatisfaction. He was on board, but only in wobbly fashion.

Having first seen which way the wind would turn, Johnson waited for the initial resignations of the Brexit team led by **David Davis** to take the plunge. His resignation was intended as an improvised explosive device, timed to blow up in the prime minister's face just before she was to address members of parliament on Monday.

The [letter](#) has all the elements of BJ the opportunist, the cad, the slippery debater. It has no definite shape in terms of what should be done, but is filled with defiance and, dare one say it, hope. Central to the argument is a defence of the "British people", those subjects for whom he supposedly speaks for. "They were told that they would be able to manage their own immigration policy, repatriate the sums of UK cash currently spent by the EU, and, above all, that they would be able to pass laws independently and in the interests of the people of this country."

He warned, with irate frustration, that the "dream is dying, suffocated by needless self-doubt." Decisions had been postponed on vital issues "with the result that we appear to be heading for a semi-Brexit, with large parts of the economy still locked in the EU system, but with no UK control over that system."

Ever chancing his arm, and interpretation of events, Johnson brought a touch of drama into the note. The new plan proposed by May, he argued, seemed to take Britain further back since the last Chequers meeting in February. Then, he described frustrations

"as Mayor of London, in trying to protect cyclists from juggernauts. We had wanted to lower the cabin windows to improve visibility; and even though such designs were already on the market, and even though there had been a horrific spate of deaths, mainly of female cyclists, we were told that we had to wait for the EU to legislate on the matter."

Ever forceful with the dire scenario, Johnson insisted that the May plan would put Britain into a “ludicrous position” of asserting that “huge amounts” of EU law would have to be accepted “without changing an iota”, while shutting Britain out from influencing them. “In that respect we are truly headed for the status of a colony”.

Such imagery qualifies as both entertainment and conceit. Labour’s Shadow Brexit Secretary **Sir [Keir Starmer](#)** summed up the Johnson approach in a sentence:

“Boris Johnson’s whole political career has been characterised by self-promotion and spreading misinformation.”

On the issue of introducing cab design changes to improve visibility for trucks, Johnson [conveniently avoided](#) the European Parliament’s vote in 2014 requiring such improvements to be made, a point subsequently decreed by a 2015 directive. A more complex picture to emerge from here is one of institutional lethargy and foot dragging across a range of institutions, of which Johnson’s own stint as London mayor may count as one.

The resignation has been read in some circles of British commentary as decisively damning for Johnson’s future influence over the Tories. His stint as foreign secretary, suggested **Stephen Bush** of [The New Statesman](#), was so gaffe-strewn as to erode “his standing among MPs”. Where his effect becomes different is in the realms of disruption: encouraging Tory members to press for a confidence motion in the prime minister. A mere 15 percent of Conservative MPs are needed to sign letters calling for such a vote.

Such readings of Johnson ignore the beguiling force he retains in politics. His buffoonery and populism do have retail value. Deemed unelectable at points of his career, let alone beyond promotion, he managed to win the mayorship of London. He was indispensable to swinging the mood to Brexit prior to the 2016 referendum. To that end, dismissive interpretations of Johnson’s career suffer, to some extent, from a rational view that sees politics as predictable and reasonable. It was exactly such an approach that missed, almost in its entirety, the furious rise of Donald Trump.

“Johnson,” went **William Davies** in the [London Review Books](#) on March 8 this year, “approaches public life as a game in which he commits sackable offences as a way of demonstrating his unsackability.”

Making him foreign secretary had served only one purpose: a restraint, and a means of minimising any potential damage to May. But his presence, his bravado and his disruptive penchant made Davies wonder whether Trumpism was, as matter of reality, a British problem. “Johnson,” he admitted, “is as close as British politics has to a Trump problem; and his seniority suggests that Trumpism has permeated our political culture more deeply than we like to admit.” This streak of British-styled Trumpism is bound to provide Johnson more nourishment, though its duration, and depth, remain questionable.

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