

No Deal Chaos: The Brexit Cliff Face and Operation Yellowhammer

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Britain's **Boris Johnson** is driving his country to the cliff face, along the way mouthing and spouting all manner of populist reassurances. Still fresh in the job, he declared that UK preparations for a no-deal Brexit on October 31, when Britain would leave the European Union, would receive a boost – a “turbocharge”, no less. **Michael Gove**, now chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster, has been charged with the [task](#) of handling the haphazard effort, having chaired some dozen meetings of the Brexit war cabinet dubbed XO to date.

While this hubris bubbles, the *Sunday Times* article relying on a leaked cross-government paper showing preparations for a no-deal Brexit did its panic-inducing trick, though it has not swayed the Tory-Brexititeer zombies. The BBC [was told](#) by a “Downing Street source” that the leaked document “is from when ministers were blocking what needed to be done to get ready to leave and the funds were not available.”

Codenamed Operation Yellowhammer, the dossier is resoundingly pessimistic, an Anglo version of *Götterdämmerung* delivered in a civil servant’s tone. The former head of the British civil service, **Lord Bob Kerslake**, had little reason to doubt its veracity or sincerity, [warning](#) listeners on BBC Radio 4’s Broadcasting House that the document “lays bare the scale of the risks we are facing with no-deal Brexit in almost every area.”

A few blotches of generous bleakness are noted in the Yellowhammer report, not least the theme of uncertainty (read total lack of transparency) that has hindered efforts to “provide for a concrete situation for third parties to prepare for”. The UK risks lapsing into “third country” status, with the European Union “unsympathetic” in engaging bilaterally or implementing protections unilaterally. (Individual member states might take a different view.) The public, and British businesses, remained unprepared in the face of “EU exit fatigue” – at least those of the small and medium-size types. “Business readiness will be compounded by seasonable effects and factors such as warehouse availability.”

The lack of preparedness on the part of businesses is a point [reiterated](#) by the interim director-general of the Institute of Directors, **Edwin Morgan**.

“Until recently the level of planning has been fairly low. Our surveys show that businesses had been waiting to see what happened. The message from the government is getting clearer, but is still not clear enough.”

The chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses, **Mike Cherry**, is even [gloomier](#).

“The ongoing political uncertainty has meant it’s impossible for them to invest,

expand and hire when we don't know what the future holds.”

The big no-no of a hard border in Ireland is also floated in the dossier; current arrangements to avoid widespread checks are deemed “unsustainable” in the long-run. The risk of “direct” protest action and road blockages is considered a more than realistic prospect. Protests in the UK would also be possible, requiring “significant amounts of police resource[s]”.

Strangulation and suffocation are the heavy themes that run through the report like clarions of doom. Fuel distribution could be disrupted in London and the southeast of England, caused by the closure of oil refineries leading to a loss of 2,000 jobs and strike action; up to 85 percent of lorries using the main Channel crossing were unprepared for French customs, a point that could lead to delays of two-and-a-half days. Shortages in fresh food, precipitating a rise in prices; this would hit “vulnerable groups”. Medical supplies would “be vulnerable to severe extended delays”, given that the UK receives three-quarters of its medicine through the main Channel crossings.

Then there is the sheer blithe indifference of it all, the Whitehall smugness and government secrecy of the optimists who bungle in the name of Queen and country. In the reported words of a Cabinet Office source,

“Successive UK governments have a long history of failing to prepare their citizens to be resilient for their own emergencies.”

The Britannia-rules-the-waves set barely broke a sweat at Sunday's less than startling revelations. The consensus among them was that the Yellowhammer dossier was merely part of a sensible planning strategy, not a portrait of calamity; in any case, [claimed](#) Gove, this was “a worst case scenario” and hardly worth a murmur of concern. Contingencies always had to be planned for; there would be “bumps in the road” and “some element of disruption”. The last three weeks had been very “significant steps” taken to “accelerate Brexit planning”. Nothing, however, was done to allay uncertainty.

Other efforts were made to suggest that the Yellowhammer Report was outdated and inaccurate on various points. A [press release](#) from the Gibraltar authorities, for instance, claimed that references to the territory on whether preparations for “worse case scenarios” had been made were “out of date”. (The Yellowhammer dossier suggests delays of up to four hours at the border with Spain, a state of affairs that will last for “at least a few months”.)

Stay calm, suggest the governing authorities in Gibraltar; they had “already dealt with” such matters.

“We have already commissioned all necessary works at the port of Gibraltar in order to have even further contingency capacity in maritime traffic. We do not anticipate this will be needed, but as a responsible government we want to make sure it will be available.”

While the denial syndrome continues to exert its force, the fears within the bureaucracy on imminent, and absurd catastrophe, abound. A sickened, black humour prevails. Last

Wednesday, a civil servant working in what might be designated the National Centre For No-Deal Planning [told](#) comedian Stewart Lee of a clandestine scheme to purchase Kinder eggs and tubs of Vaseline using “thousands of press-ganged school children and cross-Channel swimmers”. The comic mused: Why keep it clandestine? “I don’t know, but we don’t want to set off a Kinder egg and Vaseline buying panic.” More than just a comic affair.

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