

Sorry, Boris Johnson Will Not Disappear

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It is currently popular among those who make money writing media articles about politics, to argue that Boris Johnson will implode next year and be replaced as Tory leader by someone more rational and conventional. I very much doubt this: the most important reason for that doubt being the power of the atavistic English nationalist forces that Johnson has unleashed in British politics. Astonishingly, despite the UK government's hideously inept performance in the Covid crisis, and the corruption and looting of the public purse on a massive scale for which the pandemic has been used, the Conservatives still lead Labour in the UK opinion polls.

Partly that is due to Sir Keir Starmer having no apparent policy other than to ensure that no party member ever criticises Israel. But it is mostly due to the fact that Johnson's supporters do not care what happens to the country, as long as they can see news footage of black people being deported on charter planes and immigrant children washed up dead rather than rescued. The racist brand is very, very strong in England. Cummings and Johnson's plan to appropriate it and target the areas of England with lowest levels of educational achievement as their new political base still holds up as a political strategy. Look at the polls.

Tory MP's care about themselves. They will ditch Johnson extremely quickly if he becomes a perceived electoral liability and therefore a threat to their own jobs. But as long as the Tories are ahead in the opinion polls, then Johnson is secure. The idea that there is a norm to which politics revert is a false one. Many of the same pundits who are assuring us now that Johnson will depart, also assured us that his kicking out moderate and pro-EU Conservatives from his party, and removing Remainers from his Cabinet, was a temporary move to be reversed post-election. There is in fact no going back to the norm.

Even the dimmest Labour Party members must now realise that Starmer lied when he promised he would carry on with Corbyn's radical economic policies if elected to the leadership of the Labour Party. The Corbyn phenomenon was interesting. It arose as a reaction to the massively burgeoning wealth inequality in UK society and the great loss of secure employment opportunity with rights and benefits available to the large bulk of the population. That situation continues to worsen. Brexit was in large part a cry of pain resulting from the same causes. But Brexit in itself is going to do nothing to improve the social position or economic prospects of the working class.

Whether the novelty of Brexit will in the long term continue to be enough to channel the desire for radical change away from actual programmes of redistribution of wealth and ownership, I doubt. I suspect the Starmer project will falter on public reluctance to yet again embrace a choice of two Tory parties, and Starmer will be ejected as Labour leader before he can become the third Blue Labour PM. In the meantime, I can only urge those in England

to vote Green. I can certainly see no reason to vote Labour and validate the Starmer purge.

As a former professional diplomat, I am going to be astonished if there is not a Brexit deal announced very shortly. It is plainly highly achievable given the current state of negotiations. The EU have moved very far in agreeing that an independent UK body, as opposed to the European Court of Justice, can be responsible for policing UK compliance with standards regulation to ensure against undercutting. The “ratchet clause” sticking point, where a mechanism is needed to ensure the UK does not undercut future improved EU regulatory regimes, can be resolved with some fudged wording on the mutual obligation to comply with the highest standards, but which does not quite force the EU to simply copy UK regulation in the improbable event it becomes more demanding than the EU regime. By making the obligation theoretically mutual the “sovereignty” argument about UK subservience to EU regulations and standards is met, which is the ultra Tory Brexiteers biggest fetish. Fisheries is even simpler to solve, with obvious compromises on lengths of agreement periods and quotas within easy grasp.

It should not be forgotten that David Frost is not the plain loutish Brexiteer he has so spectacularly enhanced his career by impersonating domestically, but is the smooth and effective professional diplomat he shows when actually interacting with Barnier. It could only be an act of utter lunacy that would lead Johnson to eschew a deal that the Express and Mail will be able to trumpet as a massive victory over Johnny Foreigner. I expect we shall be seeing a union jacked apotheosis of saviour Johnson all over the media by a week from now at the very latest – another reason he will not be leaving office.

It is of course, all smoke and mirrors. By expectation management, a deal which is a far harder Brexit than anybody imagined when Theresa May set down her infamous red lines, will be greeted by a relieved business community as better than actually blowing your own brains out. As I have stated ever since the repression of the Catalan referendum, I can live with leaving the EU and live with abandoning its political and security pillars. I continue to view leaving the single market and losing the great advantage of free movement as disastrous.

One thing that has been very little publicised is that, deal or no deal, the UK is going to fudge the worst consequences by simply not on 1 January applying the new rules at the borders. There will not be immigration checks on the 86% of truck drivers entering the UK who are EU citizens, for the first six months. Otherwise the queues by mid January would scarcely be contained by Kent itself. Similarly, the UK side will not be applying the new customs paperwork on 1 January except on a “random sampling” basis. Those who are eagerly anticipating chaos on 1 January will thus probably be disappointed. In fact the deleterious economic effects of Brexit are quite probably going to take some time to show through in a definite way. I do not believe we will see either empty shelves or major price hikes in the first few weeks.

My prediction is this: Boris will agree his thin deal and at the end of January the Brexiteers will be gloating that the predicted disaster did not happen. Effects on economic growth and employment will take some time to be plainly identified, and it will be mortifying how readily the Tories will twist the narrative to blame the EU, and also to obtain English nationalist support for the notion that this gradual pain is worth it in pursuit of a purer country, with less immigration. That may sound crazy to you. But is it not crazy to you that the Tories are still ahead in UK polls after the last year? Mark my words; hope that Boris Johnson will

simply vanish is very misplaced.

There is of course the possibility that Johnson is indeed completely bonkers and will not agree any deal at all, in which case 1 January chaos is unavoidable and all bets are off. I should be very surprised indeed. But then I did not think Trump would be mad enough not to concede the US Presidential election. Trying to predict the irrational mind is a pointless undertaking. I don't think Johnson is that irrational; but I have been wrong before.

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Featured image: Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a press conference on 16 March, with Chief Medical Officer Prof Chris Witty and Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance. Picture by Andrew Parsons

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