

Boris Johnson Trips: Duvets, Toothbrushes and the House of Lords

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In 2017, MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, a Tory creature trapped in cold storage, [suggested](#) that the UK's withdrawal from the European Union was tantamount to fighting the battles of Agincourt, Waterloo and Trafalgar, a true statement of British strength. (Much inconsistency there, but let him ride with it.)

"This is Magna Carta, it's the Burgesses coming at Parliament, it's the great reform bill, it's the bill of rights, it's Waterloo, it's Agincourt, it's Crecy. We win all of these things."

Those things are not looking quite so victorious at the moment, stalling and falling as they are. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, like his predecessor, is finding the House of Commons unruly, incapable of placation. He has lost every vote so far, failing to get the trigger by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act to propel the country towards a speedy election. In response to that loss, Johnson [appeared](#) at the West Yorkshire Police Headquarters intending to crow about being "strong on crime" in front of a gaggle of police officers. Before asking the EU for an extension, he would "rather be dead in a ditch."

He is also finding the House of Lords a tough proposition. Everyone is talking about ways that Brexit will not happen, rather than *how* it will happen. In order to effectuate the former, the need to take, again, the begging bowl to Europe to seek an extension past the October 31 date of departure is becoming pressing.

On Wednesday night, reports were filtering through that the House of Lords was determined to stay and debate for as long as it was required on the fate of a backbench bill seeking to block a no-deal Brexit. Some [had even arrived](#) with duvets and toothbrushes, anticipating a lengthy battle in the chamber. Richard Newby, the Liberal Democrats leader in the Lords, [was relieved](#) that it did not come to that. "I don't think carrying through 24 or 48 hours as we have been doing in a sort of pathetic attempt to set a new Guinness world record... would do anybody any favours."

At 1.30 Thursday morning, peers were informed that the bill tabled by Labour's Hilary Benn would be returned to the lower house the following day by 5pm, scuppering any new attempts at a filibuster. (Such behaviour is precisely the sort that has gotten the conservative magazine, *The Spectator*, [worried](#): pack the Lords, it suggests, with leavers, and we would not have this disagreeable nonsense.) On Monday, the bill will again be voted on in the Commons and, if passed, duly become law with royal assent.

Johnson, [through a spokesman](#), has expressed a desire to reject the bill's force, requiring

him to seek yet another extension on Brexit till January 31 if October's European Council summit fails to secure a deal or Parliament's consent for a no deal. "The PM will not do this. It is clear the only action is to go back to the people and give them the opportunity to decide what they want: Boris to go to Brussels and get a deal, or leave without one on 31 October."

The debate, the angst, and the anger, is taking place in a sealed vacuum, one that sees Europe and the European Union in the most abstract of terms. The United Kingdom remains psychically and spiritually estranged from the continent, a point that is also shown by the Remainers: Europe is only relevant as a commissariat to transact with, an assemblage of destinations rather than a set of ties. Well and good to get a vote to force Boris with his Begging Bowl to front up to the EU, but in the minds of most officials, the deal is done and dusted, on the table awaiting implementation. The rest is a carnival of despair marked by a parody akin to students who refuse to submit their assessments on time, though a worrying one for those in Brussels who fear that a successful exit might spell the end of the EU compact.

Such conditions breed foolishness, satire, and caricature. The trivial becomes arresting, compelling and disproportionately significant. A politician's posture and demeanour – how that person behaves in the House – exceeds the interests of all others, including the mechanics of one of the most important processes in several generations. Where expertise on process is required, clownish expounding is preferred.

The delightfully hysterical reaction to Rees-Mogg himself is a case in point. The leader of the House of Commons has taken to becoming a bit of furniture, [spreading out](#) on the front bench, quite literally, the sort of behaviour that would not have been out of place from a Head Boy at a public school. This [horrified](#) conservative grandee Sir Nicholas Soames, former defence minister of the realm, and grandson of Winston Churchill considers that:

"[Rees Mogg] is in serious danger of believing his own shtick. He is an absolute fraud, he is a living example of what a moderately cut double-breasted suit and a decent tie can do with an ultra-posh voice and a bit of ginger stuck up his arse."

Even as the ship sinks, it is important to keep up appearances.

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