

Brexit's Collateral Damage

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Five years after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, the costs of that decision are becoming clearer. Most perniciously, trust in Britain is declining fast as Prime Minister Boris Johnson denies the consequences of the post-Brexit agreement he reached regarding Northern Ireland.

I confess straightaway: I am not a football fan. Too often, matches fall well below the sport's claim to be “the beautiful game.” Nonetheless, I am dutifully watching some of the current European Championship. Naturally, I always want England to win, though I hate how English fans boo other countries' national anthems. And, being British, I would support Scotland, Wales, or – though they did not qualify this year – Northern Ireland if they were playing a country from outside the United Kingdom.

My point is that I never want my country to do badly. And even though I passionately opposed Brexit, I want Britain to fare as well as it possibly can outside the European Union. But staying silent in the face of evidence that it is not amounts to the crudest and most mendacious sort of nationalism.

The UK has already incurred steadily rising costs as a result not only of Brexit but of a hard Brexit that people did not necessarily vote for in the June 2016 referendum. Yet, that is what we got in order to appease Britain's right-wing media and politicians and to pave the way for Boris Johnson to become prime minister.

I will not itemize here Britain's Brexit-induced loss of trade with the EU in [food](#), manufactured goods, and [services](#), which cannot be blamed on the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the UK's worsening labor shortage – not least in the agriculture and hospitality sectors. As the OECD has [pointed out](#), Britain is emerging from the pandemic in worse shape than most of its competitors.

But I do want to highlight three damaging consequences of Brexit. First, its advocates claimed that leaving the EU would enable Britain to “take back control.” If that phrase meant anything, it suggested that Parliament would have more say in running our national affairs. In practice, it means nothing of the sort.

For example, the government recently agreed to a [free-trade deal with Australia](#). Leave aside the fact that the pact's likely economic benefits to the UK over a 15-year period are so small, even by the government's estimates, that they amount to a rounding adjustment. Just as significant is that – despite the government's promises during the passage of the Brexit legislation – Parliament cannot scrutinize, much less mitigate, the deal's impact, which will be particularly harmful for small farmers in Wales and Scotland.

Second, the government was keen to reach an agreement with Australia to show that Britain can negotiate trade deals on its own, without the EU. Although Johnson had hoped to begin with India, and planned to visit the country to discuss a deal with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the visit became inadvisable as COVID-19 ravaged South Asia. Yet, in the hope that it might still go ahead, the British government delayed imposing a travel ban on people coming to the UK from India, despite barring visitors from Bangladesh and Pakistan. There was no plausible public-health rationale for this distinction. In fact, given its COVID-19 figures, arrivals from India arguably should have been prohibited first.

As many pointed out, the thousands of travelers who arrived in the UK from India during the period when other South Asian visitors were banned must have seeded and spread what is now called the Delta variant of the coronavirus. COVID-19 infections in the UK have [increased significantly](#) in the last few weeks, obliging the government to [delay](#) the further planned easing of lockdown restrictions in England and deterring other countries from opening their borders to people arriving from the UK. So, this new surge in the pandemic looks like part of the collateral damage caused by the government's attempt to make the political case for Brexit and trade.

Third, trust in Britain and Johnson is declining fast as the government denies the consequences of the agreement it reached regarding Northern Ireland after the UK's departure from the EU. In those negotiations, Britain wanted to minimize the inconvenience of accessing the EU's single market while maximizing its ability to establish its own rules and standards.

The UK's only land border with the EU is the one between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Avoiding a hard border on the island is a fundamental part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland. But Northern Ireland cannot remain outside the EU's customs union and regulatory regime and at the same time maintain an open border with the Republic.

For this reason, Johnson negotiated and signed a protocol that meant Northern Ireland received, in a sense, the best of both worlds. It stayed in the EU's customs union and partly in its single market while also remaining a part of the UK market. This was despite the government's promises to Northern Ireland's Unionists that there would not need to be any kind of border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland with customs and other checks.

Johnson now denies the promises he made and is threatening to tear up the protocol, blaming the EU for the problem he has caused. The EU certainly has scope for flexibility in managing the border, and I hope it will show some. But the UK government can show even more latitude, for example by accepting that Northern Ireland might follow EU standards for food and agricultural products. After all, the government says it does not want to see lower standards in Britain than in Europe.

But the most important thing for Johnson to do is to demonstrate trustworthiness in

international negotiations. Sadly, a growing number of world leaders, as well as people in Britain and Northern Ireland, have come to doubt that he will keep his word when he has given it.

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