

Brexiting Hard: Boris Johnson Goes to War

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The Times was none too pleased, riled and concerned. Contributors to The Spectator were wondering whether an imminent implosion was about to take place. Who would profit from this act of suicide, this ritual of Tory party cannibalism? The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, naturally. The Tories, Britain's drivers of Brexit, have gone from trouble to potential disaster.

It all came down the antics of Buffoonish Boris Johnson, the foreign secretary who rendered himself a talismanic figure during the Brexit referendum campaign, the figure whom Prime Minister Theresa May felt best secure from in sending him to far-flung places. Over time, the talisman has become an un-improvised explosion device, poorly assembled but nonetheless devastating. At any moment, he might just blow up, leaving a crippling residue.

Rumours had begun circulating this week that Johnson was set for the cabinet chop. In a lengthy note in the *Daily Telegraph*, Johnson was returning to soil long tilled over by the Leave debate. Even grounds now considered inaccurate if not plainly misleading by those who participated in the campaign to leave the EU, were revisited with unremitting enthusiasm.

It was this very meditation that had peeved establishment Tories.

"I don't know where this is coming from, honestly. It feels to me like an attempt to keep the great snoreathon story about my article running." [1]

Tory grandee Ken Clarke was in little doubt what the foreign secretary was up to: soiling the prime minister's stable.

"Sounding off personally in this way is totally unhelpful and he shouldn't exploit the fact that [Theresa May] hasn't got a majority in parliament."

Had May received a stonking majority in what turned out to be a withering election, he would have been surely sacked for such conduct.

Interest centred on Johnson's cavalier approach to the claim, made before and most recently in the *Daily Telegraph*, that £350 million a week was being paid in dues to the European Union, and that it was an amount that would be duly clawed back once Britannia had made her brave, disentangling escape.

"Once we have settled out accounts, we will take back control of roughly £350m a week."

It was a figure he has defended with iconoclastic conviction and a degree of enthusiasm verging on mania. Never mind the inconsistencies and the balanced losses, the EU subsidies and services supplied in return for dues. Britain, bold, hamstrung Britain, had to out, to fight this imposition.

Once freed from these clutches, Britain would be able to relocate the funding to, for instance, the National Health Service (NHS), the very system Tories was sworn to eliminate at various stages since its inception. (The NHS already suffers at the hands of the privatisation ideologues.)

“It would be fine thing,” suggested Johnson, “as many of us have pointed out, if a lot of that money went on the NHS, provided we use that cash injection to modernise and make most of the new technology.”

The core of his argument was his own pitch for a Hard Brexit. Rather than fearing the behaviour of EU apparatchiks, it was important for Britain not to pay anything to the EU for access post-Brexit. To remain within, even if only financially, would constitute a betrayal. As would a transitional period after 2019 that would involve the government softening its exit with ongoing EU payments for market benefits. Prime Minister May had been warned.

Statistics Chief Sir David Norgrove deemed Johnson’s play with figures a “clear misuse of official statistics”.[2] It was a classic statement of British understatement.

“I am surprised and disappointed that you have chosen to repeat the £350m per week, in connection with the amount that might be available for extra public spending when we leave the European Union.”

It conveyed a fundamental confusion, refusing to admit to the difference between gross contributions and net. Johnson’s response was to accuse Norgrove, in turn, of a “willful distortion of the text of my article”.

This has been an ongoing problem of Johnson and his Leave comrades, a certain injudicious use of statistics. In April 2016, Norgrove’s predecessor as chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot, noted that the figure cited by those in the Leave campaign appeared “to relate to the UK’s gross contributions to the EU, before the applications of the UK’s rebate.”[3] As he concluded in a letter to Norman Lamb, MP,

“Without further explanation I consider these statements to be potentially misleading.”

As, indeed, it proved to be.

That was not all – Johnson was keen to insist that the aggrieved young, those who felt that Britain had profited from being involved in the union, were suffering a case of split loyalties. The zealous Europeanist Guy Verhofstadt could be counted on picking up on this criticism.

“Some British politicians – not to name Boris Johnson – criticise their countrymen and women for wanting to keep their European identity.” This sort of approach smacked of the archaic, claimed Verhofstadt, a case of “binary, old-fashioned and reductionist

understanding”.[4]

For Johnson, these points hardly matter. After being kept on the cooler, and isolated as a dangerous, rebarbative maverick, he has signaled his wish to be counted again, to make the case that will resonate with those who voted to leave in 2016. Time, it seems, to either turn or spurn the prime minister.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/19/boris-johnson-i-wont-quit-over-theresa-mays-brex-it-speech>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/17/boris-johnson-slapped-down-statistics-chief-fresh-350m-brex-it-speech>

[3] <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Letter-from-Sir-Andrew-Dilnot-to-Norman-Lamb-MP-210416.pdf>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/21/eu-brex-it-negotiator-attacks-boris-johnson-old-fashioned-views-on-identity-european>

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