

Consumed by Lies: U Turn on EU Withdrawal Agreement, Britain's "Masochistic" Trashing of Its Global Reputation

By [Alex Andreou](#)

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With Boris Johnson now U-turning on the Withdrawal Agreement he signed with the EU in December, Alex Andreou argues how the entire Brexit project "never made any sense" from the very start

"There is no plan for 'no deal' because we are going to get a great deal."

These were the [words](#) of the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in the House of Commons, when he was challenged on a lack of preparation for a Brexit deal in July 2017. Today, the same Boris Johnson is [telling](#) the country that he has "said right from the start" that a 'no deal' "would be a good outcome for the UK".

This, combined with [news](#) that the forthcoming UK Internal Markets Bill will seek to undermine parts of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement – which Johnson himself signed and Parliament ratified only 10 months ago – signify an intensification of the rhetoric surrounding the eighth, and last, round of UK-EU negotiations due to take place this week.

Several things may be going on and they are not mutually exclusive – all these hares may be running concurrently.

First, there is a predictable level of sabre-rattling which always precedes such negotiations.

Second, there may be a level of expectation management, so that if a deal does eventually materialise, however thin and awful, it can be presented as a magnificent achievement.

Third – and this has been a classic Dominic Cummings technique – there may be an effort to create a more chaotic atmosphere, in order to create disorder on the EU side and disrupt its advantage. If this was partly the aim, it has not worked. The reaction from the EU has been, for the most part, a weary roll of the eyes and steely determination.

The resignation of Sir Jonathan Jones, the head of the Government Legal Service on Tuesday morning, after a reported major spat over Johnson trying to undermine or circumvent the Withdrawal Agreement the UK signed in December, would hint that there is more going on.

The final scenario is the most worrying of all. As Peter Foster [observed](#) in July, the UK negotiator David Frost's fundamental problem was that he was unable to present a clear

position on the future UK regulatory environment because the debate in London was still going on. Hard Brexiters, led by Cummings, wanted a light-touch regime. It is possible that the hardliners have won the point and that a 'no deal' is now actively the aim.

Concerns about rules on state aid seem to me to be bogus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rules still applied to the UK and several subsidies which would qualify as state aid were notified to the European Commission – just as they were by every EU member state – without it being a problem.

This is deeper and ideological.

If the UK is to 'go rogue' and turn into a market disruptor – a notion with which Cummings' rambling blogs often flirt – it must have become clear that this would not be possible if the UK remained part of any rules-based structure, and its actions subject to arbitration.

Whatever the reasoning, the reputational damage the UK will suffer, if its Government chooses to renege on a treaty it signed less than a year ago, will be immeasurable. It will go into the world, looking to sign treaties, with every single potential partner knowing that the UK's promises are, quite literally, not worth the paper they are written on. As Ian Dunt [observes](#), it is much easier to throw a good reputation away than it is to create it.

Appointments like that of the disreputable [Tony Abbott](#) as a trade advisor to the Government, only compound the sinking sense that the UK, like an impressionable teenager, has fallen in with a bad crowd. It risks becoming an international pariah.

The first problem the UK is likely to encounter is with the US. The Democrat-controlled Congress has made it abundantly [clear](#) that it will not approve any trade deal if Brexit undermines the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement. Many such correctives to our inflated national ego will follow.

A Con from the Start

It is difficult to understand the issue at the heart of these diplomatic spasms, without revisiting the 2016 referendum.

What was promised was undeliverable: the same level of access to the Single Market that the UK enjoyed as an EU member, with no tariffs, no quotas, no barriers, and no disruption, while being free from any of the responsibilities and rules that come with membership. It was never going to happen. It was always a lie.

What we are witnessing now is the Leave camp *finally* having to choose between a level of access that necessarily entails a level of involvement, or neither. The UK opted for a worse deal than it had. All that remains is to find out how much worse. This is the inalienable truth of Brexit. The rest is spin.

Those of us who warned that this was always a likely outcome, were dismissed as fear-mongers. For four years now, expectations have been lowered, 'project fear' has become a reality and voters have been battered with lie after lie and spurious argument after spurious argument, until they can no longer follow proceedings or have lost any desire to.

The right-wing press has set about methodically normalising a 'no deal' Brexit to its

hypnotised audience. “Boris’s deal is the only game in town,” wrote former MEP John Longworth in his [Telegraph column](#) in December 2019. “It is vital my fellow Brexiteers vote Conservative.” By August 2020, his position had shamelessly [mutated](#) to: “Once people realise what Boris’s deal means, they’ll want a cleaner break.”

At the core of this mess, is a catastrophic misconception: for four years, the UK hasn’t grasped that the EU is, above all else, a rules-based structure. The legal framework is not an inconvenience, but the beating heart of the union. It is designed to fetter power. Then again, why would the UK now understand something which it failed to during four decades of membership?

A ‘Bonkers’ Mindset

I cannot conceive of any behaviour that the EU would find more incomprehensible and reprehensible, than the unilateral trashing of a hard-fought compromise, freely agreed to and enacted into law by the UK Government only months ago.

I cannot conceive of any behaviour more disrespectful to the 27 EU member states which worked hard and swallowed the UK’s disrespect, so that an agreement could be reached. It doesn’t spell ‘tough’ to them. It spells ‘dishonest’.

Brexiteers keep banging on about sovereignty. But sovereignty is not merely a set of freedoms – it also comprises responsibilities. Sovereignty is being free to sign deals, but also standing by them. “The deal never made any sense”, [says Johnson](#) now – as if his very own signature is not on the document; as if it wasn’t him who [commended](#) it to the House of Commons only last December as “a great deal for our whole country”.

The UK’s chief negotiator and occasional pez-dispenser of pound shop psychoanalysis, David Frost [suggested in July](#) that the EU had not “internalised and accepted” the fact that the UK was now an independent state. On the contrary, this latest behaviour betrays the fact that it is the UK that has not accepted its new status – otherwise it would know that the toddler tantrums it got away with as a member of the EU, are likely to meet with a different response when it is a third-country suppliant asking for access.

The Prime Minister has set – randomly, of course – a deadline of 15 October for a deal to be done, threatening to otherwise walk away.

“I don’t understand why we keep using this slightly bonkers language, where we try to make out it’s some sort of fight to the death,” says former Conservative MP and now Baron Ed Vaizey.

Instead of trying to work out what four-dimensional chess game is being played, it may be time to consider the possibility that we use ‘bonkers language’ because we are ‘bonkers’.

“Deadlines do tend to focus minds,” [mused](#) the *Telegraph*’s Madeline Grant. This implies that, if only everyone on the EU side focused, they might be able to bring into being the impossible dream cynically promised to the British people in 2016. They cannot. Nobody can.

Johnson can drive a digger through any number of walls made up of empty cardboard boxes. It is a poor rehearsal for what happens when he meets the all-too-solid wall of reality.

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