

Rational Views on Brexit, The Australian and Spiked Online

Editorial, The Australian, 31 August 2019

Boris Johnson is right. After more than three rudderless years since the British people voted 52 per cent to 48 per cent on June 23, 2016, to leave the EU, it is time to stop the death by a thousand cuts. It is time for Britain to look ahead. Opportunities abound for the world's fifth largest economy and its trading partners. On the sidelines of the G7, Scott Morrison edged Australia into pole position to be the first nation to strike a comprehensive post-Brexit free trade deal with Britain. The US and Canada also are lining up. Those processes cannot begin formally, however, until Brexit takes place. Nor will certainty be restored across Britain's economy and society until the wish of its people is fulfilled, which is why Mr Johnson has no alternative but to forge ahead to exit the EU, with or without a deal, on October 31.

Mr Johnson knows Brexit presents a "massive economic opportunity" for Britain, unlike his predecessor, Theresa May, who regarded it as "an impending adverse weather event". Because of her repeated failures to defeat the obstinacy of EU leaders and secure a deal acceptable to them and to the House of Commons, the Brexit date was extended from March 29 this year to June 30 and then to October 31. Yet another extension prolonging the fiasco would be pointless defeatism. EU leaders, faced with Mr Johnson's bold decision to suspend parliament until October 14, know he means business. Unlike Mrs May, he will not be strung along. In their own interests, EU leaders might even be sufficiently savvy to clinch a pragmatic deal with the second largest economy in Europe while the chance remains.

Mr Johnson's decision to suspend parliament until the Queen's speech in mid-October has drawn phony and hysterical claims about "coups", "tin-pot dictators", "constitutional outrage" "horrible precedents" and "the most blatant assault on democracy in living memory". After a protracted and largely fruitless two-year parliamentary session, the longest in almost 400 years, parliament was scheduled to break for several weeks between now and the Queen's speech to allow MPs of all parties to attend party conferences. After the ceremonial opening on October 14, parliament will have a fortnight to debate any new motions before Brexit Day.

Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 31 August 2019

Boris Johnson has gambled everything — his career, Britain's future, the relationship with Europe, the relationship with the US, even the prospect of a trade deal with Australia and, much more important, the viability of responsible and democratic self-government in his nation — on a single, bold, you might say breathtaking initiative.

Acting constitutionally but unconventionally, Johnson has got the Queen to prorogue the British parliament for five weeks from September 11 to October 14. Parliament will resume next Tuesday and have a week before it is prorogued. Then it will resume on October 14 to hear the Queen's speech, which is a statement of the government's agenda.

On October 31 it is, according to its existing legislation and the timetable agreed with the EU itself, scheduled to leave the EU.

This is the moment of truth. This is do or die. This is the moment of climax in an epic struggle between the rebellious will of the British people, expressed in a referendum and

many democratic votes, and the fierce oppressive rule of the whole British establishment that is determined that Britain must not leave the EU, whatever the people say.

Naturally the establishment, and all the enemies of Brexit, paint Johnson's move as a shocking attack on democracy, as does the mainstream political opposition. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn describes it as "a smash-and-grab attack on democracy". Scottish Nationalist Party leader Nicola Sturgeon says it is the end of democracy in Britain and that Johnson is acting as a dictator.

Corbyn and Sturgeon represent two strands on the British far left. But in this hysteria they are fully joined by the British establishment.

The Financial Times demanded that MPs vote no confidence in the Johnson government and weightily proclaimed: "Charlatans, demagogues and would-be dictators have little time for representative government." It graciously admitted that Johnson "may not be a tyrant" but labelled him a "revolutionary".

The Economist, pro-Remain in all its coverage, accused Johnson of "stifling democracy". It lamented his breach of precedent but then called on the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, to defy all precedent to allow MPs to derail the government. It then called for MPs to legislate to make a no-deal Brexit illegal and, if that fails, to vote no confidence in the Johnson government.

Establishment Tories, such as Bercow and former chancellor Philip Hammond and former prime minister John Major and others, variously described Johnson's move as an outrage, a constitutional outrage, an assault on democracy and so on. They, too, all want parliament to frustrate the Johnson government.

The absolute weirdness of the alliance between the far left and the establishment in Britain is evident in the fact one of the most likely outcomes of the no-confidence vote the Financial Times, The Economist and much of the mainstream media advocate is to make Corbyn, the most extreme left-wing leader in British Labour Party history, the friend and admirer of terrorists, the veteran of every extremist cause you can imagine, into Britain's next prime minister.

So just how outrageous, shocking, unprecedented and a threat to democracy is Johnson's move?

The Brits regularly prorogue their parliament, normally several times within one parliamentary term, sometimes as regularly as annually. One session of parliament comes to an end and a new session begins. The Queen then reads out to the House of Commons a speech written by the prime minister that sketches out the government's legislative and political agenda.

Australia has such a speech only after an election, when the governor-general makes an analogous address on behalf of the government.

Typically the British parliament is prorogued for a few days, sometimes as long as a couple of weeks. In this case, the parliament had already decided to take a couple of weeks off in September so that all the main parties could hold their annual conferences.

The net effect of Johnson's move is that the Commons could lose between four and seven sitting days. Four to seven sitting days! That is the end of democracy?

Johnson's claim that he needs the proroguing to prepare major legislation is of course just window-dressing.

This is a tactical move to discomfit his opponents. Why on earth shouldn't he do that? They have undertaken every subterfuge in the book, and many not previously thought of, to frustrate the will of the British people. Johnson is operating within the constitution and within the law. He is stretching the conventions.

Johnson has brought magnificent energy and determination to the prime ministership, aided by the brilliant Dominic Cummings, the savvy Jacob Rees-Mogg and the others around him. Johnson may well lose and if he does Britain loses. But he is giving it everything.

Like Donald Trump, Johnson is spectacularly underestimated by his opponents. There are three main reasons for this. First, he is preternaturally humorous. His every spoken and written word is infused with the spirit of PG Wodehouse and the felicitous verbal subversion and invention that no one else has ever quite equalled. Second, Johnson has a shambolic personal life. But third, and by far the most important, the cause he is chiefly identified with — Brexit — is a matter of deep doctrinal purity for the left liberal establishment.

I have just come back from three months based in Britain and the discussion of Brexit in most of the up-market media, and certainly in academe, has about it all the generous imaginative insight of the Spanish Inquisition dealing with the first anti-clerical atheist. Johnson himself was routinely mocked and lampooned in the most extravagant language.

Actor Hugh Grant won himself rave reviews by declaring, among a forest of expletives, that Johnson was "an over-promoted rubber bath toy". The same people who speak that way of Johnson simultaneously lament that populists — a word now so degraded it means anyone who disagrees with left liberal orthodoxy — are making the debate less civil. The routinely extremist language the Remainers use could yet lead to violence on the streets in Britain.

The inspiring thing about Brexit, and about Johnson's bold moves, is their defiance of the zeitgeist, whose orthodoxies are plainly not working. The real truth about the EU is that it imposes a dreadful social, political and economic model, undemocratic and grievously destructive economically, which is breaking down. All the time I was in London I was reading about stagnation in the German, French and Italian economies, yet anything unsatisfactory in the British economy was magically attributed solely to Brexit.

This coming week in parliament could determine the fate of Johnson and the fate of Brexit. The threat to British democracy does not come from Johnson causing the parliament to lose four to seven sitting days. It comes from the determination of the British establishment to frustrate the democratic will.

It is worth recalling again the enormous democratic legitimacy of Johnson's policy that is to seek a good deal with the EU as Britain leaves the EU, but if no good deal can be achieved then to leave with no deal, which means Britain trading with the EU on World Trade Organisation terms, as Australia and the US do.

Let's look at the rollcall of election results. In the 2014 election for British members of the European parliament, the United Kingdom Independence Party won a strong victory. Its single policy was to take Britain out of the EU. As a result of this stunning upset, David Cameron, who was governing in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, took to the 2015 election a pledge for a once-and-for-all, in-out referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. This policy was successful in winning back UKIP voters to the Conservative Party and Cameron won a clear majority in his own right in 2015. So the 2016 referendum had complete legitimacy. In the 2016 referendum, in the biggest vote for anything in British history, the British people voted 52-48 to leave the EU.

This was after the most extravagant fear campaign waged by the Remain forces. Remain was supported by all the main political parties, almost all the media, all of academe, all the civil service and every foreign leader Cameron could get to comment. The vote was a magnificent act of self-determination and national will. The British wanted control back of their borders, their money and their laws.

When Theresa May succeeded Cameron as prime minister, she soon made a definitive speech on Brexit and declared: "No deal is better than a bad deal." Right from the start of the process, it was clear that if the EU did not agree to a reasonable deal, Britain would leave with no deal.

In early 2017, May's government legislated to invoke article 50 of the EU treaty that formally notified the EU that Britain was withdrawing. This legislation had overwhelming bipartisan support and passed the Commons by 494 votes to 122. There was nothing in the legislation, as there could easily have been, to say Britain would accept any deal the EU offered no matter how bad, or that if it was impossible to negotiate a deal then Britain would stay in the EU indefinitely. Temporarily cowed by the referendum result, that was the last moment at which the British establishment respected the will of the people.

At the 2017 election the Conservative Party manifesto promised to get the best deal possible from the EU, but it also said, explicitly and without the slightest hint of ambiguity, that "no deal is better than a bad deal". That election turned out to be very close but the Conservatives, in partnership with the Democratic Unionist Party, which entirely supported their policy, won a clear parliamentary majority. Brexit did not figure much in the election because Labour promised to honour the result of the referendum and had voted for the article 50 legislation that had the no-deal option as the necessary alternative if the EU did not offer a reasonable deal.

The Conservatives and Labour parties, both promising Brexit, won 80 per cent of the vote - between them. The Liberal Democrats, promising to reverse Brexit, and thus the only credible anti-Brexit option in many electorates, were smashed to bits.

Since then, the establishment has struck back. May, in her weakened position, was hopelessly outplayed by the EU, who quickly bluffed her into abandoning no deal as an option. The establishment saw it might not have to honour the referendum result after all. Tony Blair, Michael Heseltine, academics, the bien pensant media, all began trying to get Labour to reverse itself on honouring the referendum and to get enough Conservatives to agree to cross the floor if any prime minister should contemplate no deal after all.

Then, earlier this year, Britain held another election for British members of the European parliament. The Brexit Party, called into existence five minutes in advance by a resurgent Nigel Farage, won a striking victory.

It is true that European parliament elections have a lower turnout than national elections and are not a seat of meaningful democratic accountability. All of which sort of makes one of the Brexiteers' key points. But you can bet that if the British electorate was voting disproportionately in European parliament elections in favour of Remain parties, the dominant narrative would be that this was where the British were really expressing themselves on Europe.

This coming week the enemies of Brexit will try three things to derail Johnson. They will try to tie him up in the courts and the judiciary, though there is no doubt over its integrity, is comprehensively part of the establishment and shares establishment views. They will try to pass a law making a no-deal Brexit impossible, though the EU would have to co-operate in that.

And they will probably try to pass a motion of no confidence in his government. A government that loses a vote of no confidence normally calls an election. Johnson, given the enormous democratic mandate that Brexit has accumulated, would be within his rights to call the election for the first week of November, just after Brexit has happened.

The establishment strategy to derail Brexit is based on the idea of getting the people to vote again and again and again until they deliver the result the establishment wants. The Brexiteers have to win every time. The establishment only has to win once.

The House of Commons has had years to legislate to make a no-deal Brexit impossible if that's what they wanted to do. But they are not only undemocratic. They are cowards. And they have been scared all the time of a people's electoral revolt.

For Johnson, the electoral timetable is obvious. If he leads the Conservative Party to an election having delivered Brexit, there is no real reason for a single voter to vote for the Brexit Party. If he goes to an election before he delivers Brexit, the Brexit Party will eat him alive, deliver and tactical alliances among the opposition parties will probably deliver government to Corbyn.

Operation Fear is now in overdrive. A no-deal Brexit is painted as combining the worst features of the Great Flood and the bubonic plague. A no-deal Brexit could be orderly or it could be chaotic. The Remain factions, in both Britain and the EU, have invested so much in Operation Fear that they may even try to make a no-deal Brexit, should it happen, as traumatic as possible.

There is, of course, still a chance of a deal if the EU has the minimal wit and goodwill to offer Johnson sufficient concessions to allow him to get a deal passed.

This coming week will likely see all manner of parliamentary tactics. Even if Johnson's opponents pass restrictive legislation, the Tories could conceivably filibuster it in the House of Lords until parliament runs out.

If Johnson wins next week, he might win Brexit and he might win a general election. He might even scare the Labour Party back to a reasonable social democratic place on the political spectrum. And he will up end the zeitgeist and give effect to a people's revolt against the left liberal establishment. He will also maintain the strategic integrity of the Western alliance and the ability of a nation to determine its own destiny.

Everything rides on this. Don't look away.

Spiked Online, 31 August 2019

This was the week the British bourgeoisie officially lost the plot. Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue parliament – shaving off a few days of time MPs were counting on to thwart Brexit – has excited elite Remainers' feverish imaginations like never before. They have compared it to the Reichstag Fire and themselves to the French Resistance. They have wept and hollered and protested – puntastic placard in one hand and designer dog in the other.

But this isn't about Johnson's cynical – though hardly dictatorial – prorogation. This is about Brexit. What horrifies these people is not Johnson's trimming of the parliamentary timetable, but the temerity of the 17.4million to demand more democracy, and the chance that they might just get it. The cognitive dissonance is perfectly summed up in the Remainers' new favourite slogan – 'Save Democracy, Stop Brexit'.

But The Great Meltdown has shown us something else, too. That these people haven't just been driven to rage by Brexit, but to a kind of madness. The Brexit vote was for them not just a defeat, but an abomination. It shouldn't have happened. It couldn't have happened in any reasonable world – in which People Like Them call the shots and People Like Us are quietly grateful.

By challenging the elites' right to rule, Brexit tugs at the threads of the intellects of our supposedly cool-headed betters. And the unravelling continues. Brexit continues to drive them mad – and so it should.