

# Boris Johnson has run out of rope



Prime Minister Boris Johnson is finding that the benefit of the doubt over Brexit and the coronavirus is finite after all | Leon Neal/Getty Images

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UK prime minister's aggressive tactics are undermining trust abroad and at home.

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There's a reason Boris Johnson shows little respect for the traditional rules of the political game. After all, it's the British prime minister's bull-in-a-china-shop approach that got him where is today.

It's an approach that served him well last year, when after six months spent battling parliament and the Supreme Court over Brexit, Johnson called an early election and swept back into power with an 80-seat majority in the House of Commons — his Conservative Party's largest since Margaret Thatcher's in 1987.

But while Johnson and his advisers seem to believe the prime minister's governing style will continue to pay electoral dividends, the diminishing returns of repeatedly breaking with U.K. institutions and their long-established rules are now coming into sight.

Let's start with Brexit. Johnson has had to beat a retreat from his government's threat to break international law by overriding the Northern Ireland protocol in last year's Withdrawal Agreement. He will now give the Commons the final say on using the controversial provisions in the Internal Market Bill.

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But while hopes of a U.K.-EU trade deal are rising, the move has left a legacy of distrust in Brussels. EU leaders will want to nail down every last detail of an

agreement to prevent any attempt by Johnson to wriggle out of it once the coronavirus pandemic has passed (a course favored by some hard-line Brexiteers on the Tory benches, who admit the government is unlikely to risk a no-deal scenario in January while business is suffering an economic hit).

The mistrust might also make it harder to secure U.K.-EU cooperation in other areas, such as security, criminal justice and asylum, to London's cost. The threat to break international law will also likely be bad for his key aim of establishing a Global Britain, with lucrative trade deals around the world.

Meanwhile, at home, Johnson's style has provoked a series of rebellions by Tory backbenchers who feel he treats them, and parliament as a whole, with contempt. A serious cross-party revolt, backed by more than 50 Tories, threatens to defeat the government Wednesday, when MPs will demand the right to approve national restrictions in advance. Although Downing Street is belatedly trying to woo Tory MPs, the relationship has been badly damaged.

And yet, despite all this, Johnson will not change his spots. Team Boris is determined to hang on to former Labour supporters in the leftist party's heartland who voted Tory last December. Their strategy to do that is to continue to redraw the Brexit dividing line whenever possible. Thus, they will continue to happily tack to the right, wage culture war against the BBC or over the toppling of statues, or adopt a hard line on asylum and immigration, believing all this plays to the patriotism of these voters.

Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's Third Way mantra was about doing "what works." But Team Boris remains convinced its aggressive, no-nonsense approach works better than consensus and conciliation. They genuinely don't care if other players in the political game don't like it, as long as the voters are onside.

The jury is out on whether their gamble will pay off. In normal times, it might be needed to achieve Johnson's "leveling up" agenda — to overcome blockages in Whitehall, another Johnson "enemy" and scapegoat for his government's mistakes. One example is Treasury rules that previously favored infrastructure projects in the already rich London and southeast.

But permanent revolution must also be combined with competent government, and we've seen the opposite of competence since the election, notably on the coronavirus. Dividing the world into friend and foe doesn't help the fight against

the multiheaded monster of the pandemic or make easier the difficult judgments between prioritizing public health and the economy.

People no longer give the government the benefit of the doubt, as they did six months ago. And once you've lost the public trust, as Johnson may well have already done, reckless confrontation no longer looks like potency; it looks like an attempt to divert from a government's woes.

The result: Labour has drawn level in the opinion polls, and more voters consider Labour leader Keir Starmer to be best suited for the job of prime minister. The bull in the china shop might soon discover he's being handed a bill for everything he broke.

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