

# Deal or no-deal Brexit? Boris playing with fire

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Britain's new Prime Minister Boris Johnson makes a statement in the House of Commons in London on Thursday. (Photo: AFP)

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On Tuesday last week, Boris Johnson won the second round of the Conservative Party leadership election against Jeremy Hunt. He won convincingly, with 66 percent of the vote of the membership. In the early afternoon of Wednesday, Theresa May tendered her resignation as prime minister to the Queen. Later that afternoon the Queen invited Boris Johnson, as leader of the largest party in the House of Commons, to become the 14th to hold that office in her reign. Constitutional decorum having been observed, savagery then followed.

Boris Johnson undertook a reshuffle of his Cabinet, more vicious and spiteful than any seen before. More Cabinet ministers were sacked than had ever been sacked in any previous reshuffle — by far. The main criterion for dismissal appears to

have been support for Jeremy Hunt. The main criterion for elevation appears to have been loyalty to Boris Johnson.

The whole process has more resembled a display of pique by a spoilt brat than the assembly of a competent government. To give some examples — the home secretary is now Priti Patel. She had been dismissed from her previous Cabinet position — secretary of state for international development — for pursuing her own foreign policy, in private and unauthorized meetings with Israeli officials while ostensibly on holiday. Dominic Raab is now foreign secretary. Previously, as Cabinet minister for Brexit, it had been revealed that he didn't appreciate that most of the UK's trade with the European Union — by far the UK's largest trading partner — goes through the port of Dover. To top it all, Dominic Cummings, the previous chief strategist for the Leave campaign during the referendum, has been appointed to be Boris Johnson's chief adviser. The fact he had also been found to be in contempt of Parliament for refusing to answer questions on the use of fake news by the Leave campaign was clearly irrelevant.

The net result of the process has been a takeover of the government by fundamentalist Brexiters, who believe as articles of faith the slogans deployed by Boris Johnson during the leadership election — Brexit on October 31 — “deal or no deal”, “do or die”. Whether Boris Johnson actually believes them, though, is uncertain.

Posing as a hard Brexiter certainly won Boris Johnson the Conservative leadership election. Painting the Conservative Party as a hard Brexit party also makes tactical sense — at least in the short term. The Conservative Party faces an existential threat from the Brexit Party. It was founded only a few months ago by the highly effective and populist Nigel Farage as the party of a “hard” Brexit. By a hard Brexit it means a Brexit with minimal links to the EU, and above all one shorn of the hated “backstop”. The “backstop” is a device which was inserted into the deal with the EU negotiated by Ms. May. In the event that the EU and the UK fail to reach a new free trade deal, the UK will remain in the EU customs union. This is necessary to preserve the soft border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, a foundational pillar of the Northern Irish peace process. This uncompromising stance has been frighteningly attractive to large swathes of Conservative voters.

By repositioning the Conservative Party as a party of hard Brexit, Boris Johnson

can hope to blunt the Brexit Party's appeal. If he delivers a hard Brexit, the Brexit Party's *raison d'être* disappears. He is unlikely to do so since the EU has already explicitly refused to remove the backstop from the deal. The next step would then be to present a hard Brexit to Parliament. If Parliament refuses to endorse it, Boris Johnson can challenge Parliament to vote him out of office and trigger a general election. In the election, Boris Johnson can campaign for a hard Brexit, crowd out the Brexit Party and win a majority. In the short term, then, that tactic leads to victory. In the longer term, though, it is playing with fire.

A few weeks ago, I put this scenario to a senior Conservative MP and brave supporter of the cause of remaining in the EU. He didn't think a general election would necessarily follow a defeat for Boris Johnson. Labour votes would be necessary to call one, but the Labour Party is in no state to fight a general election. Its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, is deeply unpopular with the public and its Brexit policy is a masterpiece of casuistry and obfuscation. It, too, is leaching votes — to the explicitly pro-EU Liberal Democrats and Green Party. It probably does not want an early general election. So while Parliament might vote down a hard Brexit, it might not vote for a general election. Instead, it could put in office a government of national unity, supported by a coalition of moderate Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the bulk of the Labour Party. That government could then negotiate a soft Brexit or even call a referendum.

Even if the moves to install a national unity government were to fail and a general election was to ensue, the result is not a given. Recent opinion polls suggest that Boris Johnson has had some success in attracting away Conservative voters from the Brexit Party, but the dynamics of a campaign could change that. The delays and arguments in Parliament have allowed Mr. Farage to propagate a false, but persuasive, narrative of a self-serving elite thwarting the people's will. Further delays and arguments will only make it easier for Mr. Farage to peddle that myth.

If a general election produces another hung Parliament, it will be no more willing to pass a hard Brexit than the present one. Boris Johnson will then have failed. If on the other hand, Boris Johnson wins a majority, he will face a monumental decision. A hard Brexit will certainly wreak massive economic devastation and will probably lead to the breakup of the United Kingdom. The Scots and Northern Irish had both voted convincingly to remain in the EU and would be likely to secede. The Welsh could follow soon after. At that point then Boris Johnson will be put to the test: If he sticks to his word, he destroys the country. If he goes back

on it, he destroys himself.

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