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Brexit: deaths, more deaths ... and no-deal calculations

In a nightmare-scenario 'Brexit', the UK government provokes no-deal chaos hoping to profit after its Covid-19 shambles

For Boris Johnson the year that was supposed to be focused on 'Brexit' has turned into a year that's focused on death. To be exact, 50,000 excess deaths and rising — the result of his government's hubris and incompetence in the face of the Covid-19 epidemic.

The UK's response to the pandemic has been pilloried in the global media: the late lockdown, the shortages of personal protective equipment and testing kits, the unannounced strategy of protecting the hospital system by moving the epidemic into the eldercare-home system and, at time of writing, a confused and fragmentary attempt to ease the restrictions on work and movement.

Renewed prospect

But there is hope in sight for the prime minister, in the form of a clash with the European Union and the renewed prospect of a no-deal Brexit. At the official level, the UK still plans not only to leave the single market on December 31st but to trigger a no-deal scenario as early as 30 June— by which time any extension of the transition would have to be decided — if no outline agreement is reached at the EU-UK summit next month.

Last week the government moved civil servants who had been dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak back into their jobs at the 'Exit Operations' unit and increased the tempo of preparations for a no-deal outcome.

Meanwhile, at community level, the social constituencies which voted for Brexit have — until now — given Johnson the benefit of the doubt over his handling of the pandemic. While the left and sections of the media clamoured for a hard and early lockdown, the anecdotal reaction in Brexit-supporting communities was 'Stop politicising things — support

the government'.

Now, as the trade unions resist Johnson's attempt to reopen schools and public transport, the familiar lines of cultural warfare are re-emerging. The unions are 'selfish' and the opponents of the relaxation 'wreckers' who just want the economy to collapse — that's been the subtext, or text, of right-wing tabloid-press coverage over the past week.

Discontented majority

But it's not working. Support for Johnson's handling of the epidemic peaked at 72 per cent at the end of March but has now fallen to 42 per cent. In a 17 May Yougov poll, for the first time, those discontented with the government's performance overtook those contented, with the latter on 47 per cent. Crucially, this includes one in five of those who voted for Johnson — though the same demographics which split the UK over Brexit are still in evidence: all groups under 50 are disparaging of Johnson's record, all groups over 50 supportive.

This is the background to the reactivation of the no-deal scenario in the Brexit talks. The UK's chief negotiator, David Frost, accused Michel Barnier, representing the EU, of clinging to an 'ideological' position — that the UK must honour its commitments to a level playing-field on social and environmental issues, as an ex-member seeking to sustain favourable trade access.

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As in the autumn 2019 Brexit crisis, this move is calculated to raise the spectre of no deal to bounce the EU into a more favourable agreement, while reigniting the political polarisation which put Johnson in power.

The playbook reads: first, ease the lockdown and use the right-wing press to brand Labour and other progressive parties as responsible for wrecking the economy if they oppose it. Next, suggest that the left is trying to sabotage Brexit by calling for an extension to the transition period. Finally, stage a confrontation at the June summit, at which the threat of a no-deal Brexit is activated, throwing the UK and the EU into a six-month crisis — out of which emerges a deal favourable to the UK.

Obstacles hit

Johnson has however hit several obstacles. First, though the *Mail* and *Telegraph* newspapers sprang into action to attack the teachers' unions,

the power to force schools to open lies with local authorities, many of which are siding with their own workforce. Next, under the new leadership of Keir Starmer, Labour has refused to call for a delay outright: seeing absolutely nothing to be gained politically, it has simply pointed out that the UK's self-imposed year-end deadline does not look feasible.

Finally, with the UK economy in freefall, and the government set to borrow £250-350bn this financial year (April-April), there may not be enough political bandwidth for a stage-managed confrontation with Europe.

But the temptations for Johnson are strong. The UK's public debt looks likely to rise above 100 per cent of GDP and he has promised his cabinet there will be no return to the austerity which has marked the last decade of power for his party. Hence the option looms to attempt to 'lose' the costs of a sudden reversion to World Trade Organization terms in 2021 inside the much larger economic damage inflicted by the lockdown.

Decisive moment

If so, we are heading for a decisive moment, which will not only affect the UK. With world trade predicted to fall by up to a third this year, and with public discourse in the United States turning hostile to China across the board, the prospect emerges of a re-election of Donald Trump in November's presidential election, followed by a hard Brexit crisis in December-January — the combined effects of which reorder the global system.

The extreme elements around Trump are reported to be fantasising about a US debt default against China. Meanwhile, if the UK walks away from the EU — with catastrophic short-term impacts on food, travel and the manufacturing supply chain — the extreme elements around Johnson will be free to advocate an 'America first' trade deal, turning the UK into a deregulated paradise for predatory US capital. The no-deal Brexit trauma, with checkpoints at the Northern Ireland border and food shortages in the supermarkets, would be a nice way of cancelling out the coronavirus trauma in the public mind.

The tragedy of this moment is that, with deglobalisation certain to gather pace, there is a strong, logical argument to be had, even with Brexit supporters, that the UK should seek a close relationship with the EU after it completes its departure. If the price of that relationship is a level playing-field and common jurisdiction on trade, it should — even for the Little Englanders — be worth paying. If the world economy is breaking

up into large rival trading blocs, centred on Washington, Brussels and Beijing, the only logical place for the UK is within the European bloc.

But as all the lessons of 1929-34 tell us, declining imperial powers take bad decisions when the crisis comes.

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Paul Mason
London

Paul Mason is a British author and radio personality. In 2015 he published his book *PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future* (Allen Lane).

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