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Brexit: The Disaster Movie

Brian Melican imagines what a 'worst case scenario' for Brexit might look like...

Coming soon to a theatre near you: Brexit: The Disaster Movie. *In this rip-roaring political thriller, Britain leaves the European Union without a settlement, soon to find out that any deal would have been better than no deal. Although its plot may, at times, sound far-fetched, it is simply based on the premise that, with Brexit, what can go wrong, will go wrong – as it has done since spring 2016.*

It's 00:01 on Saturday 30 March 2019, and Britain has left the European Union. At an emergency summit over the previous weekend, EU27 leaders were, in private, unable to agree on whether Britain's final offer was a genuine, yet seriously misguided attempt to salvage a deal from the wreckage of the previous months or simply another insincere proposal made in the full knowledge that Brussels would be unable to accept it. In public, their declaration was unanimous.

Underlining their unwavering commitment to reaching an agreement, EU leaders expressed their regret that 'Britain has remained unable or unwilling to offer acceptable compromises. It is thus with a heavy heart that we must consider the talks concluded without an agreed outcome. We wish Britain well in its future outside of the European Union and look forward to constructive relations with it as a friend and neighbour.'

Berlaymont journalists were accidentally given a draft showing that the word 'friend' had been removed at the last minute. A leaked recording of Jacob Rees-Mogg and Boris Johnson drunkenly impersonating Jean-Claude Juncker and Angela Merkel – Johnson parodying the latter with the words 'Ve have vays of making you stay' – has irreparably damaged any remaining goodwill on the Continent towards exit-bound Britain.

Yet in Dover, Holyhead, and Harwich, the mood overnight is surprisingly relaxed. After years of repeated warnings by port authorities that there is no space to stack vehicles and insufficient staff to carry out comprehensive customs checks, a last-minute solution has been found: for the foreseeable future, the UK will not alter the in-bound border

regime. The journalists dispatched from London to Dover to report on queuing lorries have retired to a local pub; 'Story's over at Dover!' jokes one Telegraph reporter in a WhatsApp group for hacks sent to cover Brexit Day stories.

Their colleagues stationed at major airports, however, have better luck in the morning. After Ryanair's early withdrawal from the UK market in 2018, Michael O'Leary became the subject of a tabloid hate campaign; behind closed doors, however, editors were well aware that transport minister Chris Grayling's blithe assertion about EU air traffic control agreements persisting 'because Spanish hoteliers need British tourists' was tempting fate. As bleary-eyed holiday-makers looking to escape an unusually chilly March file into Birmingham International and Stanstead for their early morning departures, the exchange rate – down overnight to a new low of €0.75 to the pound – is not the only nasty surprise: flights to and out of the EU are grounded as the Commission has instructed Eurocontrol to await legal advice. Tempers fray and, at Glasgow, angry customers hospitalise a Thomas Cooke representative who snaps that they 'should have read the terms and conditions when they booked.' A Daily Mail man posts a video of the altercation in the WhatsApp group: 'It's all systems Glas-go up here!'

As dawn breaks in London, pro-Brexit crowds – many tired and emotional after the previous night's 'B-Day' celebrations – gather around the House of Parliament to hear Nigel Farage harangue ('No changes at the border? That's out of order!') and Big Ben chime: following a Sun campaign, the bells have been specially prepared to ring again on Brexit Day before maintenance resumes. A Prime Ministerial speech is scheduled for 10am, but an anti-Brexit demonstration will be leaving Trafalgar Square and processing down Whitehall; the planned route will then take it past the Houses of Parliament and on to the European Commission's deputation in Smith Square, where a pro-EU rally is to be led by Paddy Ashdown, Tony Blair, and Ken Clarke.

Concerned about disruption to the Prime Minister's speech and potential clashes with pro-Brexit revellers – and under intense pressure from the Home Office – the Metropolitan Police shut off Whitehall from 6am, trying to divert the protest up Haymarket and along Piccadilly. Yet with almost a quarter of a million pro-Europeans pouring into the area around Trafalgar Square, pressure builds and there are several attempts to break through police lines onto Whitehall. A mass panic breaks out when gunshots are heard and the crowd storms northwards; at Admiralty Arch, where riot units have blocked off the Mall to stop the demonstration heading for Buckingham Palace, a crush ensues. Live-streams on Twitter and Facebook show chaotic scenes;

emergency services stationed on the Strand are unable to reach injured protestors.

In homes around the country, many people are going about their usual Saturday routines. Fans of the BBC's Saturday Kitchen Live are annoyed that Breakfast will overrun to broadcast the Prime Minister's speech – and shocked when they turn on their televisions to see live scenes from London. People listening to the radio in their cars as they hope to beat the Saturday supermarket crowds are surprised when anodyne music programming is interrupted with warnings to stay out of central London. A rally in Manchester turns chaotic, too, when police kettle demonstrators in Albert and St. Peter's Squares. In Luton, an unannounced EDL march wreaks a trail of havoc through the town.

When Theresa May comes out of Number 10, around 15 minutes later than planned, it is unclear whether she has already been informed of the clashes. Viewers at home can hear sirens wailing down Whitehall in the background when the haggard-looking Prime Minister begins her address: 'Good morning. When I said in 2016 that I would deliver Brexit, I made it very clear that this would mean leaving the European Union, regaining control of our borders, wresting back judicial oversight from the European Court of Justice…' What begins like many of her speeches in recent years, however, takes an unexpected turn: 'Now that we have left – and I stress the words: have left – the European Union this morning, my work is done. It will be for my successor as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party to steer the country in its new direction.'

The Queen, bed-ridden with a serious case of the flu and out of the public eye since late 2018 due to her increasing frailty, has been secretly brought back to Buckingham Palace from Sandringham in anticipation of this move; political journalists and Conservative party colleagues, however, are stunned. May's resignation had been expected just before the summer recess so that a new leader could be installed in time for the party conference.

Yet camera teams rushing to the homes of Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, and Jacob Rees-Moggs don't get far: much of central London is now in lock-down. After a violent clash between pro and anti-Brexit protesters on Westminster Green, shots are fired at the politicians assembled in Smith Square and police call on all crowds to dissipate as armed units move in. By midday, St. Thomas' Hospital opposite the Houses of Parliament has to close its doors to new admissions as casualties stream in. Social networks are filled with frightening pictures: lifeless protestors lying on the pavement, looting along Regent's and Oxford Street, an

overturned double-decker bus.

It takes until early evening for the police report that they have the situation under control. Transport for London states that the Underground, shut as the protests turned ugly, will remain closed until the start of regular Sunday services; most rail lines into London are also closed and bus services severely disrupted. Hundreds of thousands of protestors return home on foot. As night falls, police presence is reinforced in areas which saw rioting in 2011. On Sunday morning, it transpires that there were thirty-five deaths in the London crush and thirteen in Manchester; hundreds more are in a critical condition. Cleveland Police report that they are treating the deaths of two Polish families in their burned out Middlesbrough home as suspicious. Nationwide, police leave is cancelled. There is widespread condemnation of the silence from cabinet ministers and the Royal Family amid calls for a national day of mourning. Nicola Sturgeon says that 'every Westminster MP who voted to trigger Article 50 now has blood on their hands' and announces that a second Scottish independence referendum will be held on the third anniversary of the Brexit vote.

With political commentators referring to May's resignation as a premature April Fool's Joke, Monday 1 April has another trick in store: a re-run of 1992's Black Wednesday. With the pound in sustained decline against the Euro for much of 2018 and interest rate rises having already provoked a 15 per cent fall in property prices, in early 2019, the Bank of England began spending to prop up Sterling's value and keep import prices down. Investors know, however, that there are limits to the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street's means and so have been quietly acquiring short positions of gigantic proportions for months now. On Monday, they capitalise on international scepticism about the UK economy and the political vacuum caused by May's resignation to dump such high quantities of Sterling that the exchange rate against the Euro falls to €0.50 per pound by the close of trading. On Tuesday morning, John Paulson, the New York hedge fund manager who netted $5 billion dollars off of the sub-prime crisis in 2010, makes a triumphant return to the world's financial media as 'George Soros 2.0' and 'The Second Man Who Broke The Bank Of England'.

On Wednesday, several supermarkets are forced to cancel food import deals in view of the currency devaluation. Heads of the biggest chains go public about the repeated refusal of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to engage with their demands for a pre-Brexit-Day national food security plan. In a combative Today Programme interview on Thursday morning, Michael Gove hits back at 'the supermarket fat-cats', adding that 'British consumers certainly don't need

Spanish courgettes in March – they can make soup with good, old-fashioned root vegetables. And wine from the Surrey Downs is very good these days.' By lunchtime, most chains are limiting sales of everything from fresh imported fruit to beer and wine as worried consumers storm the isles. Waitrose and the Cooperative are accused of profiteering after they raise prices several times in one day. In Birmingham, a Tesco store which has stationed security guards outside for crowd-control is overrun as the situation escalates; the looting spreads across the city and, by nightfall, across the country.

By the morning of Friday 5 April, nerves are visibly fraying. Major employers are reporting unheard-of levels of absenteeism; many train and bus companies are running skeleton services; supermarkets and petrol stations are now under police protection. The Thin Blue Line is, however, itself overstretched; on social media, several incidents of police brutality are documented as tired, worried officers – many on duty continuously since the weekend – lose their cool with queues of agitated shoppers. When a major anti-Brexit demonstration is called for Saturday to commemorate the loss of life the week previously, the Metropolitan Police takes the unprecedented step of requesting support from the armed forces. Territorial army reservists have already received their call-up papers. In a hastily-convened press conference at midday, Jeremy Corbyn and several of the country's biggest unions call for a general strike from Monday 8 April onwards in protest at the peacetime domestic deployment of soldiers. On Friday afternoon, Corbyn's Twitter feed falls strangely silent. That evening, Theresa May and several of her ministers leave London for the safety of Chequers. Yet when the caretaker Prime Minister and her entourage arrive, they are put under house arrest by a waiting military unit. As midnight approaches one week after Brexit Day, a group of leading generals is admitted to the ailing monarch's Buckingham Palace suite.



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reading modern languages at Oxford. He has been working as a journalist, translator, and author since finishing his degree, publishing several books on Germany and appearing in a range of media outlets. In 2015, he became a German citizen.