

How American Right-Wingers Are Driving Britain Toward a Hard Brexit

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December 18, 2018

The popular perception of Brexiteers as lacking a rational vision—as being motivated, rather, by naïve and nostalgic fantasies—is widespread. In November, the *London Times* published an illustrative [cartoon](#). Comprising three panels, it shows an angry mob of Brexiteers, leading Conservative MPs Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg at the fore, chanting: “What do we want?!” Then silence and bewildered glances. Then: “NOW!”

After Prime Minister Theresa May’s proposed Brexit deal collapsed early last week—it was pulled from Parliament at the final moment because she didn’t have the votes—the perception has taken on new force. Two and a half years after the referendum, the British cannot agree on what they want from Brexit, even—or especially—those who wanted it most. Suddenly, with the deadline for negotiations with the European Union looming on March 29, 2019, “Brexit means Brexit” is no longer an adequate answer.

Having survived a confidence vote, May returned to Brussels on Thursday to renegotiate her deal—the culmination of over a year’s work, which she initially insisted was impossible to improve. Questions over Britain’s intentions returned to the surface. “Our British friends need to say what they want instead of asking us to say what we want,” European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said. In a private meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly interrupted May to tell her the same thing. “What else do you want?” Merkel asked.

But Britain’s most ardent Brexiteers know exactly what they want, even if political constraints make it hard to achieve. Their aims are well-defined and, for all Brexit’s parochial connotations, their ambition is global. Funding networks linking libertarian think tanks in America—such as those funded by the Mercer family and the Koch brothers—to Brexit have been exposed over recent [months](#), and the interest of President Donald Trump and his ex-strategist Steve Bannon, along with the upper echelons of Europe’s far-right, is plain to see.

The result they are agitating for is a so-called “hard Brexit”—cutting all ties with the EU, whether through a “no deal,” in which negotiations fail and Britain leaves by default on deadline day, or through some kind of deal, which would simply give Britain more time to adjust to the same stark scenario. The forecasts for this outcome are bleak, particularly for a no deal, but it has attracted an array of enthusiastic and influential supporters within Britain: Boris Johnson, Jacob

Rees-Mogg, former Brexit Secretary David Davis, Trade Secretary Liam Fox, ex-UKIP leader Nigel Farage, and former leader of Vote Leave, Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan. Where others see a gathering storm, they see only a bright new world waiting on the other side, dizzy with possibility.

A web of wealthy think tanks, lobbying groups, and organizations that seem to blur the line between such distinctions are behind them. These individuals and organizations are bound by a shared dream of deregulating the British economy and opening it up to U.S. markets—billed as the “Brexit prize.” In this vision, Britain escapes the EU to become a free-market idyll, shorn of all EU regulations—a nation at once enclosed in a historical sovereignty and exposed to all the market forces of a globalized world.

It’s a contradictory vision that, in many ways, strikes at the heart of modern conservatism the world over. A hallowed heartland is idolized, only to let big business hollow it out. The fight to “free” Britain from the EU is framed as the latest round in Britain’s historic rivalry with the continent. With the rhetoric of war and the “will of the British people,” a staunchly libertarian agenda of slashing the British state can be pursued as a patriotic mission to save it.

And so, for Britain’s most ardent Brexiteers, the closer their cause comes to completion, the greater the betrayal becomes. Johnson accuses the European Union, and the supposedly treacherous Theresa May, of wanting to make Britain “a colony.” Whenever May tries to soften their Brexit stance, aware of the economic shock their dramatic rupture would entail, they accuse her of “surrender” and of “waving the white flag.” Against an adversary like the EU (also Britain’s major trade partner), they argue, only the hardest of Brexits will do: Britain must be excised from all EU institutions, rules, and regulations completely. They have vowed to battle May with “trench warfare” and say that they are ready to watch her, in the words of one Conservative MP, “bleed out slowly.”

The main proponents of a hard Brexit are radical free-market Conservatives with a history of trans-Atlantic ties. A recent blueprint for a future U.K.-U.S. trade policy post-Brexit shined a light on the shared interests their project entails. The proposal listed as contributors a nexus of British and American libertarian organizations and received glowing endorsements from Brexit’s most influential figures. Its three authors were Daniel Hannan and two employees from the Cato Institute.

Among other suggestions, the blueprint advocated opening up Britain’s public services—including education, legal services, and, eventually, health care—to U.S. competition. Current EU regulations that prevent certain U.S. products from entering the British marketplace—particularly rules governing food hygiene and environmental standards—should be discarded, it argued, along with the EU’s relatively progressive policies on workers’ rights.

May’s proposed deal is opposed on both sides of the Atlantic precisely because it makes such a deal impossible. Under May’s plan, Britain remains tied to the EU’s regulatory system, and the barriers to U.S. trade persist. Britain loses its power to influence the regulatory system (hence the “colony” accusation), yet gains control of its borders—for so long, Brexit’s *raison d’etre*.

May still sees strong borders as the priority. As leader of the Home Office from 2010 to 2016, she championed this cause with the cruel confidence and creativity that, in the eyes of her Conservative critics, her current leadership lacks. More recently, when the EU and Britain drew

up a document regarding their future relationship, May personally insisted that “the ending of the free movement of people” be placed on the first page.

What’s clear from the opposition to May’s deal, however, is that for all the xenophobia incited during the referendum by the Leave campaign, border control was not the highest goal. Even Nigel Farage, whose sole concern seemed to be Britain taking back control of its borders, is unenthused by May’s deal. Many other leading Brexiteers, including its main financial donors, have said that it would be better to remain inside the EU than leave on May’s terms. Clearly, for the parties most invested in Brexit, the real reasons for leaving lie elsewhere.

The sad, unsolvable riddle at the heart of British politics is that, while May’s deal is doomed, every other deal is too. There is simply no resolution to Brexit that can claim a majority in Parliament. The divisions are too deep, and the costs too steep for compromise. Britain is left lurching between three dramatic scenarios: a second referendum, a general election, and a no deal Brexit.

There is no guarantee that either of the first two scenarios will resolve the Brexit impasse. A no deal outcome, by contrast, definitely will—it is the hard Brexit *par excellence*—and the consequences could be severe. This is what will happen: At 11pm Greenwich Mean Time on Friday, March 29, 2019, Britain will leave the EU without any new arrangement in place. Its membership, along with 45 years of legal and institutional integration, will become void in an instant, leaving almost everything in limbo.

According to almost every analysis, it is by far the worst of any outcome for the British economy. The uncertainty would be unprecedented; the value of the pound would plummet. Grocery stores and pharmaceutical companies have started stockpiling essential materials to prepare for havoc at the border. But in its superficial speed and simplicity—overnight, the Brexit prize is brought home and EU regulations disappear—it stands as a satisfying solution for many Brexiteers.

Until recently, May always said that “no deal is better than a bad deal.” For the Brexiteers, however, even more indifferent to the dangers, there may be no deal better than a no deal. Anything else leaves Britain tied, in some unacceptable way, to Brussels, only now with a reduced say and a £37 billion divorce bill to pay. Chaos is preferred to such concessions and, in the end, may even be more fitting for the main event: Britain’s day of liberation.

Besides, the national fantasy, indulged by most Tories, that Brits are at their best when their backs are against the wall, gives any hardship a patriotic spin. At the Conservative Party Conference, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt invoked the “Dunkirk Spirit” to warn the EU of who and what they were up against. Over the weekend, Hunt declared that Britain would “flourish and prosper” in the event of a no deal.

So even if a no deal Brexit happens exactly as the worst predictions warn, Britain can still celebrate. Brexiteers will take solace in the great spirit of British sacrifice, a sacrifice none of which will have been theirs. The queues at customs can perversely prove that Britain has taken back control of its borders, even if it is only capital that is set free. After World War II, it was sometimes joked that the British gave up rationing only reluctantly. Now, as the distant possibility of rationing returns to Britain’s streets—the government recently appointed

a new “Minister of Food Supplies” to cope with potential food shortages—that dormant Dunkirk spirit can be revived. Britain just needs to keep calm and carry on.