

IDEAS

What Brexit Did to Boris Johnson—And Britain

The prime minister's fake populism led to his undoing—and will keep haunting his country.

By Anne Applebaum



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***About the author:** Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

Not too long ago, I heard one of the leading Brexiteers describe his political philosophy in a room full of CEOs and senior politicians. He started by talking to this elite group about the great division between “elites” and “the people,” the victors and the victims of globalization, the haves and the have-nots of modernity. The longer he spoke, the more his words began to seem rote, remote, and stale. The energizing slogans of the Brexit campaign of 2016 sounded hollow and clichéd in 2022.

Partly, this is because the slogans were not true. Globalization was indeed bad for some people and good for others, but those groups didn't split neatly along a rural-urban or rich-poor divide, or along any other easily defined demographic line. Some farmers in the distant countryside turned out to be huge beneficiaries of Britain's European Union membership. Some of the least-well-off Britons benefited from foreign investment. Besides, many of the people loudly attacking the “elite” were not actually among globalization's losers themselves. Boris Johnson was the standout example of this phenomenon: He attended Eton and Oxford (just as in America, where all of the loudest “anti-elitists” seem to have gone to Yale or Harvard Law School), and his campaign was paid for by hedge-fund managers and billionaires.

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More important, Brexit, the solution to the problem Johnson and his supporters described, was based on a series of lies. The electorate was promised that departure from the EU would lead not only to fewer immigrants but to greater prosperity, more welfare spending, less crowded hospitals. Instead, six years after the vote, Britain is less prosperous and more unequal. Brexit reduced the U.K. GDP by at least 1.5 percent even before it took full effect; the U.K. has the highest inflation rate in the G7; small businesses, especially importers, have been crushed by Brexit-related red tape and

supply-chain problems. Though committees have been set up to look for “benefits from Brexit,” few are available. Brexiteers instead crow about the British vaccine campaign or British support for Ukraine, both of which would have been perfectly compatible with EU membership.

Of course, Brexit is not why Johnson has now resigned, or why his cabinet melted down, or why his popularity plunged. But it is an essential piece of the backstory. If British politics were a Faulkner novel, Brexit would be the long-ago tragedy that haunts all of the main characters, even if they hadn't been born when it happened. Why did a story about a jolly drinking session his cabinet held during COVID lockdown do so much damage to Johnson? Partly because he was already suspected of dishonesty about Brexit, and “Partygate” reconfirmed the image of him as a liar. Why did his Conservative colleagues ultimately decide not to remove him as prime minister when they voted last month? Partly because Johnson is so closely associated with Brexit that a rejection of him looked like a rejection of Brexit, the policy that the party still claims as its greatest achievement. Why are Conservative and Labour politicians alike shocked by his admission that he met a former KGB officer, now a wealthy oligarch, at a private party in Italy while he was still foreign secretary, with no other officials present? Partly because the role of Russian money and influence in the Brexit campaign has never been fully explained.

No one will claim that Brexit is the reason the Conservative Party has just lost two by-elections and crowds at the Queen's jubilee service booed Johnson when he arrived at the church. But Johnson's perceived dishonesty is a by-product of Brexit. The Tories' perceived failure to keep economic promises is a by-product of Brexit. The flailing economy itself is a partial by-product of Brexit. All of these things hover in the background, whether the Tories want to admit it or not.

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None of this is necessarily good for the Conservative Party's opponents. If Britain follows the pattern of other countries, then the failure of Tory populism might not lead the public back to some kind of predictable centrism. In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi—a kind of proto-Johnson who did and said outrageous things—kept the public's attention for years but achieved very little real reform. After he left office, many Italian voters did not want to elect sober politicians who told them what the real, hard choices were. Instead, the failure of populism led them to the far left and the far right, to the eccentric Five Star Movement, to the pro-Russian leader Matteo Salvini, or to the Brothers of Italy, a party directly descended from disgruntled postwar supporters of Mussolini. As in the United States, the electoral system in Britain restricts the range of options presented to voters. But it doesn't prevent people from feeling a greater sense of alienation from politics and politicians than ever before.

Because we are talking about Westminster, not Washington, it's extremely unlikely, indeed unimaginable, that Johnson will now stage a coup, encourage a violent march on the House of Commons, or support the public hanging of the chancellor of the exchequer. But Johnson has already broken many unwritten rules, and possibly some

written ones as well. British norms and traditions—you don't lie in Parliament, for example—grow weaker every day that he remains in Downing Street. Johnson's appointees have deliberately chipped away at nonpartisan institutions, such as the judiciary and the BBC, undermining the few areas of national unity and agreement that remain.

These officials did so because they, too, were products of Brexit. No previous Conservative government would have allowed many of these mediocrities in the cabinet at all. Public loyalty to Johnson and to the lies he told are what got them their job, whether they originally believed in Brexit or not. Now we can watch them jump ship. Soon enough, they'll no doubt swear an equally passionate loyalty to someone and something else.
