

Boris Johnson's cunning plan

by GWYNNE DYER

'I've got a plan so cunning you could put a tail on it and call it a weasel,' said Blackadder's sidekick Baldrick in the BBC's brilliant historical comedy series 'Blackadder'. In fact, he said 'I have a cunning plan' in almost every episode, but the plans hardly ever worked, and it became a popular catch-phrase.

So the question in the United Kingdom today is this: if Prime Minister Boris Johnson is Blackadder, who is his Baldrick? Who actually put Johnson up to passing a new law that says Britain can unilaterally change the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement he signed with the European Union less than eight months ago?

Did he not understand what the treaty said? Unlikely. He negotiated it with the EU himself.

Does he realise that a treaty is a legally enforceable international agreement? Presumably, because even his own cabinet minister for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, admits that plan 'does break international law in a specific and limited way'.

Did he plan from the start to break the treaty? Probably not. This is Boris Johnson - well, Al Johnson, really; 'Boris' is just his stage name - and he regards worrying about next week as long-term planning.

Johnson was well aware that the problem that brought down Theresa May's government last year and made him prime minister was the Irish border. Peace in Northern Ireland depends on there being an open border with the Irish Republic. EU trade with the United Kingdom, post-Brexit, depends on controlling that border so that there is not a massive smuggling problem. Square that circle, if you can.

May tried to square it by agreeing that the customs border would effectively run down the middle of the Irish Sea, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. That way, no customs controls would be needed on the border between the two parts of Ireland.

She never got that through parliament, because so many MPs from her own Conservative Party saw it as an unacceptable breach of British sovereignty. Eventually her government fell, and Johnson won the Conservative leadership and a large majority in an election last December by promising to fix that problem and 'get Brexit done'.

But he couldn't fix it, of course. Instead, he just accepted the same withdrawal terms as May had when the negotiating time ran out, with a few extra concessions to the EU and the border still firmly in the middle of the Irish Sea. But he went around telling everyone in the UK who hadn't read the text that it wasn't true.

On the strength of that 'victory' he won a big majority in last December's election. How could he imagine that this would not come back to bite him?

By following standard Boris operating procedure: bluster and lie to win time, and hope something magical turns up in the end to save the day. If that doesn't happen, then stage a disguised last-minute surrender, because without a trade deal with the EU, its biggest trading partner, the UK is heading for a massive economic crash.

Johnson has been on course for that surrender for some time now, but a new trade deal doesn't cancel the existing Withdrawal Agreement, so the border controls will still appear in the Irish Sea next January. His instinct would be to blame it all on Johnny Foreigner and his tricky ways, and maybe he could ride out the storm.

Instead, he has announced that he is going to tear up an international treaty with the EU. This is most un-Boris-like behaviour.

We are asked to believe that Boris Johnson has belatedly realised there will be a crisis in the Irish Sea next January, and decided to push through a highly controversial law right now to give himself cover for an illegal act next year. It's so out of character that it begs the question: who put him up to it?

Not exactly Baldrick, but Johnson's senior political adviser is Dominic Cummings, whose passionate and scarcely concealed desire is to crash the United Kingdom out of the European Union with no deal at all.

The other man who truly wants that outcome is Michael Gove, the most powerful person in Johnson's cabinet, who used to be Cummings's main patron in government. Together, they have somehow talked Johnson into doing something so stupid that it may make a trade deal impossible and end his prime ministership.

They probably just told him that such a grave threat would bring the spineless foreigners to heel. The EU would let Johnson have his way, forget about putting an Irish-UK border anywhere (even though the Irish Republic is an EU member), and all would be well.

And the poor mug believed them.