

The Brexit cult

BY GWYNNE DYER

Oscar Wilde described fox-hunting as 'the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible.' Brexit may be similarly defined as the unhinged in pursuit of the infeasible.

Unhinged how? The last two men standing in the contest to replace Theresa May as leader of the Conservative Party, and therefore Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, are Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt. Both of them have now promised to take the UK out of the European Union without an exit deal on October 31 unless the EU bows to their demands.

A 'no-deal' exit would be an economic catastrophe, for the UK's foreign trade is currently conducted in accord with the myriad trade deals that the EU has negotiated over the decades on behalf of its members. Crash out and Britain would have NO trade deals in place, even with Europe.

Both contenders know that there would be huge economic pain, and still they press on. On Sunday Jeremy Hunt said he would willingly tell people whose companies went broke after a no-deal Brexit that their sacrifice had been necessary, although he would do so 'with a heavy heart.' Boris Johnson simply says 'F**k business.' (I am not making this up.)

Yet these two men belong to the Conservative Party, for almost two centuries 'the party of business'. Unfortunately, that ship sailed some time ago. The party first became a vehicle for rabid English nationalism, and has now morphed into a secular cult that treats Brexit as the Holy Grail.

Conventional calculations of national interest no longer count. A recent YouGov poll found that 63% of Conservative Party members would be willing to see Scotland leave the Union in order to achieve Brexit. 59% were prepared to see Northern Ireland go too, and more than 60% were willing to accept 'significant damage to the UK economy'. And it has to be the hardest, most damaging Brexit imaginable.

So yes, the Conservative Party has become unhinged - even though a perfectly sensible exit deal from the EU already exists. Theresa May signed it last November.

It's not a great deal - you don't have much negotiating leverage when you are walking out of a club with 27 other members - but it would preserve Britain's ability to go on trading at advantageous terms with the rest of the world. However, May could not get her deal through because she has only a tiny majority in parliament, and the extreme Brexit wing of her own party would not vote for it.

Johnson and Hunt both vow to junk May's deal and 'renegotiate' a better one, but that truly is infeasible. The EU has said plainly that May's deal cannot be 'renegotiated', and repeats it almost weekly. Neither Johnson nor Hunt can make all 27 EU countries change their position by sheer force of personality.

They must know this, but they must pretend otherwise because the 160,000 members of the Conservative party who will decide between them - an overwhelmingly white, male and very prosperous group, average age 57 - believe with an almost religious faith that Johnny Foreigner will always crumble if you shout loudly at him in English.

It is the purest fantasy, and only a madman would want the job that Johnson and Hunt are vying for. As the fantasy collides with reality round about October, all things will become possible: a no-deal Brexit, the collapse of the government, the disintegration of the Conservative Party, a new election, or even a second referendum that sweeps all the nonsense of the past three years away. (56% of British voters say they would now vote 'Remain'.)

Brexit now means a no-deal Brexit, since the EU is not going to abandon the existing deal. But the arithmetic in parliament has not

changed either, and parliament has repeatedly rejected a no-deal exit. Johnson and Hunt have therefore both said that they would shut parliament down temporarily, if necessary, to get no-deal through. So much for democracy.

You can see how the British got into this mess in terms of cause and effect, but the sheer ignorance, incompetence and cowardice of the political class, and especially of the Conservative Party, is still stunning. It makes Donald Trump's White House look well run