

Brexit: cock-up or conspiracy?

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After reviewing the Nancy MacLean book *Democracy in Chains*,¹ it is apparent that the conspiratorial script of the radical right is the same across the world.

- shrink the state/'Starve the Beast';²
- the introduction of constitutional barriers preventing democratic forces in one or more countries damaging multinational corporate interests;³
- privatisation of retirement funds;⁴
- privatisation of healthcare;⁵
- opening of agriculture to world market forces (this helps America which has a comparative advantage and a lead in industrialised agriculture);
- the transformation of the judiciary (the creation of supra-national trade dispute bodies to arbitrate on trade issues and the subordination of the judiciary to the executive/politicians);
- new limits on the regulatory powers of central governments (particularly in environmentalism);
- and 'free schools'/the privatisation of schools and student loans, etc.

Brexit fits neatly into that script: it seeks to jump the UK out of a highly contested and regulated EU box into one where Free Trade deals can be negotiated, which effectively impose the script above as a by-product. This can be tricky, as all such agreements require pre-approval and will cause controversy. Turkeys have a habit of *not* voting for Christmas. Hence I was

¹ In *Lobster 77* at <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster77/lob77-democracy-in-chains.pdf>.

For an alternative review of this book I commend George Monbiot's in the *Guardian* which I had not encountered at the time of my review. <https://tinyurl.com/yar3qjxa> or <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/19/despot-disguise-democracy-james-mcgill-buchanan-totalitarian-capitalism>.

² https://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_12_01_01_bartlett.pdf

³ MacLean ch. 10 'A Constitution with Locks and Bolts'

⁴ One such example is France and, for details of Macron's plans for pensions, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/business/france-blackrock-protests.html>

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/yd7ftp34> or <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/7-ways-the-private-sector-can-contribute-to-universal-health-coverage>

startled (but not surprised) to discover that Liz Truss, the UK trade secretary, has signed off on a five year secrecy deal with the US. This has effectively *removing the details of a UK/US trade deal from public or parliamentary scrutiny*;⁶ albeit despite leaks already pointing to the script being followed to the letter.⁷

I found this out in the Brexit Blog⁸ written by Chris Grey, a professor at the University of London, who casually mentioned it whilst aggressively dismissing any suggestion that a Brexit plan that seeks to impose a conspiratorial agenda exist. Instead, Grey believes that the contradictory and confusing nature of news on Brexit negotiations is all down to incompetence.⁹

‘The Brexiters have no more idea in private than they do in public about what they are doing. Predictions based upon their concealed intent project on to them a competence they simply don’t possess’.

Without wanting to labour the point:

‘Rather, we have what might be called a government of all the talentless, incapable of competence in any domain and almost ludicrously inadequate to any challenge it is set or sets itself.

So even if they have a plan for Brexit it doesn’t follow that they will stick to it, and even if they stick to it then it doesn’t follow that they will deliver it, and even if they deliver it then it doesn’t follow it will have the effects they expect.’

But my reading of the right-wing press has indicated the contrary. There are more and more articles extolling the Singapore model for the UK – and exposing the intention to go down this route. Here are some examples: less than a year ago Johnson himself was setting out his plans to create Singapore-style free ports across the UK;¹⁰ articles in the *Telegraph*¹¹ have recently praised Singapore for its use of a Sovereign Investment Fund and the use of

⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/y953c64p>> or <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/uk-accused-of-caving-to-us-trade-demands_uk_5eb16d59c5b60a9277823f3e>

⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/ybty3mdh>> or <<https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/news/2019/nov/27/explosive-leaked-trade-papers-show-nhs-chlorinated-chicken-already-table-us-trade>>

⁸ <https://chrisgreybrexitblog.blogspot.com/2020/06/nothing-to-see-here_19.html>

⁹ On the current Cabinet’s inbuilt incompetence, see <<https://tinyurl.com/yams2zks>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/17/incompetence-boris-johnson-government-cabinet-britain>>

¹⁰ <<https://tinyurl.com/yxnedukl>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/07/02/boris-johnson-plans-six-singapore-style-tax-free-zones-around/>>

¹¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/ybt7ctbt>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/06/18/need-sovereign-wealth-fund-save-us-post-covid-autumn-discontent/>>

state aid to pursue an interventionist industrial strategy; the *Express* has given space to Ann Widdecombe who 'insisted the EU was afraid of the UK becoming a financial powerhouse, similar to that of Singapore';¹² advisers linked to Dominic Cummings have proposed abandoning UK agriculture and adopting the Singapore way of becoming rich.¹³ (As an aside, an analysis of Dominic Cummings' blog by an academic at Bath University termed it 'CP Snow in Singapore'.¹⁴) It should be clear by now that the plan is to make the UK more like Singapore.

Plenty of people have seen this and analysed why this may be not such a good idea – that many aspects of the Singapore model are undesirable, inapplicable, and, if revealed to the British people, will be unacceptable. Notable features of the Singapore model are money laundering, social authoritarianism, rigid schooling, state ownership of land and housing, and the deliberate creation of a large (c. 40%) underclass of foreign migrants who provide cheap labour in conditions akin to slavery. I have provided links to a number of articles that point out these issues in the footnotes below.¹⁵ Paradoxically for Brexiteers, Singapore is using ASEAN, a trade bloc, as its intermediary, in recognition that there is strength in numbers when it comes to trade negotiations.¹⁶

The author of the previously mentioned Brexit Blog, surveying what he sees as chaos and incompetence, comes to the conclusion that 'Untrammelled by anything as inconvenient as a plan, or even a definition, Brexit can now mean whatever this government of all the talentless decides it to mean.' He

¹² <<https://tinyurl.com/yakbddch>> or <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1298139/Brexit-News-EU-trade-talks-update-latest-Ann-Widdecombe-European-Union>>

¹³ <<https://tinyurl.com/sts4sfq>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8060473/Britain-doesnt-need-farmers-reveal-leaked-emails-senior-government-official.html>>

¹⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/ybuesfm8>> or <<https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2016/06/30/on-the-worldview-of-dominic-cummings-and-michael-gove/>> C.P. Snow was a scientist, government advisor and novelist. In the 1960s he wrote about the 'two cultures' in British society: the science-oriented and the humanities-oriented. He thought the relative decline of Britain was in part the result of the dominance of the humanities.

¹⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/y9c4ap7t>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-singapore-british-economy-new-model-really-bad-idea-a7535226.html>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/ydavneas>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jan/02/why-the-singapore-model-wont-work-for-the-uk-post-brexit>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/yb85t3ua>> or <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2017/02/heres-what-it-would-really-mean-if-britain-was-singapore>>

<<https://tinyurl.com/yarhza86>> or <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/singapore-challenges-democracy_b_7933188>

<<https://www.ft.com/content/a70274ea-2ab9-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8>>

¹⁶ <<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/understanding-aseans-free-trade-agreements/>>

despairs and concludes, as he predicted in 2015, that 'If . . . the vote is to exit, it will be no good saying afterwards that "we didn't understand what we were voting for", the repeated complaint made by Eurosceptics about the 1975 Referendum. By then it will be too late.'¹⁷

My conclusion is that was the plan all along.

I learn in reading *Strategy*¹⁸ that the Greeks' method was of deception rather than the overt use of power. The benefits of a classical education are of understanding how to manoeuvre effectively without the need for war. Johnson has learnt his lessons well. This has been the method of the neo-liberals schooled by James Buchanan and described by Nancy MacLean.

I also learn from Margaret Heffernan¹⁹ of Sir George Tryon,²⁰ a rear admiral famed for his ways of encouraging initiative amongst trainee ships' captains. It involved issuing vague and conflicting orders on the basis that this would encourage captains to become self-reliant and better able to think for themselves. Or, in modern parlance, to forge a new entrepreneurial dynamism destined to make Britain great again. (Tryon's story did not end well, with the sinking of his own ship being caused by a bizarre maneuver he himself had ordered.)

Having a plan is not the same thing as assuring its coherence and deliverability and ensuring the plan is effective in delivering its goals.

The interesting question is that which preoccupies all co-pilots in the world: in what circumstances are the controls taken from the pilot's hands? And what could be the consequences of delaying that decision for too long?

¹⁷ See note 8.

¹⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy – A history* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

¹⁹ Margaret Heffernan, *Wilful Blindness* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2011)

²⁰ <<https://virily.com/culture/the-sinking-of-vice-admiral-tryon/>>