

Boris Johnson: what first speech as prime minister suggests is in store for Britain

By [Simon Usherwood](#)

26 Jul 2019

[Boris Johnson's speech](#) outside Number 10 Downing Street - his first as prime minister of the United Kingdom - was always going to be noteworthy.



Boris Johnson. Image CNN

At last, a genuine Leaver at the head of government, rather than someone whose loyalties to the cause of Brexit were always in doubt. At last, an opportunity to break the political gridlock that has plagued Westminster ever since Theresa May brought back the controversial [Withdrawal Agreement](#) at the end of 2018. At last, someone with a forceful and boosterish style to make everyone feel better about things.

And yet, for all that, it was a speech that was longer on emotion than substance. Johnson's central pitch was that the UK has been underestimated by others and that the "gloomsters" have been too dominant.

To demonstrate the boldness of his new approach, he announced a slew of domestic initiatives – on the police, health, education – all clearly intended to show that this would not be a government solely obsessed with Brexit.

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Yet Brexit remains at the very heart of this administration, so particular attention should be paid to his words on this.

A Boris Brexit

The headline statement was clearly that the UK will leave the EU on October 31, "no ifs, no buts". But beyond that there was very little indeed.

The ambition is still to conclude a deal with the EU, but without the backstop for Northern Ireland, which would then open the door to a “new partnership”. If the EU doesn’t want to negotiate, then the UK should be ready to commit to a no-deal exit, with extra support from the government and with the help of the £39 billion that Johnson would no longer give the European Union.

Presented like this, it sounds simple: play ball, or we walk away and you get to foot the bill.

But Johnson offered no good reason for the EU to play ball. There was no suggestion that he had an alternative model for the Withdrawal Agreement, which is widely understood in policy-making circles as the only possibility for its renegotiation.

There was no acknowledgement that in the event of no deal, the EU’s initial focus will be on securing the content of the Withdrawal Agreement – on finances, citizen rights and the Irish backstop – by other means. Any new partnership would be entirely conditional upon resolving these issues first.

And there was only an indirect acknowledgement that while £39 billion is a large sum of money, it would be dwarfed by the costs to the economy of disrupted trade in the wake of no deal, and the costs to the UK’s reputation as a negotiator of international deals. That money has been long accepted by the government as an outstanding liability from EU membership and to try to agree differently now would only reinforce the impression of third countries that the UK should be handled with some care – and suspicion.

In short, past the verbiage and the can-do-ness of it all, there was no strong sense that Johnson is about to make a successful early move to resolve Brexit. And that matters because there is the harsh reality of his situation.

Johnson’s election to Tory party leader and thus to the office of prime minister does not give him any more votes in the Commons than May had when she stepped down. His elevation does not remove or address the deep division in public and political debate between Leavers and Remainers.

His installation in the job that he has long desired does not mean that there is a new consensus on the purpose of Brexit, or on the kind of society that the UK should be. In short, just as May was sharply constrained by her position, so too will be Johnson. If his speech was to be a balm, then it will have to contend with the practicalities of power.

Trouble ahead

The most immediate of these is the Cabinet reshuffle. But even with many posts to be filled, there are not enough to give to everyone who has jumped on the Johnson bandwagon in the past month: disappointment is inevitable, and so will be sown the first seeds of discontent.

While Johnson settles into his new role, he is likely to find very quickly that gloomsters might not be cheery, but that doesn't mean they are wrong.

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