

Boris bails – or are we falling for another trick by magic Johnson?

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Boris Johnson has always had an instinct for political drama but he has really surpassed himself this time. Nearly everyone assumed that the job of Prime Minister was his for the taking. Then, just when he was expected to announce his candidacy, he pulled out of the race.

Within seconds the Twittersphere went ballistic. The dominant sentiment was that Johnson had bottled it. Boris Johnson, the man who had almost single-handedly tipped the Brexit referendum in favour of Leave and unleashed the constitutional chaos that currently engulfs the United Kingdom, had shrunk from the momentous political task ahead. Johnson, the Etonian man of the people and bluffer's bluffer, was trapped in a political endgame of his own making. Boris: all sizzle and no sausage.

There is a lot of evidence to support this view. We don't have a window into Johnson's soul but many speculated that his [conversion to the Leave camp](#) was less than sincere and that a narrow remain vote would be his preferred outcome. Then Johnson would have been able to ride the wave of bitter disappointment on the Tory backbenches and take the leadership from his lifetime rival Cameron, without inheriting the unholy mess the country is now facing.

And it is a mess. Criticism is pouring in from every direction, the overall sentiment being that he has ["smashed up the place for nothing"](#).

The UK is grievously divided, split by geography, class, age, levels of education, and cultural outlook. Much has been made of the sense of dislocation and anger that appears to have driven the Leave vote, and rightly so. But there is also great anger among Remain voters, many of whom feel their future has been compromised by a slim majority.

Significant sections of the population have come to despise Johnson and nothing in his eclectic biography working with The Spectator, as Mayor of London, or as an exuberant talkshow host will have prepared him for this emotional shock. Nor, it has to be said, would he have taken the political betrayal of Michael Gove – who came to doubt Johnson's ability to do the job just in time to [declare his own candidacy for the job](#) – with equanimity.

A long, long game?

Another intriguing point of view, first tweeted by a colleague of mine, was that this is another masterstroke by Boris the elusive political shape-shifter. It is plausible. The original plan was almost definitely for Cameron to act as Michael Collins to Johnson's [Famon De Valera](#).

It would be Cameron who would enact Article 50 and return from Brussels with the deal that inevitably failed to deliver on the shameless promises made by the Leave camp. Then, having helped cultivate the UK's own "stab-in-the-back" myth, Johnson would take over as prime minister with his reputation intact and without having to have bothered himself with the tedium of policy detail and political compromise.

Cameron's early resignation scuppered that plan and Johnson clearly understood the potential political danger he was now in. For whoever does take the Brexit negotiations forward will almost certainly be broken by them.

Whoever takes over from Cameron is in for a very tough battle with 27 other national leaders. They may find themselves entering a 2020 general election campaign with the UK in a post-Brexit limbo, reliant on WTO trade rules and trying to deal with an alienated EU from a position of weakness.

Under such circumstances, Johnson might feel that his time has finally come. It is a long shot but is this a long game that Johnson is playing?