

**Opinion**  
Brexit

## **The gap between reckless Brexit promises and reality will soon be too big to ignore**

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*Voters invested hope in the idea of leaving the EU. But a few years of queues and chaos could further erode public trust*

What must it be like to be in the inner circles of this government, watching the economy bounce from crisis to crisis? Shortages mount, while livestock that suddenly cannot be put into the food chain is slaughtered and sent to rendering plants. Ships are diverted from UK ports because no drivers can be found to transport their cargo once it is offloaded. In response to ministers' threats to suspend the trading arrangements for Northern Ireland – that we are now told the government never believed in to start with – there is reportedly pressure within the EU to begin preparations for a trade war.

The prime minister goes off to Marbella, where he pretends to paint pictures; the business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, is said to be pinning his hopes for an easing of the current energy crisis on a “wet, windy and mild” winter. Yet the Conservative party is still ahead in the polls, apparently shored up by the weakness of the Labour party and the clear, optimistic narrative that Boris Johnson has so far managed to project on to events. And I wonder: in cabinet meetings and ministerial get-togethers, do they laugh at the apparent absurdity of it all, or anxiously exchange estimates of when the roof might finally start to fall in?

After all, the central political fact of life in the UK could not be more stark. Whatever the effects of the pandemic and supply-chain issues that are evident all over the world, we are fundamentally living with the gigantic consequences of a gigantic act of recklessness, led by many of the people in charge – and now unravelling.

In Scotland, the results of Brexit sit at the heart of Nicola Sturgeon's drive for independence; in Northern Ireland, they are the focus of no end of anxiety. But in England and Wales, the contrast between the realities of life outside the EU and what we were promised seems like some cruel deceit at the heart of a family or marriage: silently acknowledged and understood, but so far largely unspoken. Looking to the future, one big political question surely demands to be asked: what happens when some watershed point is reached, and the fact that people were conned becomes inescapable?

We all know the promises made by Brexiteers in pursuit of what they wanted – of cheaper food, easy trade deals, that £350m extra a week for the NHS, and all the rest. What is still underestimated is how much hope a lot of people were thereby encouraged to invest in the idea of leaving the EU. When some people backed leave, it was the first time they had voted in their lives. Many did so not out of bigotry or nastiness, but a kind of desperate belief that things might finally get better. Europe, they had endlessly been told, was a drain on both the UK's attention and money: as one Brexit voter told me in 2018, the simplest available solution was to “get out, and repair the country”. If that collective belief has so far shown no obvious signs of fading (indeed, it lives on in the implied links Johnson draws between Brexit and “levelling up”), that is probably an indication of how much faith some people still have in it – and, by implication, what a seismic moment we will have reached when it no longer makes any sense.

Brexit was also an expression of a dire breakdown in public trust, which had been under way for several years, furthered by the effects on politics of the internet, intensified by the