

Britain: Tory grandees' fury over Johnson's 'nationalist' no-deal Brexit

How did we get here? The harsh realities of a no-deal Brexit

Sunday 13 December 2020, by [HELM Toby](#), [INMAN Phillip](#), [SAVAGE Michael](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2020).

As fears grow of threat of chaos in new year, Lord Heseltine brands potential failure to strike deal 'the worst decision of our times'

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Boris Johnson faced a rising tide of anger from senior Tories and business leaders last night as he appeared ready to embrace a no-deal Brexit and prepared Royal Navy gunboats to defend UK fishing waters.

With the prime minister and the European commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, due to decide on Sunday whether to halt stalled talks and make the momentous decision to accept no deal – an outcome that would lead to tariffs and quotas on UK-EU trade and rising prices – Johnson's handling of the final stage of negotiations has caused astonishment in his own party, and the EU.

Fearing the disastrous effects of no deal, former cabinet ministers called for talks to resume despite Sunday's "final deadline", to make sure 2021 does not begin against a backdrop of twin crises caused by the pandemic and Brexit.

Businesses need detailed answers on Brexit, not vague letters or TV ads

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Tobias Ellwood, Tory chairman of the defence select committee, also expressed outrage at government-inspired headlines about plans to use gunboats to patrol fishing waters [\[1\]](#) – confirmed by the Ministry of Defence – saying they were "absolutely irresponsible" and damaging to the UK's reputation abroad.

Damian Green, a former cabinet minister, led calls from Tory remainers for talks to last as long as is needed to reach a deal. "Every rational person in Britain and Europe knows a deal would be better all round, so I still cling to the hope that reason will win the day," he said.

A government source said: "Talks are continuing overnight, but as things stand the offer on the table from the EU remains unacceptable. The prime minister will leave no stone unturned, but he is absolutely clear: any agreement must be fair and respect the fundamental position that the UK will be a sovereign nation in three weeks' time."

A Downing Street source said the talks in Brussels remain very difficult.

Writing in the Observer today, Adam Marshall, director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, expresses his disbelief that businesses have still not been informed of the rules under which they will have to operate from 1 January.

“Businesses need detailed answers, not vague letters, posters or television adverts,” Marshall writes. “It is hard to believe that we still have to ask ministers for clarity on the nuts and bolts of trade – things like rules of origin, customs software, tariff codes, and much more besides – just a fortnight before the end of the transition period.”

He adds that lack of clarity will mean investment decisions will be delayed: “Businesses can and will adapt to the UK’s new trade reality. Yet they’re not miracle workers or mind-readers. Without official guidance, many will pause long-term planning and hold back on investment.”

The use of gunboats to patrol UK fishing waters in the event of no deal was backed by Admiral Lord West, a former chief of naval staff. “It is absolutely appropriate that the Royal Navy should protect our waters if the position is we’re a sovereign state and our government has said we don’t want other nations there,” he told the BBC.

But the behaviour of the Johnson government drew outraged responses from pro-Remain Tory grandees. Also writing in today’s Observer, former deputy prime minister Michael Heseltine says of Brexit and the slide towards no deal: “This government will be – and should be – held responsible for quite simply the worst peacetime decision of modern times. I know personally of members of the cabinet who believe this as firmly as I do. I cannot understand their silence.”

Heseltine adds: “Christmas is upon us and before the country goes back to work we are on our own. Sovereign, in charge, control regained. None of that creates a single job, one pound’s worth of investment or any rise in living standards. We will have risked our trading relationship with the world’s largest market which accounts for nearly half our imports and exports.”

Meanwhile the former Tory party chairman and European commissioner Chris Patten said Johnson was not a Conservative but an “English nationalist”. He told BBC Radio 4’s Today that he feared for the UK’s future when it was finally out of the EU single market, “which we of course helped to build because the main constructor of the single market was Margaret Thatcher”.

On Sunday the Cabinet Office releases details of its latest Brexit planning, which suggests a willingness by Johnson to accept a no-deal. A Whitehall source said preparations had been thorough but predicted difficult moments, including clashes with foreign fishing boats.

“We’ve hired 900 more officers to man the border, with 1,100 border staff set to be recruited by March. There are over 20 helplines to provide advice to specific sectors, and we’ve even given businesses more time to prepare by introducing import controls in stages, he said.

“Come 1 January we’ll have to move quickly and decisively to tackle issues if they arise. We’ve developed a playbook which maps out every foreseeable scenario with minister-approved courses of action so we can implement them immediately if needed.

“These plans work in real life, not just on paper. We’ve run live exercises moving fresh produce and fish across the border, and scrambled naval vessels to respond to threats of illegal fishing in our soon-to-be sovereign waters.

Brexit is the worst decision of modern times. Why are its critics in cabinet so silent?

“We’ve tested our traffic management plans and are confident we have the tools to mitigate disruption and queues at the border which will inevitably occur in the early weeks as traders adjust

to the new requirements. By building more lorry spaces than we need, prioritising lorries carrying fish and day-old chicks, and launching the 'Check an HGV' service, goods can keep moving smoothly through Kent."

Greg Clark, the former business secretary and current chair of the Commons science committee, said: "It is clearly unacceptable for the UK to be expected to agree to be unilaterally punished if we declined to follow future EU policy."

Toby Helm and Michael Savage

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<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/13/tory-grandeers-fury-over-johnsons-nationalist-no-deal-brexit>

How did we get here? The harsh realities of a no-deal Brexit

We were told it would be easy. Now, as Britain faces the threat of a no deal Brexit and its grim consequences it has become clear the EU and UK's positions were always irreconcilable

It is hard for most shoppers in Bridgwater's weekly market to imagine the price rises and shortages that might be round the corner as Christmas and the new year approach.

The covered stalls in this Somerset town – known as the Brexit capital of the south-west – are piled high with keenly priced fruit, veg and cheese, much of it from Spain, France and the Netherlands. But among those buying and selling, doubts, fears and resentments about the future are growing.

There are less than three weeks to go before the pro-Leave politicians who promised that Brexit would make the UK and its people stronger and freer could well end four-and-a-half years of tortuous negotiations on a future relationship with the EU with no deal.

Such an outcome would mean tariffs, quotas and extra barriers to trade and travel, instead of open access to the continent and its single market that our EU membership allowed, all leading to near-inevitable price rises, job cuts and loss of UK economic firepower.

Over the past fortnight, more than at any other time since the Brexit referendum, people in this town and across the country have begun to confront hard truths about what ending our ties without an agreement would mean. But despite this, nobody has seemed able to halt the march towards disaster.

Last week, the chairman of Tesco [2] warned that a no-deal Brexit could lead to rises in UK food bills of around 5%. Increasingly, there are also visible signs of what is to come. All southbound motorways now have signs overhead saying there will be extra paperwork at UK ports after 31 December, raising the prospect of severe hold-ups on our roads.

What leading Brexiters had said would be an easy, swift and reasonably painless divorce from the

EU could be about to end in acrimonious failure and chaos.

Before Sunday's deadline – which EU leaders say is the last realistic chance to avoid no deal – tensions have been rising. Saturday's front-page headline in the *Times* talked of military options. "Navy to board French boats", it said, as the *Express* sounded its own battle cry, declaring "Gunships to guard our fish".

While Boris Johnson's government and diehard Leavers may want people to rally round the flag in the UK's final hours as members of the single market and customs union, many in the real world seem unimpressed.

"It has been really badly handled. Everything Boris said was possible has turned out not to be possible," says Andy Tipper, a former warehouse worker, who voted to leave. "He seems to be playing games. It's the same with Covid – one disaster after another."

Tipper, 50, who believed Brexit would mean more money for the NHS and more job opportunities, says he wouldn't bother to vote if the referendum were held again. "I believed what I had read – that there was an oven-ready deal and it was going to be easy. Now there's talk of no deal at all."

His wife, Mia, 52, who works in a school, feels misled by Johnson. "He has backtracked on everything. He's lied all the time, to my eyes. They've all done it. Every single one of them since it started," she explains. "I wish I hadn't [voted Leave]."

Some Leave voters blame the EU for the impasse. "Obviously, they want our money, but they're not going to get it," says Tony Squirrell, 76, a retired army corporal and former power worker who says he is not worried by the prospect of no deal and is ready to tough it out. "We've managed before," he adds. "There is a lot of scaremongering. I won't listen to the news any more; it does my head in."

But most are concerned by the warnings they increasingly hear. David Payne, 37, who runs the Somerset Deli, says he will have to put up his prices for the European cheeses he sells alongside local specialities if the UK crashes out. "It will impact negatively on us. Certain cheeses are going to have to go up in price," he says, between serving customers. "We don't know to what extent, but some have already started to go that way."

This weekend there are Remainers and Leavers who still cling on to the faint hope that the two sides will see sense, give ground and meet in the middle. Differences over fishing waters [\[3\]](#) and rules governing access to the single market must be bridgeable, they say.

But increasingly the rhetoric is that of recrimination and blame. The Tory peer and ex-governor of Hong Kong Chris Patten said yesterday he did not think Johnson was a Conservative at all, so cavalier were his attitudes his country's interests. "I think he is an English nationalist, and all the things the Conservatives used to believe in – like standing up for the union, like not attacking our institutions like the judges, like believing in international co-operation – seem to have gone out of the window," he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme. "I don't know where this is going to end."

"This government will be – and should be – held responsible for quite simply the worst peacetime decision of modern times"

Lord Heseltine

His fellow Conservative peer Lord Heseltine, another passionate Remainer, is equally excoriating. Writing in today's *Observer* he says of Brexit and the prospect of no deal: "This government will be – and should be – held responsible for quite simply the worst peacetime decision of modern times. I know personally of members of the cabinet who believe this as firmly as I do. I cannot understand

their silence.

“So we are where we are. Christmas is upon us and before the country goes back to work we are on our own. Sovereign, in charge, control regained. None of that creates a single job, one pound’s worth of investment, or any rise in living standards. We will have risked our trading relationship with the world’s largest market on our doorstep, which accounts for nearly half our imports and exports.”

Asked how it can have come to this, David Gauke, the anti-Brexit former cabinet minister in Theresa May’s government, says the roots of the current no-deal crisis can be traced back to Vote Leave’s unrealistic pledges to the British people in the referendum campaign of 2016.

“There were two incompatible promises which were made to the public by the Vote Leave side,” he said. “One was that there would be very little economic dislocation as a result of Brexit, with the UK retaining very good access to the EU market, and the other that sovereignty would be regained as we took back control of all our laws and our borders.”

As it has turned out, retaining access to the largest single market in the world while refusing to except the pooling of sovereignty has proved impossible. Another former cabinet minister said: “Essentially, the same tension that dogged our entire membership and drove us to Brexit has now driven us on to the rocks of no deal. We wanted the benefits of the European project and single market, but increasingly did not want to play by the rules that govern it if that meant ceding sovereignty. The logical outcome is no deal.”

Gauke says he first realised that a no-deal outcome was coming into view during May’s premiership, when the cabinet gathered in Chequers in July 2018 [\[4\]](#) to hear the prime minister’s blueprint for a deal. “It was the first time collectively that the cabinet had to face up to trade-offs,” said Gauke. “Chequers was about the common rule book, saying that if we could be aligned on goods and accept EU standards, then we could go our way on services and end freedom of movement. That was her deal...”

But the compromises proved unacceptable, both to Eurosceptics in the cabinet and to the EU. The day after Chequers, David Davis resigned as Brexit secretary [\[5\]](#), then Johnson quit as foreign secretary [\[6\]](#). Neither could accept anything akin to a “common rule book”. After Johnson became prime minister and then won last December’s general election on a promise to “get Brexit done”, Gauke believes he was even more trapped to deliver pure Brexit, meaning no deal.

“Fundamentally, the people were promised the impossible, then, over time, as things dragged on, there was fury at the politicians for failing to deliver that. Now it is a case of the government delivering what Leave voters want. Boris Johnson feels compelled to deliver something so appalling that, had it been clear in 2016, the referendum would have been a landslide in favour of remaining.”

Stewart Wood, former adviser to Labour PM Gordon Brown, said: “The key moment was the Chequers speech, when Theresa May had the opportunity to define Brexit in a realistic pragmatic way, but ended up defining it as no customs union, no single market, no European Court of Justice jurisdiction, total control of our borders, and keeping unfettered access to trading with the EU. It was a hopelessly impossible combination. It defined the negotiating objective in ways that made it impossible to deliver, yet geared up a country, and especially a Conservative party, to expect the undeliverable.”

As Johnson’s government has dug in, so too has the EU side, determined not to allow a member state that has left to be seen to do so on terms that it could portray as beneficial. As one former UK

ambassador put it: "The thing President Macron is most concerned about is Marine Le Pen saying: 'Look, the Brits got a great deal from Brexit.' That, he thinks, would be fatal."

Fabian Zuleeg, chief executive of the European Policy Centre thinktank in Brussels, says the UK always underestimated the resolve of the EU side to preserve the integrity of the single market and the union. "Part of the answer is that the UK has never understood the process, red lines and priorities of the EU, also vastly overestimating how much power they would have in the negotiations and underestimating EU unity when dealing with a third country."

Back in Bridgwater, the Labour leader of the town council, Brian Smedley, says he was devastated by the referendum result and the way his town voted. "They were lied to and misled, but a lot of people saw Brexit as a rebellion," he says. Even worse, with no deal now in prospect he worries for the town's main employers. "There are masses of distribution warehouses and big hauliers - they would definitely be impacted," he said.

Even as he spoke, politicians on both sides of the Channel were struggling to find an agreement that might help the people of Bridgwater before tonight's deadline. But what had always seemed clear to some - that the Brexit debate was a clash of irreconcilable philosophies, fuelled by angry rhetoric and unrealisable pledges - is now becoming increasingly apparent to the country at large. And as the clock counts down, there is little sign that a solution to that clash is in sight.

Toby Helm and Michael Savage

- The Observer. The Guardian. Sun 13 Dec 2020 10.45 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/focus/2020/dec/13/britain-harsh-realities-no-deal-brexiteu-uk>
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Our jobs and future depend on a deal, business warns Boris Johnson

From farming to travel, the car industry to academia, the pressure is building on the prime minister to reach an agreement

Boris Johnson has been warned that the fate of millions of jobs, Britain's most deprived regions and the UK's manufacturing base rely on him reaching an 11th-hour trade deal with the EU, as senior figures from every corner of the economy issued a final plea for a compromise.

Amid frustration and disbelief among prominent business people that a deal has still not been secured, consumer groups, universities, farmers and both large and small retailers said a deal was essential to allow them to cope with the impacts of Brexit, even with a deal in place. Some simply called on ministers to be honest about the impact of no deal.

Businesses said they were still finding issues over their Brexit readiness with the transition period ending in less than three weeks, deal or no deal. Meanwhile, business groups in areas such as the north-east said they would be left "exposed" with no deal in place. Consumer groups also warned of the impact on cross-border consumer rights, food prices and travel once the transition period ends.

However, a government spokesperson signalled last night that it was ready and willing to embrace no deal, saying that it had made "extensive preparations and invested £4bn for the end of the

transition period, because regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, we must be ready on 1 January". The spokesperson said that while "there will be challenges and bumps to overcome", it had "laid the groundwork to minimise the disruption which occurs in either scenario".

It is understood that business groups were still privately urging ministers to push for a deal this weekend, with the deadline for talks set for Sunday night. While the cabinet signed off their support for a no-deal outcome should Johnson opt for it, chancellor Rishi Sunak was understood to be getting hourly updates amid huge pressure on the Treasury to push for a deal.

Stephen Phipson, chief executive of the manufacturer's lobby group, Make UK, warned that many of the 2.7 million jobs supported by manufacturing businesses were heavily dependent on trade with the EU. "A no deal would be catastrophic for Britain's manufacturers, a sector which came to the nation's aid when the Covid crisis struck," he said. "It is vital the prime minister and president of the EU commission work together and find a pragmatic solution to deliver a zero-tariff and zero-quota deal to avoid additional friction at the border."

With warnings that a no-deal outcome would be "existential" for the UK car industry [7], making it unprofitable overnight, Mike Hawes, head of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, said: "The resulting tariffs would put our manufacturers at a disadvantage in export markets, raise prices for consumers and make the UK uncompetitive, both as a market and producer. We know the UK government understands this, and we hope it will do whatever it takes to secure a deal that safeguards the sector and hundreds of thousands of livelihoods that depend on its success."

The president of the National Farmers Union, Minette Batters, said: "More than 60% of our agri-food exports go to the EU, making it British farming's largest trading partner. Reaching a deal is critical to maintaining those trade links and without it there will be significant disruption for British food and farming. The government needs to be straight with businesses about the impact of no deal and address many outstanding issues, such as ensuring the necessary authorisations are in place for agri-food exports and guaranteeing there will be sufficient financial support, advice and resources for businesses."

Business groups in regions that voted in favour of Brexit warned that their reliance on EU trade meant they wanted the prime minister to compromise. Jonathan Walker, director of policy at the North East England Chamber of Commerce said the body had been making the case for a trade deal for four years because of the area's economic reliance on Europe. "The EU is the north-east's largest marketplace and the government's own analysis has clearly set out how exposed we would be to the consequences of a no-deal Brexit," he said. "It is ridiculous our businesses now only have a matter of days to prepare fully for the biggest change to trading conditions for generations with no clarity on how they will have to operate."

The absence of a tariff-free deal would mean that supermarkets and their customers face £3bn in tariffs from next year, according to Andrew Opie, director of food and sustainability at the British Retail Consortium. He said four-fifths of UK food imports arrived from the EU each day. "While retailers are doing all they can in time for 1 January, no amount of preparation for retailers can completely mitigate disruption to food and other essential goods that come from or through the EU," he said.

Tony Danker, the CBI director-general, also issued a plea to the prime minister to look at what's at stake in the negotiations. "With less than three weeks to go, we also need to plan in parallel for 1 January, deal or no deal," he said. "We need both sides to be deeply practical - and to remove the immediate threat of a damaging cliff edge."

Sue Davies, head of consumer protection at Which?, said no deal would have significant impacts for consumers in the immediate term “with a likely adverse effect on cross-border consumer rights, food prices and travel once the transition period ends”. She added: “One of the consequences of the likely economic uncertainty is that people could see the value of their pensions or investments impacted.” Abta, the leading association of travel agents and tour operators, urged for clarity whatever the rules will be. The rules about future travel in Europe remain unclear.

Universities UK said that no deal would see “immediate disruption to universities’ activities and could have longer-term consequences for their international competitiveness”. It added: “There must be assurances that no deal will not disrupt universities’ existing supply chains, halt EU and UK data flow, or hinder the future mutual recognition of professional qualifications.”

Tories criticise Boris Johnson over navy gunboats Brexit threat

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Meanwhile, a huge dossier of concerns about the lack of Brexit preparedness, whatever happens in trade deal talks, was published by parliament last week.

Warnings over preparedness were received by the business select committee from groups including the Law Society, the Association of Convenience Stores, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the offshore oil and gas industry and the Mineral Products Association.

Arla Foods, a cooperative owned by about 11,200 dairy farmers based in seven northern European nations, said even now they were finding “new issues that we have not been aware of before”.

A UK government spokesperson said last night that 900 more officers had been hired to manage the border, with 1,100 border staff set to be recruited by March. They added there were more than 20 existing helplines to provide advice to specific sectors, and that import controls would be introduced in stages. “We’ve developed a playbook which maps out every single foreseeable scenario with minister-approved courses of action so we can implement them immediately if needed,” they said.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/13/our-jobs-and-future-depend-on-a-deal-business-warns-boris-johnson>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/12/tories-criticise-boris-johnson-navy-gunboats-brexit-threat>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/dec/09/tesco-prices-uk-eu-fail-agree-brexit-no-deal-shortages-tariffs>
- [3] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/11/four-navy-ships-to-help-protect-uk-waters-in-case-of-no-deal-brexit>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/06/what-the-cabinet-has-agreed-at-chequers-brexit-meeting>
- [5] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/08/david-davis-resigns-as-brexit-secretary-reports-say>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/09/boris-johnson-resigns-as-foreign-secretary-brexit>
- [7] <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/24/no-deal-brexit-uk-car-industry-tariffs-smm-t>