

If you didn't laugh, you'd cry ... Brexit and the renaissance of British humour



*It would be unbearable if it weren't so amusing ... **John Ryan (LSE Ideas)** says the desire to salvage some comic value from the Brexit negotiations, and the chief political players, has inspired plenty of satire – something the British have long excelled at. Even the more arcane elements of British comedy have found an appreciative audience in continental Europe.*

The referendum was won like an Oxford Union debate: with funny, almost substance-free hot air. It has come as a shock to our EU partners, who operate a system built on information and who are now having to inform Theresa May and her cabinet about the reality of leaving the EU. As the government's Brexit strategy threatens to descend into chaos, it has triggered a highly creative response of comedy and satire.

The book *Alice in Brexitland* is a satirical twist on the classic children's book *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Instead of tumbling down the rabbit hole, Alice is in Brexitland and the characters she comes across – David Camerabbit, Corbyn-Pillar, The Cheshire Twat (stupid or obnoxious), Trumpty Dumpty, Tweedleboz and Tweedlegove and the Queen of Heartlessness – are well-known political figures. The play *Brexit – The Musical* has been updating its satire throughout its runs in 2017.

The Tory leadership debate is a modern farce in its own right. Consistent in his optimism about Brexit – if not delusional – is the Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg. He recently concluded that “there has been too much Eeyore [a character in the Winnie-the-Pooh books by AA Milne] and we want a bit more Red Rum [a horse that won the Grand National three times]”. Comments like this give the EU plenty of ammunition to laugh at the British.



No arms! A Black Knight Monty Python tribute at DragonCon, 2009. Photo: [BlueRidgeKitties](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Private Eye magazine has two enjoyable columns. The first capture the adventures of Boris Johnson, the foreign secretary, as if he were writing exclusively for the magazine. (The recent Channel 4 documentary *Blond Ambition*, meanwhile, shows that there may be considerable truth to the parody.) The second column takes the form of the school newsletter of St Theresa's Independent State Grammar School for Girls (and Boys) incorporating The William III Orange Academy (renamed since the 2017 election, after the informal alliance between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist Party) where May is the headteacher leading a group of dysfunctional staff (cabinet ministers).

Many will lament the government's shambolic approach to Brexit. But the famous British sense of humour may prevent large parts of the population from succumbing to depression.

Yet while the British sense of humour is much loved on the continent, it has long been a mystery. Brexit may change that. One popular joke plays on the Brexit divide within the United Kingdom: *An Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman walk into a bar. The Englishman wanted to go so they all had to leave.* When Johnson suggested that the EU could "go whistle" if it expected large sums of money from Britain as part of the Brexit process, the bloc's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier had a deadpan response at hand: "I'm not hearing any whistling, just the clock ticking." Some draw comparisons between Johnson and Bertie Wooster.

Frans Timmermans, the powerful First Vice-President of the European Commission, has mocked Britain's ambitions to forge new global trading relationships after Brexit by comparing Eurosceptic politicians to a character from Monty Python. Speaking in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Timmermans likened UKIP MEP Raymond Finch to the Black Knight in the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In the film, King Arthur slices off the limbs of the belligerent Black Knight, who threatens to bleed on his adversary and bite his legs.

Asked about the UK strategy of 'having our cake and eating it', an Irish MEP dryly answered that 'it sounds like having your cake and eating mine'.

One prominent Italian commentator captured the mood this way: "To be alone in 1940 among the enemy was heroic; to be alone in 2017 among friends is absurd."

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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