As Easy as Bojo’s ‘Oven-ready’ Brexit Pie? The Conservative Campaign

Aussi facile que la tarte au Brexit ‘prête à cuire’ de Bojo? La campagne des Conservateurs

Alma-Pierre Bonnet
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Introduction

1 The 2019 general election took place in a divided country in which tension and distrust in politicians had been exacerbated by months, even years, of Brexit uncertainty. Clarity was desperately needed as the political class had failed to deliver any solution to the Brexit problem. Putting the decision back to the people seemed to be the only viable way out. The 2019 general election was then seen as extremely important. It was even dubbed “a once-in-a-lifetime election” that would “decide the future of our country for generations”. However, because of the current political chaos, it also became one the most unpredictable elections in recent history. Would it be a Brexit election, as most commentators predicted? Or maybe a social election, with a real focus on the NHS? Some even claimed that it would be “the climate election”.

2 In the end, it turned out to be mainly about Brexit and the early uncertainty was wiped out as the Conservatives won by a landslide. They even managed to win seats in traditional Labour strongholds. Many factors have been used to explain this sweeping victory: Brexit fatigue, a charismatic leader and an opposition in disarray. All of this was encapsulated in a highly efficient Conservative campaign.

3 This clear mandate for the Tories was not a given as the previous general election, back in 2017, had resulted in a fiasco: the party lost its majority and had to rely on the DUP’s ten MPs. The Conservative campaign was heavily criticized for blowing up what should have been an easy win. A new approach was therefore needed, a necessity Boris Johnson’s campaign team understood perfectly. But they did not carry out a clear and comprehensive overhaul of the Conservative strategy. Quite ironically, they sought...
inspiration in what political strategist Lynton Crosby had suggested they do back in 2017:

- Be clear why this election is needed. Frame it as a choice between stability and uncertainty. Demonstrate to the country that the only way to secure that stability is with a solid and united party. Convince the public that this party is the Tories. And, finally, take every opportunity to contrast with Corbyn.

As Tom McTague puts it, they fought the 2019 election with 2017 scripts. However, if the script was quite similar, the Conservatives had learned the lessons from the 2017 disaster and devised a more efficient strategy.

First, they would use a very simple message, “Get Brexit done”, and replace Theresa May’s focus on change with an emphasis on stability and practical conservatism. Second, they adopted a populist approach and focused on a popular leader. Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson proved to be both a liability and an asset as his unpredictability would sometimes hinder his charismatic appeal. Third, they would gather a very efficient campaign team as controlling Johnson’s character and making the most of it became a real challenge.

The campaign team surrounding Boris Johnson comprised several advisors who had worked for Johnson for quite some time. Lee Cain is the PM’s director of communication and was Mr Johnson’s special adviser as foreign secretary. He was mainly concerned with managing the PM’s media appearances and messaging during the campaign. Other members had worked with Johnson during the Vote Leave campaign in 2016. Rob Oxley, for example, was a close aide to Johnson and is now the PM’s press secretary. The most notorious spin doctor is Dominic Cummings, the PM’s de facto chief of staff. He played a big role during the campaign, but in the background as the official director of politics and campaign at Conservative headquarters was Australian political strategist Isaac Levido, who was instrumental in the unexpected election of Australian PM Scott Morrison. As Dominic Cummings deferred to the young Australian (35 years old) on campaign matters, Levido brought together a team of young talents and displayed the clarity and discipline that the 2017 campaign had lacked.

This paper will be organized according to this threefold strategy: a populist message (I) was delivered by a charismatic yet unpredictable leader (II) who was backed by a team of young strategists ready to bend the rules, in particular online (III).

A political incantation: ‘Get Brexit Done’

The importance and the impact of a political slogan should never be downplayed. For example, Dominic Cummings’s brainchild “Vote leave, take back control”, is widely credited with the eventual success of the official campaign in favour of leaving the European Union (EU) during the Brexit referendum, Vote Leave. According to Professor Tim Haughton “it helped to mobilize the anti-establishment support of voters who felt let down by their politicians”.

The notion of mobilization is essential here. The origin of the word slogan is "from the Gaelic ‘sluagh-ghairm’ meaning a clan’s battle-cry". It brings people together before an important event and is one of the first elements that a campaign team needs to find. A good slogan, in the words of Florian Silnicki, a communication expert and founder of
La French Com’, needs to be “short, straightforward and accessible” as its emotional appeal represents a key asset in political communication.10

According to David Gagnon, a slogan is the “ultimate synthesis of the program of a party during the election campaign.”13 But a political slogan will also “prevent people from thinking” as Olivier Reboul put it.14 A political slogan therefore shares similarities with metaphors in this hiding/highlighting phenomenon: it brings some elements to the forefront while sidelining others.15 For that matter, the 2019 Conservative slogan was a case in point.

The three simple words “Get Brexit done” showed that the key policy of the Conservatives was to focus on Brexit so as to draw a line under it and move on to other issues. Its simplicity reinforced its appeal as Tim Bale, a professor of politics at Queen Mary, University of London, remarked: “slogan obviously played a part in Johnson’s victory […] partly because it appealed to leavers but also because it appealed to some remainers who are sick to the back teeth of Brexit and want to get it over with.”16

The origin of the slogan might explain its success as “the effectiveness [of a slogan] depends on acceptance and use by the public.”17 As the Conservatives had organized a focus group in the Northern town of Bury, the idea of the “Get Brexit Done” slogan emerged from a conversation of half a dozen Tory supporters, as one Conservative strategist recalled:

“Voters were chatting about Brexit and there was a [group] of about four to five people who started talking about ‘getting it done’ […] that was all they wanted: to get Brexit out of the way, out of their lives. ‘Get Brexit Done’ emerged from that meeting. It was trailed at the party conference and went on to define the campaign.”18

Thus, the leading principle of the Tory campaign, encapsulated in the slogan, comes from the people. This bottom-up approach seems to run counter the ideologically driven campaign of Labour. The Conservatives can therefore describe themselves as being close to the people and as literally caring about what the man in the street thinks.

“Get Brexit Done” entails an inherent opposition between the government and Parliament. The 2019 election can be seen as the climax of a showdown between a Tory government, led first by Theresa May and then Boris Johnson, which asserted that the 2016 referendum result was a clear enough mandate to implement their own idea of Brexit and the British Parliament whose members voted in majority against Brexit.19 Throughout the three years leading up to Brexit, the government tried several times to bypass Parliament. It even prorogued it only to be ruled out by the Supreme Court. On the other hand, Parliament managed to have a say in the Brexit process, in particular by imposing a so-called “meaningful vote” at the end of the negotiations between the government and the EU.

By focusing on “getting Brexit done”, the Conservatives clearly signalled that a landslide victory would give them carte blanche to implement the will of the people. As Boris Johnson’s main backdrop on the day of the result, which bore the words “the people’s government”, the government would be answerable only to the people, effectively creating an opposition between the people and Parliament. Westminster would therefore be here exclusively to enforce the will of the government, making Parliament irrelevant and meaningless.
Using Edmund Burke’s distinction, Agnès Alexandre-Collier rightly points out that members of Parliament are transformed from trustees to delegates. They are only here to implement the direct will of the people, not to act in all conscience for the greater good of the nation. As the slogan makes clear, the government would get its legitimacy through its popular support, not through Parliament. The link between the leader and the people is therefore direct, which is one essential aspect of populism.

This populist approach might not be in the long-term interest of the Conservative Party itself. As Andy Knott, from the University of Brighton, puts it “populism is incompatible with some of the central principles of British conservatism”. The Conservatives cherish British traditions and institutions, in particular Parliament, and they revere the rule of law. Populism, on the other hand, does not lay the emphasis on the law and considers political mediators such as parliaments as a danger to the relationship between the people and the leader. The 2019 populist approach might therefore have serious consequences on the future of the Conservative Party which might have to manage “the fallout for decades to come”.

To sum up, the “Get Brexit Done” slogan shows that the Conservatives are interested in the here and now, in delivering Brexit, “do or die”, to paraphrase Johnson. This short-term approach was nonetheless counterbalanced by the phrase “Unleash Britain’s potential”, which was added to the title of the manifesto. This was a clear reference to the rhetoric used by the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 referendum according to which Britain was seen as being imprisoned in Europe. Michael Gove went as far as saying:

I want us to vote to Leave the EU before it’s too late, because that’s the safer choice for Britain. If we vote to stay, we’re not settling for a secure status quo. We’re voting to be hostages locked in the back of the car and driven headlong towards deeper EU integration.

This reference to the successful 2016 campaign enabled the Conservatives to display continuity and to reinforce Boris Johnson’s Brexit credentials. The incumbent PM would indeed be a major player in the campaign.

**Controlling Bojo’s mojo**

The Conservative Party has always considered itself as the “natural party of government”. This political dominance rests on two key elements: strong party discipline and a powerful and unifying leader who commands personal loyalty. The Brexit crisis, and the way it was handled by the Tories, seems to challenge this traditional conception. Theresa May was at the head of a divided party whose MPs did not hesitate to defy the official party policy and voted down her Brexit deal. Theresa May herself was no unifying figure. During her disastrous 2017 campaign, her official slogan “Strong and Stable Leadership” was soon derided into “weak and wobbly”.

Boris Johnson’s campaign team would make sure their candidate would not make the same mistake and would go back to what made the Tories so politically efficient: discipline and loyalty to the leader. Dominic Cummings is believed to have masterminded the groundwork. He is credited with controversial decisions before the election, such as the prorogation of Parliament or the suspension of 21 rebel MPs, including Winston Churchill’s grandson. What has been dubbed as “purge” by some seems to have paid off:
Johnson returns to No. 10 Downing Street having cleared the House of Commons of many of its anti-Brexit protagonists and supported by a fresh crop of obedient Tory MPs who have signed up to his Brexit vision.

This brutal approach proved to be quite efficient and for many in the PM’s team, the 2019 general election was won even before the campaign began. As the political field had been cleared out, Johnson was now able to make the most of the situation. His self-centred populist approach seems to have hit home for two main reasons.

First, because of the way the Conservative leader is chosen. Following a process of democratisation in 1998, it is the membership of the party, not the MPs, who have the final word, through a postal ballot. This had important consequences on the very organisation and official policy of the party:

This reform clearly changed the balance of power in the party by making the leader more sensitive to the grassroots’ needs and wishes and therefore more vulnerable to them, thus exposing the whole party to the risk of populism. Based on the assumption that these grassroots are more Eurosceptic, Euroscepticism, as a consequence, has come to permeate the whole party structure, from bottom to top, with party leaders and MPs responding, in return, to this grassroots’ pressure.

Johnson’s populism is therefore in tune with the evolution of the party. On top of that, and this will be the second reason for Johnson’s successful populist approach, the Brexit crisis is seen as so complicated that voters tend to rely on personalities rather than political ideas. This had already been the case in 2015 when Cameron went back to Downing Street and it is fair to assume that Brexit has reinforced this tendency:

Some 71% of Tory voters cited the leader as one of the three most important reasons for voting for the party. This is consistent with the possibility that more and more voters are coming to rely on leadership evaluations as a heuristic simplification to guide their decision at a time when policy debates are becoming increasingly complex and almost impossible for non-experts to adjudicate on.

As Boris Johnson has been a household name for decades, his populist approach was therefore very likely to work well. Focusing on Johnson’s personality was both an asset and a liability. His unpredictability, just like his personal problems, posed a risk to the campaign. He and his team had to face off a smear campaign over allegations of conflict of interest and sexual misconduct with a former friend of his, Jennifer Arcuri. But because no politician was immune from defamation, his advisers did not worry too much.

Foreign interference proved to be more harmful as Johnson refused to release a report on Russian interference into British politics before the election. Russia was even alleged to have leaked documents later used by Labour revealing that the Conservatives would put the NHS “on the table” in US trade talks. Concerning the US, Johnson’s personal friendship with Donald Trump was also a problem. In an interview with Nigel Farage, Trump praised Johnson while claiming that “we can’t make a trade deal with the UK.”

Johnson’s team made sure he would not hold one-to-one conversation with Trump at the 2019 NATO summit in London. They only met once, discreetly, at Downing Street.

The solution found by the campaign team to avoid trouble was to control, and limit, Johnson’s public appearance as much as possible. This approach was vindicated when several unplanned events went wrong: certain videos went viral and could have had a damaging effect on the Conservative campaign. When presented with the picture of a young boy lying on the floor of an overcrowded hospital by a journalist, Johnson refused to look at it and took the journalist’s phone away. Similarly, when confronted
by Good Morning Britain journalists for an impromptu interview, Johnson, who was in the middle of a publicity stunt delivering milk to regular people, decided to hide in a walk-in fridge nearby. Worse, one of his closest aides, Rob Oxley swore when he saw the ITV journalists.

28 In order to avoid getting more bad press, the campaign team tried to control Johnson’s public appearance carefully to drive home the message encapsulated in the “Get Brexit Done” slogan. To achieve this, they would capitalise on Johnson’s charisma and easy-going appearance. To symbolise the fact that he would literally break the Brexit deadlock, he was photographed wearing boxing gloves emblazoned with “Get Brexit Done” in Manchester. He made his point even more explicit later in the campaign when he drove a digger with "Get Brexit Done" written on its bucket through a polystyrene wall emblazoned with the word "Gridlock".

29 More in tune with Johnson’s traditional humorous self, he parodied the 2003 romcom Love Actually into “Vote Conservative Actually”. In the three-minute video, Johnson attacks Parliament by blaming it for the current chaotic situation: “with any luck, by next year, Brexit will be 'done', if Parliament doesn’t block it again”. By addressing people directly (he knocks on somebody’s door and silently shows his message on boards) he reinforced the government of the people versus Parliament approach that we discussed in Part I. But this kind of stunt was only the tip of the iceberg and his campaign team went much further online.

Unleashing hell online: the digital campaign

30 Back in 2017, Labour made the most of the digital campaign by encouraging grassroots activism through a “new politics” approach. As Emma Bell put it, digital campaigning was done “in a horizontal manner which allowed people to actively get involved in a political movement”\(^{38}\). With organisations such as Red Labour and Momentum, Labour gained ascendency over a weak Conservative campaign. In 2019, the Tories would take the influence of the digital campaign more seriously.

31 The campaign online was handled by two New Zealanders in their 20s, Sean Topham and Ben Guerin, at the head of a ten-strong team. Before joining the conservative team, Topham and Guerin had worked on a series of controversial campaigns, in particular when they were employed by Sir Lynton Crosby\(^{39}\). They also played an important role in the victorious campaign of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in 2019.

32 Despite growing concerns over transparency and calls for more regulation on digital campaigning, the pair managed to outgun Labour and to turn social networking sites into major battlegrounds. In addition to the short videos discussed in part II (the Brexit wall and the Love Actually parody) the 2019 Conservative campaign online was three-fold: they would use so-called “shit-posting”, blatant dirty tricks and countless ads.

33 In the same way as Vote Leave managed to convince people to leave the EU, the digital campaign would focus on emotions. The “Meme machine”, as the two men came to be dubbed, wanted to “unlock arousal emotions… anger, excitement, pride, fear”\(^{40}\), as Cummings had done a few years before.

34 To do so, they used so-called “shit-posting”, that is “the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers”\(^{41}\). In the same vein, they would
flood social media with “boomer memes” which are “hastily executed and comically
dubious pairings of image and text pitched to older voters”\(^{43}\). The most famous example
was a picture of Jeremy Corbyn’s head Photoshopped onto a man in a chicken costume.

Those “boomer memes” were designed to be simple, straightforward and amusing. That
way, they managed to reach out to older voters, who are usually not as concerned as
younger ones with social media. Those memes were absurd and poor in quality on
purpose: the more people derided them, the more publicity they got. This was all part
of a plan as one anonymous source said: “we’d make them really basic and deliberately lame
because they’d get shares and lift our reach; that made our reach for the harder political
messages higher”\(^{43}\). Along with those absurd creations, the digital campaign also
resorted to dirty tricks.

The bulk of the online activities were attacks on Labour. This was facilitated by a
partisan press that displayed much hostility towards Labour. Researchers at
Loughborough University even found that “press hostility to Labour was more than
double the levels identified during the 2017 election”\(^{44}\). The campaign online backed
statements by Johnson comparing Corbyn to Stalin and did not hesitate to bend the
rules to bring their message home. Two examples, among others: a fake fact-checking
website and a mock Labour website.

During the TV debate between Johnson and Corbyn, the Conservatives rebranded their
official Twitter account as “factcheckUK” to make it look like an impartial fact-
checking service. The account pretended that Johnson’s statements were “facts”,
pushed pro-Conservative material and eventually declare Johnson winner of the
debate. The stunt caused an outcry\(^{45}\). But the deed was done.

The digital team also created a fake Labour website supposed to analyse the content of
the Labour manifesto. Here again, the URL was meant to cause confusion as
“Labourmanifesto.co.uk” made it look official. But they did not stop there, according to
the Guardian: “The Conservatives had apparently paid for a Google advert which meant
internet browsers were directed to the website when they searched for ‘Labour’”\(^{46}\).

Last but not least, the Conservatives flooded Facebook with thousands of “misleading”
adverts. As Facebook took the decision in October to refuse to ban political ads and to
fact-check them, the Conservatives made the most of it. According to journalist Simon
Chandler “88% of the Facebook ads the Conservatives posted in the first four days of
December were deemed misleading by Full Fact, one of the U.K.’s biggest fact-checking
organisations”\(^{47}\). Matt Walsh, a Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University, explains that “this
is part of a deliberate strategy to create noise on social media, to encourage users to share
content in anger or outrage, fuelling its viral reach”\(^{48}\). It seems therefore that the “Meme
Machine”, following in Dominic Cummings’s footsteps, took digital campaign to a whole
other level, taking full advantage of loose – or non-existent – regulation online.

**Conclusion**

The 2019 conservative campaign was built around one simple idea: delivering Brexit. In
a context of political fatigue, promising to finally move on seems to have hit home with
most voters. The Conservatives also benefited from a poorly organised Labour
opposition that was embroiled in internal struggle and marred by anti-Semitism. Other
parties also failed to provide a clear alternative to Johnson’s compelling message.
However, his populist triumph might be only a short-term victory as it raised questions concerning the future and the long-term survival of the Conservative Party.

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29. Ibid, Financial Times, 22 December 2019
30. Agnès Alexandre-Collier, « Euroscepticism under Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron : From Theory to Practice », Observatoire de la société britannique [En ligne], 17 | 2015, mis en ligne le
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33. In addition to his two mandate as London mayor, Johnson often appeared on TV and he has also extensively written on the European Union, as a Brussels correspondent for the Daily Telegraph in the 90s, very often attacking the EU and coining popular “Euromyths”. Source: Simon Hinde, Brexit and the media, C.N.R.S. Editions | « Hermès, La Revue ».

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40. Ibid, Newstatesman, 4 December 2019.


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ABSTRACTS

Just two years after a disastrous campaign which cost Theresa May her majority in Parliament and annihilated her hope of delivering Brexit, the Conservative Party managed to turn things around and secure a landslide victory. However surprising the result might have been, many factors can actually be used to explain this political success: a weak and disorganized opposition that failed to provide any clear solutions to the political gridlock, a general feeling of Brexit weariness and, of course, an efficient Conservative campaign. This paper will analyse the Conservative campaign to understand how the Tories managed to easily win an election that was considered by many as extremely important and whose result was almost impossible to predict. First, we will deal with the official slogan of the Conservative campaign: “Get Brexit Done”. We will then see that everything was organized around this simple message: making the most of the popularity of a highly unstable candidate, Boris Johnson, and using any means possible online to drive the point home.

Seulement deux ans après une campagne désastreuse qui a couté à Theresa May sa majorité parlementaire et détruit ses chances de mener à bien le Brexit, le Parti conservateur a réussi à retourner la situation et a obtenu un raz-de-marée électoral. Bien que surprenant, ce succès peut être expliqué : une opposition faible et désorganisée qui n’a pas su trouver de solution à l’impasse politique, un sentiment de lassitude envers le Brexit et bien sûr une campagne conservatrice qui a fait mouche. Cet article analysera la campagne conservatrice de 2019 pour comprendre comment les Tories ont réussi à remporter une élection qui était vue par beaucoup comme capitale mais aussi impossible à prédire. Dans un premier temps nous traiterons du slogan officiel « Get Brexit Done ». Nous verrons alors que toute la campagne s’articulait autour de ce message très simple : il fallait capitaliser sur la popularité de Boris Johnson, tout en contrôlant son côté imprévisible, et utiliser tous les moyens possibles pour faire passer le message sur le Brexit.

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