The rhetoric of self-preservation: Brexit and blame avoidance

What rhetorical strategies do Brexiteers adopt to defend their position? **Sten Hansson (University of Tartu)** *looks at five ways that Theresa May, David Davis, Boris Johnson and Liam Fox have sought to deflect criticism of Brexit, and concludes that they risk damaging democratic debate.*

In modern democracies, governments increasingly engage in [blame avoiding behaviour](#) when they adopt policies that hurt the interests of some groups. Brexit is a case in point. For the UK government, it involves the risk of blame generation from at least four perspectives:

1. Brexit is perceived by many as a harmful policy: some people are likely to be worse off in terms of household incomes, free movement rights, trade opportunities, and so forth.
2. The government attracts charges of [poor planning and execution](#) of the Brexit negotiations.
3. The government is vulnerable to accusations of inconsistency. Especially in the light of Theresa May's own pre-referendum [pro-Remain stance](#), the positive representation of Brexit by her government risks coming across as inconsistent and insincere.
4. The government runs the risk of alienating EU leaders who criticise Britain for its hardline approach to Brexit.

I investigated how these blame risks are reflected and countered in the rhetoric of the top UK politicians responsible for Brexit. Here are five ways in which they try to 'get away with' their divisive policy by [using language strategically](#).

Boris Johnson. Photo: [Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

1. Minimising the perceived agency of the government

Governments are more likely to attract blame when they are perceived as having caused something bad – even though they had the obligation and the capacity to prevent the (potentially) harmful behaviour or outcome. So politicians may try to give an impression that their capacity to make different policy choices is necessarily limited.

For example, when Theresa May [triggered the Brexit negotiations](#), she tried to justify the UK's withdrawal from the Single Market by saying:

> European leaders have said many times that we cannot 'cherry pick' and remain members of the Single Market without accepting the four freedoms that are indivisible. We respect that position. And as accepting those freedoms is incompatible with the democratically expressed will of the British people, we will no longer be members of the Single Market.

In the first sentence, May frames 'European leaders' as actors who necessarily try to limit her government's freedom to act. By juxtaposing 'European leaders' with the UK and its government ('we') she depicts 'European leaders' as a collective actor that does not include herself – even though she is a leader of a EU member state. Moreover, she overlooks that over the years the UK government has been involved in establishing the rules for the European Single Market and the four freedoms – the free movement of goods, capital, services, and labour – within the EU. In the third sentence, May uses a populist reference to the 'will of the people' to support the argument that the UK's withdrawal from the Single Market is inevitable.

2. Downplaying the contentious and possibly harmful nature of the policy

The degree of blame attributed to offenders may depend on how seriously they are perceived to have violated norms and caused harm. Therefore, when facing criticism, politicians may try to mask problems and downplay potentially negative outcomes.

For example, in September 2017, the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson published an article in which he wrote:

> [T]he sky has not fallen in since June 23. We have not seen the prophesied 500,000 increase in unemployment and the Treasury has not so far sought to punish the British people with an emergency budget. On the contrary: unemployment is at record lows, and manufacturing is booming "in spite of Brexit", as the BBC would put it.

Here, Johnson constructs a rather narrow definition of what could count as Brexit-related harm. He refers to two types of possible loss: a rise in unemployment and a fall in government spending ('emergency budget') due to recession. In this way, he suppresses the idea that there may be other, non-economic kinds of losses related to leaving the EU. Moreover, he only refers to current data and does not mention the long-term effects of Brexit, many of which may emerge after Britain's actual departure from the EU. By doing so, Johnson denies possible risks – for example, potential restrictions to free movement of people and goods – simply by excluding these from his representation of Brexit.

In addition, by saying 'the sky has not fallen in' Johnson ridicules critics of Brexit, depicting them as panicking without cause. He contrasts some of the pre-referendum predictions regarding two selected variables – unemployment and economic recession – with current assessments, not only to suggest that the former were false, but to convey the impression that taking a negative stance towards Brexit is misguided. Finally, the phrase '"in spite of Brexit", as the BBC would put it' suggests that the BBC's reporters tend to treat Brexit – mistakenly, from Johnson's perspective – as essentially negative.

3. Presenting the 'in-group' in a positive light

Policymakers may try to pacify disaffected groups by pleasing and complimenting them. These communicative moves are based on the assumption that people are less likely to blame someone who says good things about them. Politicians often try to depict themselves as members of the audience's in-group ('us'), such as a nation, and attribute positive characteristics and feelings to the whole in-group.

For example, in May's statement, references to concrete Brexit-related losses that could attract blame are minimised and abstract positive evaluations of the UK are repeatedly foregrounded instead. This often takes the form of self-affirming utterances that contain clusters of positive adjectives like 'great', 'proud', and 'bright'. For instance, she said:

> We are one great union of people and nations with a proud history and a bright future.

Here, the pronoun 'we' refers exclusively to the UK as an in-group, as the speaker appeals to nationalist sentiment. She also casts Britain metaphorically as a building/home and talks of 'our children' as if Britain was a family:

> And we are going to take this opportunity to build a stronger, fairer Britain – a country that our children and grandchildren are proud to call home.

4. Presenting the 'out-group' in a negative light

When people think that they face a common adversary or enemy, it can boost their feelings of in-group loyalty. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that in Brexiteers' text and talk, positive presentation of the ingroup (Britain, 'us') is contrasted with the depiction of the EU as an out-group.

In September 2017 the international trade secretary Liam Fox gave an interview on the progress of the first part of the exit negotiations. Asked by ITV News whether it was time for the UK government to agree on the financial settlement to speed up the talks, Fox said:

> We can't be blackmailed into paying a price on the first part. We think we should begin discussions on the final settlement because that's good for business, and it's good for the prosperity both of the British people and of the rest of the people of the European Union.

Here, the verb 'blackmail' evokes the image of the EU as a metaphorical villain who is threatening the UK. By extension, this implies that the UK and its government ('we') should be seen as victims. As well as attributing negative intentions to the EU, the government assumes a role that by definition excludes deserving blame for any harm or loss caused in the Brexit process.

Fox's use of the language of extortion precipitated much [critical response](#) in Britain. So this example also serves as a useful reminder that politicians' rhetoric may sometimes backfire.

5. Dealing with charges of inconsistency

Lack of consistency in politicians' actions is generally seen as negative. Therefore, when [accused of inconsistency](#), they may try to change the topic to avoid addressing the criticism, claim that there has been a misunderstanding, deny the inconsistency, cast it in a positive light, or retract the earlier standpoint to maintain the current one.

In July 2016, two days before becoming Secretary of State for Brexit, David Davis published an [article](#) on the Conservative Home blog where he claimed that leaving the EU would give the UK much better opportunities for negotiating free trade deals. He wrote:

> We can do deals with our trading partners […] quickly. I would expect the new Prime Minister […] to immediately trigger a large round of global trade deals with all our most favoured trade partners. I would expect […] most of them to be concluded within between 12 and 24 months.

17 months later, Davis admitted at the Commons [special committee hearing](#) that the UK is not allowed to start negotiating any deals until the 29 March 2019 departure date. When pressed by the committee chair to admit that his claims about quick deals were wrong, [Davis said,](#) laughing:

> What date was that [written]? I think that was before I was a minister. […] Right, so that was then, this is now!

Here, Davis tries to disassociate himself from the earlier statement: he juxtaposes temporal references ('then' vs 'now'), suggesting that his earlier standpoint belongs to the past. This seems problematic, given that all politicians – no matter what the position they hold at any given time – should be held to account for saying things that are evidently false.

Avoiding blame at any cost?

The rhetorical moves identified above – modifying the perception of agency and loss, appealing to in-group loyalty, and brushing off criticism – may be typical of times of political conflict, when people in leadership positions struggle to hold on to power.

Understandably, politicians try to present themselves in a positive light. However, this strategic use of language for the purpose of self-preservation at any cost is detrimental to democratic debate. For instance, talking of Brexit as if it were a consensual policy could be regarded as misleading, because the referendum result does not affirm that. Downplaying the legislative and executive powers of the national government and casting the EU as an omnipotent external actor in control of how the UK is governed seems equally misleading. Systematic ridicule of critics could result in silencing certain disaffected groups and excluding them from public discussions. And the extensive use of emotional appeals to the audience's feelings of nationalism ('great union…with a proud history and a bright future') could derail rational debate.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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