

Opinion **Donald Trump**

## Donald Trump becomes an extra in Britain's national drama

The UK is distracting itself with nostalgia as soft power and investor confidence drain away

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Shortly after Queen Elizabeth wowed Donald Trump into uncharacteristic docility on [his state visit to the UK](#), the US president blundered up against another national treasure: the National Health Service. Stating that “everything” would be on the table in trade talks, he provoked a rare outbreak of unity. Yet even as Conservative leadership candidates recoiled from this potential threat to the NHS, most were busy charting a path to [Brexit](#) where few things will be truly off the table.

As Mr Trump fidgeted his way through Westminster Abbey with the roving eye of a bored property developer sizing up the marble, he had unwittingly become an extra in the national drama. The president's flaws are a gift to Labour leader [Jeremy Corbyn](#), whose core philosophy is anti-Americanism. Meanwhile Mr Trump's suggestion that Nigel Farage, leader of the fledgling Brexit party, should be sent to negotiate with Brussels emboldened the Tory right. It suits extremists on

both left and right to wilfully overestimate the UK's clout in the world. That's not defeatist, it's just realpolitik — something the British used to be good at.

The Conservatives, once the party of business and common sense, are in the grip of an ideological virus. In pursuit of a no-deal Brexit, one leadership candidate has threatened to suspend parliament. A similar gambit in 1649 didn't work too well for Charles I. But you say tomato, I say tomato. You say mount a coup against the legislature, I say "prorogue" — which sounds so much more quaint, ceremonial, nostalgic.

About the only thing we Brits currently do well is nostalgia — this week's commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings was hugely resonant, even if the leaders present were pallid shadows of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. But Britain won't prosper if pomp and circumstance is its only card. To prorogue parliament would be illegal, unconstitutional and undemocratic. But the new Tory party is as unpredictable and mercurial as the current White House.

Mr Trump delighted Brexiters by talking trade, and by all-but endorsing Boris Johnson as the successor to Theresa May as prime minister (Jeremy Hunt, he said, would also "do a good job"). Mr Johnson shrewdly side-stepped a face-to-face meeting, opting for a phone call which made him look influential without giving picture editors the chance to revive comparisons between the two showmen.

Messrs Trump and Johnson have both flirted with Steve Bannon, the president's former chief strategist, and both have borrowed techniques from the Bannon playbook — positioning themselves as honest straight talkers by making remarks calculated to provoke an outcry, then garnering support from the people outraged by the outcry.

Mr Johnson, for all his faults, is not naive. Some Tories delighted by Trump's talk of a [US/UK trade deal](#) still seem determined not to understand that Britain runs a [trade surplus](#) with America, and that the president is a protectionist who turns on a dime. There would be merit in having a prime minister who can get off on the right foot with Mr Trump. But that's no guarantee of success, as France's Emmanuel Macron has learnt.

Moreover, post-Brexit the priority will be not the US but the hugely complex challenge of negotiating a free trade deal with the EU, followed by trying to save the dozens of other preferential trade deals we currently have thanks to our membership of the bloc and which are now in jeopardy.

Anyone who watched Mr Trump tell Leo Varadkar, the prime minister of Ireland, that he knew the Irish wanted a border wall should be seriously questioning what they might get from this president. And any Remainer who understands the importance of the NHS to British politics should relish his hastily retracted blunder on healthcare. The assertion that leaving the EU would bring £350m a week into the health service probably clinched the referendum vote in 2016. That misleading claim

was the subject of a court case against Mr Johnson, thrown out by judges on Friday. With the NHS one of the subjects on which the Conservatives are still vulnerable to Labour attack, MPs should be alarmed that the doctors' trade union, the British Medical Association, is warning about the consequences of Brexit.

For Mr Corbyn, it was just too tempting to shun this particular leader of the free world — and much easier than it might have been for him to have dismissed Barack Obama. Leaders who aspire to rule usually appreciate that in dealing with allies, it is the office which commands respect, not just the person.

But Labour's politics are those of the sixth form. Emily Thornberry, who will be Britain's foreign secretary if the party comes to power, declared grandly that Mr Trump is "a sexual predator" and a "racist" while failing to explain how she would protect the UK/US intelligence relationship, or why her leader is sticking to a Brexit policy which is helping to propel Britain into the arms of the very man she claims to despise.

I love the US more than any other country outside my own. It pains me to witness the stumbles of the presidential caravan. But Americans who dislike Mr Trump can take comfort in knowing that he will eventually be gone. Brexit, the greatest act of national self-harm since Suez, is irreversible.

As British soft power drains away, jobs vanish and investor confidence dwindles, I hope the special relationship with the US will endure. But on current showing, this little island looks likely to play a bigger part in America's nostalgic past than its dynamic future.

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