

Are we all being gaslighted by the government?

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Gaslighting is a term that has relatively recently come into common usage to describe a particular form of behaviour. It can refer to a particular, and pernicious, form of behaviour within the workplace, but it can also be used within the political sphere. As noted [by Theresa Avila](#) recently:

The increased popularity of the term is undoubtedly linked to the political climate we live in, where anything and everything leaves you questioning what's true or false. Talking heads and political pundits routinely comment that we're being "gaslit" by politicians who do the wrong thing, but claim we're in the wrong.

Of course, you could just also call it doublespeak. And we're suffering it, badly right now.

Two recent outstanding articles refer to it. Both concern Johnson (of course) but because both concern the state of play in recent negotiations on Northern Ireland both also refer to gaslighting by the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. One is by Prof Chris Grey. [As he says:](#)

During the Cold War, the Stasi perfected [techniques of psychological warfare known as Zersetzung](#), sometimes translated as 'disintegration'. Targeted at individuals and dissident groups, it involved "a systematic degradation of reputation, image, and prestige on the basis of true, verifiable and discrediting information together with untrue, credible, irrefutable, and thus also discrediting information; a systematic engineering of social and professional failures to undermine the self-confidence of individuals; ... engendering of doubts regarding future prospects; engendering of mistrust and mutual suspicion within groups ...".

I'm extremely wary of invoking comparisons between Brexit and totalitarianism, because they almost invariably exaggerate what is happening with Brexit, whilst insultingly and irresponsibly downplaying the horrors of totalitarianism. Even so, it's not entirely fanciful to draw at least metaphorical parallels between *Zersetzung* and the [gaslighting which characterises the government's approach to Brexit](#). In particular,

there is a comparison in the way that it is becoming almost impossible to separate out what is true from what is false, what is intended from what is accidental, what is incompetent from what is malevolent.

Take [the remarks made last Friday by the new Northern Ireland Secretary](#), Brandon Lewis, saying that there will be no Irish Sea border, despite the fact that this is precisely what [the government signed up to in the Withdrawal Agreement](#).

This last point, on which Grey is absolutely correct and Lewis is absolutely wrong, as is Johnson when talking on the same issue, is a perfect example of the fact that gaslighting is going on: claims are being made that are very obviously false with the obvious and deliberate intention of making people doubt both what is actually going on and what the truth is.

Sean Danaher made the same point in a tour de force on the state of play in Ireland on Progressive Pulse which I cannot recommend enough. [As he put it, the situation is so absurd that:](#)

the Brexiters may believe that they can persuade Ireland back into the UK's orbit – an insane delusion. Ireland sees Britain as a Jekyll and Hyde country. It likes Jekyll (the "Remain" side of the UK) but loathes the Hyde side of Britain, currently firmly in charge. The minuscule chance that Ireland would ever rejoin the UK evaporated long ago. Nevertheless, the Brexiters have never let reality get in their way and their knowledge of Ireland is so flawed that some may believe Ireland will join their Titanic voyage.

Fantasy is now the plaything of those in power when it comes to British politics in a way that is wholly new.

This has massive ramifications. First, for our national well being, Second, for our prospects of any meaningful relationship with countries where sanity still prevails. But most, for our stability because the quite deliberate intent of this policy is the creation of instability, both internally and externally, from which those pursuing it somehow think they can gain. They can't. They really are very deeply deluded, but the time might come when their Hyde does consume their Jekyll. That's why I worry.