

# The wheels are not only off the populist bus, but it's ...

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The basis of the appeal of populism is twofold. One is that it can keep the wheels on the bus going round-and-round. The other is that it's possible to choose who will be on the bus. As political philosophies go it is crude. The whole logic implicit within it is that the benefits of the economy can be directed towards some in society, and that indifference to everyone else is acceptable.

As sold in the UK the idea behind populism was that the exceptional British economy could be directed for the gain of those who were British, with massive racist overtones as to who they might be, but with an explicit expectation that those from the EU were to be excluded. The logic was sufficient for the Tories to win elections from 2015 onwards, and a Brexit referendum, of course.

There are two problems with selling a political narrative as basic as this. The first is that the wheels might fall off the bus. The second is that those on board the bus may not be those who the supporters of populism expected to be there, and that they find themselves excluded after all. The difficulty for Boris Johnson is that both are now happening.

Some might say it would be fair at this point to acknowledge that Johnson could no more have predicted the Covid crisis than the rest of us. But that is not true of course: the government of which he was a part well before he became Prime Minister was aware of this risk and did nothing of consequence to prepare for it. He compounded matters by his dither and delay after the crisis unfolded. Only yesterday the Governor of the Bank of England acknowledged that recovery is now running slower than he expected. Government policy failure about reopening, vaccines for children, schools and ventilation are clearly key to that: the vulnerable in the population who do not trust the government to protect them are not willing to take the risk of returning to normal. What is happening is really quite simple to explain in terms of the recovery. The British economy is not exceptional, and nor is its government. On any measure it has and is failing to address the issues that demand its attention.

But in many ways, worse for the government is the attempt to control the appearance

of those allowed on the bus. Brexit has pushed unexpected populations off the bus, the most obvious being people in Northern Ireland. The success in making the bus unattractive to others on whose skills we depended - including, quite literally, the drivers - is having a more than unfortunate consequence. It is entirely possible to say that the wheels are falling off the economy as a result.

Worse for the government is that what is becoming apparent is that this bus is a double-decker, and those on board fit into two quite different classes, which is a deceit they have always sought to hide. Downstairs there are those who qualify to live in the UK, although the tolerance of all of them is open to question amongst fellow passengers. Upstairs the clientele look very different. To get on the top deck you need to meet a number of very specific criteria, which are a little flexible, but have a recurring theme that focuses on privilege.

The first such criteria is that you have to be well off. Then you are favoured.

It very much helps if you are not just well off in terms of income, but are also wealthy. Not only have those in that category been enormously favoured by the boost to their wealth resulting from the Covid measures that have massively increased the value of their savings, they are also explicitly favoured by continuing bias in government tax policy, as seen this week.

And in the front seats are a special category of passengers. These are the elite for whom the government seeks to provide favours. They not only do not pay for the ride that they're on, they are actually paid to be there, without having to even break into a sweat to earn their good fortune. That fortune is now enhanced by government largesse at cost to all others, including all those on the lower deck, whilst those at the back of the top deck are only kept in check by their desire to be in the front seats, which at some time they will realise that is really not going to happen

Is this sustainable? It is, but only for as long as those on the bottom deck don't notice the staircase to the top deck and ask why it is that they are excluded from going up when a never-ending flow of favours paid for on the backs of their effort appear to be heading for the party that's taking place on top for which they don't have a ticket, despite all the promises made to them.

Will the national insurance increases, rising Covid cases, ever more apparent shortages throughout the economy, sluggish growth, rising unemployment, an NHS crisis and growing tensions within the Union, let alone with neighbours further afield, coupled with military defeat be enough to indicate that the party on the lower deck has not only failed to start but is going precisely nowhere? That is the question of the moment. I suspect that the answer is going to be yes, and sometime soon. The reality is that the bus is not only broken down, but has now run out of road, even if a temporary repair might be done. There is nowhere left to go on this route unless the void beyond the cliff near which this bus is located is to be the actual destination.

My suspicion is that lower decks will realise that it is time to get off before the top deck does. They have many fewer incentives to stay. But those departing are not that noticeable as yet. Give it time though. Once the idea that a bus is going nowhere starts to spread people quite quickly look for a better means of achieving their goals. And that is what might be happening soon here in the UK.

But it would help if an alternative was available.