

Who Can We Laugh At?

British Humour in Times of Brexit

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“Because say what you like about the English, but our saving grace, the thing we’ve always been famous for, is our ability to laugh at other people” (Finnemore S.2, Ep.6, 1:39-1:48). In the award-winning sketch comedy series John Finnemore’s Souvenir Programme, John Finnemore takes on the role of an elderly gentleman, who self-identifies as a member of the ‘silent majority’, which he paradoxically believes to be the last persecuted minority. The cranky old man complains to an implied pub audience that political correctness limits his ability to tell his racist jokes and thus undermines his national identity. Through this character, Finnemore pokes fun at the way British humour is often uncritically celebrated as a commendable national trait. Though this sketch was broadcast some years before Brexit, Finnemore’s xenophobic and paranoid character is clearly modelled on the stereotype of the UKIP voter or the would-be Brexit supporter who gives rousing speeches at

the local pub. Naturally British humour extends beyond petty taunts and racist jeers, but their pervasiveness has become more visible since the referendum. As Finnemore’s character points out, the country has always been renowned for its sense of humour, but who or what do they laugh at in Brexit Britain? After all, Brexit is a political event that has deeply divided the nation. Can British humour smooth things over? Or is British humour itself too divided?

To answer this, I turn to British comedy with examples from radio, television, print and theatre and examine how they negotiate Brexit. One disclaimer: most examples chosen back Remain, but I want to show how this is not without its ambiguities. Though there has been a lot of comedy, not all intentional, on the political stage, most Brexit comedy can still be found in the media. Even the comedy in and of politics

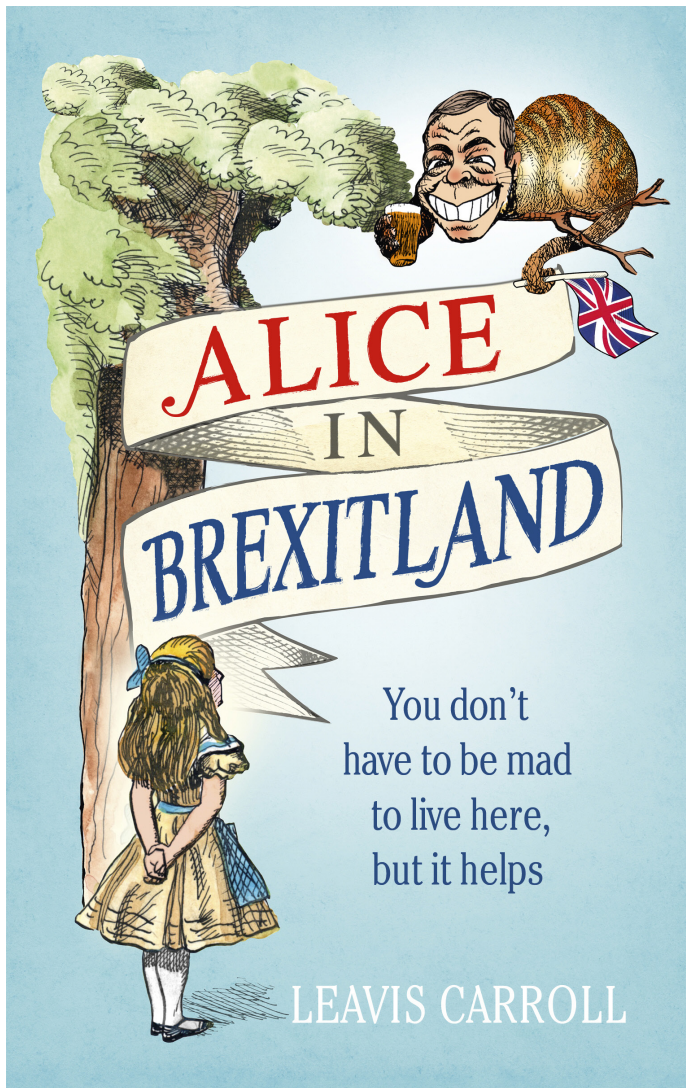
often draws their inspiration from media texts. Remember, for instance, the immortal image of Theresa May sharing a literal political stage at the general elections of 2017 with Lord Buckethead, the self-described ‘intergalactic space lord’, whose costume resembles that of the Black Knight from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. With a similar – and necessary – eye for the absurd, British comedy targets Brexit politics.

Brexit Humour

Whether the comedians supported Remain or Leave, political campaigns, along with their politicians, proved to be easy marks for comedy. In the days leading up to the referendum political figures like Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove (all Leave) and David Cameron (Remain), whose antics gave the comedians plenty of ammunition, often found themselves to be the butt of a joke. But along with cheap jibes at politicians, like the posh David Cameron, the smug Nigel Farage or the unkempt Boris Johnson, came more serious political charges. Boris Johnson’s dishevelled appearance would lead to a discussion of his wild claims in support of Brexit. Thus, US-based British Comedian John Oliver, host of HBO’s successful news satire *Last Week Tonight*, characterised Johnson as “a man with both the look and the economic insight of Bamm-Bamm from the Flintstones”

(3:22-3:25). With this apt comparison, Oliver comments on the economic repercussions of Brexit and disproves many Leave campaign claims, such as the infamous one printed on a bright red bus about the £350 million Great Britain presumably sends the EU every week.

Another political satire in favour of Remain, written by Lucien Young, recasts all the significant Brexit politicians as characters of Lewis Carroll’s children’s classic *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Young retells the story of Alice who follows the nervous rabbit Dave down a rabbit-hole only to end up in the strange Brexitland, populated by characters like the Corbynpillar, Humpty Trumpty and Cheshire Twat (Farage) and governed by “the terrifying Queen of Heartlessness, who’ll take off your head if you dare question her plan for Brexit”. The subtitle of Young’s satirical adaption, “You don’t have to be mad to live here, but it helps”, humorously sums up the socio-political climate felt by Remain supporters in the wake of Brexit. The lack of political direction and rationale is constantly mocked by Remain comedies. The satirical website *The Daily Mash* (similar to the German *Der Postillon*) ridiculed May’s divisive politics, running headlines such as: “Unite around my nutter’s version of Brexit, May tells Britain”. Chris Bryant and Bronagh Lagan put Britain’s lack of political direction on a bigger stage – literally. Their Edinburgh



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Festival Fringe success *Brexit – The Musical* frames the absence of a political course as a satirical quest narrative, advertising the musical on their website with the promise: “Somewhere out there, there’s a plan for Brexit. There’s just one small hitch – its writer has amnesia and no-one else knows where it is. It’s up to our hero, Boris Johnson, to find it. Devastated by his monumental cock-up of winning the referendum, this is the only way for Boris to gain redemption and save the nation from Brexit.”

Many Remainers have found some solace in this sudden abundance of political comedy, like John Ryan, professor at the London School of Economics, who applauds how “the desire to salvage some comic value from the Brexit negotiations, and the chief political players, has inspired plenty of satire – something the British have long excelled at.” Disillusioned by national politics, he relies on humour to boost his national pride. This move is very common in Brexit Britain – especially for Remainers. It seems that little else can be done when a country has made a disastrous decision and the political opposition is powerless to change it. In his review of *Brexit, the Musical* for the *Guardian*, Will Hutton goes so far as to pin his political hopes on comedy entirely, believing that comedy can do what Remain politics couldn’t: to sway an audience by presenting political arguments in an engaging manner. As political scientist Richard Bellamy puts it: “The comparative failure of the Remain campaign to mount even a negative political case against leaving, let alone to give positive political (or, for that matter, economic) reasons for European integration, served simply to further legitimise the Leave campaign’s democratic argument for Brexit” (223). Hutton recognises this gaping political deficit and hopes that “Satire – showing how the project and people behind it are completely farcical – has the

better chance of persuading millions in any imminent electoral or second referendum test that they have been sold a pup and must save themselves from both the perpetrators and the wreckage.” While many Remainers resignedly shake their heads and despair over Britain shooting itself in the foot, this counter-intuitive move is comedy gold.

The Tragi-Comic Campaigns and the Voters

Although traditional British sketch comedy often shies away from direct political commentary, apparently an untenable position in Brexit Britain, John Finnemore hilariously outlines the self-sabotage of the Leave campaign and its supporters by relying on an English idiom and transforming the entire debate into a referendum about whether or not Christmas should be a holiday. His 2016 Christmas Special features a series of sketches in which an interviewer tries to chart the motivations of pro-Christmas voters. But, one should note, the voters are all turkeys. And their pro-vote takes on an even more sinister twist. As one turkey enthusiastically points out, the pro-Christmas campaign has “consistently promised that if their holiday goes ahead, everyone will get three days off and a lovely big dinner.” (S6, Ep.1, 7:46-7:51). The turkeys’ motivations sum up the Leave supporters’ general responses when asked why they voted for Brexit.

They cite such reasons as the negativity of the Remain campaign (a dislike for the Easter rabbit/Cameron), through the likeability of the Leave politicians (like the jolly Santa /Johnson), to the general political apathy and disenchantment. However, Finnemore highlights that no matter the reasons or excuses given, the outcome will be most damaging, especially for the large demographic that voted for Brexit/Christmas. Because this vote is irreversible, Finnemore emphasises that political disillusionment is no excuse for political short-sightedness.

‘Excuse me, I’m interviewing turkeys about why they voted for Christmas’.

‘Oh well they’re all the same really, aren’t they. You know, these holidays. Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day. So I just voted Christmas to send a message, really.’

‘And what is that message?’

‘Well, that I’m cross.’

‘I see, and if we do have Christmas this year, do you think your message will get across?’ ‘Yeah, I think so. And if it doesn’t, I’ll just send another message next Christmas.’

‘Will you?’

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t I?’

‘No reason.’ (S6, Ep.1, 21:02-21:36)

While pointing out the repercussions of a protest vote, this sketch also

highlights how the Remain campaign had completely underestimated the widespread distrust against politicians and any institutions associated with them.

The BBC Radio 4 news satire *The Now Show*, in their special issue, “The Vote Now Show: EU and Yours”, analyses why. In their multi-voiced sketches the series’ hosts Steven Punt and Hugh Dennis, along with other actors, humorously dissect the arguments that have been circulating in the media to show how little is actually known about what a Brexit would mean for Britain. They point out that Michael Gove seems to have nothing else to say than that Britain has to ‘Take back control’ to expose that apart from their slogan, the Leave campaign’s arguments are limited, false and repetitive. But they also demonstrate why the valid Remain argument about severe financial repercussions falls on deaf ears with Leave supporters:

so none of these predictions of economic doom seem to have worked because of the many chickens coming home to roost in this referendum, the biggest and juiciest fowl striding confidently back into the hen house is this:

(fanfare) Nobody trusts anything economists say!

Because?

Because none of them saw the financial crisis

coming when it was right on top of them.

Yes, now the media forgot this almost immediately, but the public didn’t. And perhaps the greatest revelation of this campaign has been the extent to which the economic and political establishment appear to have no credibility with a large chunk of the public at all. (10:20-10:40)

Many comedians, including those who supported Remain, share this distrust with the general public. In fact, much Remain comedy shows an enduring ambivalence about voting Remain. Even politically astute and analytical shows like *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver or *The Now Show*, which each devoted an episode broadcast shortly before the referendum to discuss the consequences of Brexit, couldn’t fully convince themselves or their audiences about the benefits of a continued EU membership. The reluctance is encapsulated by the closing song of each show – a British comedy tradition that goes back to the music halls (Alexander 65). These songs highlight not only how difficult it is to break out of the negatively framed Remain arguments, but also implicitly how the binary choices left by the referendum failed to fully represent the relationship between the EU and Britain. While Oliver clearly spoke out for Remain, his *Last Week Tonight* closes with “Ode to Joy”, rewritten to express Britain’s dislike of the EU with the chorus: “Fuck you, European Union”. Oliver suggested this

song would serve to scratch the itch of many British citizens to tell the EU off so that they can eventually follow their sanity and vote Remain. Had this been an actual political gambit, the outcome of the referendum would be puzzling to no one. However, though only a crude comic relief at first glance, it still mirrors the attitudes of many Remain supporters. From its inception Britain's relationship with the EU had been a rocky one. Oliver, in his ironic bid for Remain, does not attempt to disguise the persisting scepticism and animosity:

but here is how I feel about the EU: it's a complicated, bureaucratic, ambitious, overbearing, inspirational, and consistently irritating institution. And Britain would be absolutely crazy to leave it. Especially because, if it stays, it can reap all the benefits, while still being a total dick about everything. And that is the British way. (13:02-13:25).

Whose Brexit is it anyways?

One of the paradoxes surrounding Brexit was that Britain never fully considered itself as part of the EU and comedians swiftly pointed out the political hypocrisies of the Remain campaign, and especially its representative David Cameron. In his closing song for *The Now Show*, Mitch Benn, tentatively supporting Remain, builds on this ambiguity and attempts a reconciliatory note for a divided nation:

if we're gonna stay, how's about we do it properly this time? [...] And if we're gonna leave, can it be for a good reason please? Not just because little England thinks of things foreign as sinister. [...] And whatever we do, how's about we chill the heck out? And if this is about being proud to be British, I've always been proud we get along. And if this comes between us, then it would be desperately sad." (26:50-28:13)

What many who use or insist on the British sense of humour to deal with Brexit seem to conveniently forget: Britain has never been a country where everyone 'got along'. Let's not forget that only two years prior to the Brexit referendum, Scotland held one to decide if they should leave the UK. The Irish comedy team *Foile Arms and Hog* comments on the conflicts of interest of the individual nations in the United Kingdom. In a sketch set at the urinals, a symbolism that chiefly adds to the political joke, the character portrayed by Sean Flanagan tries to bring his colleague, Sean Finegan's character, up to speed for their meeting about Brexit and the UK. Only problem is: Finegan's character remains hopelessly confounded by the whole concept of the UK. In an attempt to alleviate his confusion, they discuss how the nations work together in sports events, such as the Olympics, the European Championship and Rugby, only to realise that the teams



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are formed differently at each event.

The Brexit referendum triggered an identity crisis for an already fragile national construct. And humour became an anchor point. Facing an uncertain socio-economic future on top of a rekindling of debates about the Northern Irish border and Scotland's hopes for independence from the UK, not to mention the deep rift apparent in the narrow margin with which the Leave vote won, the British media scrambled to offer a silver lining. Like the LSE professor John Ryan who delights in the many new political satires, several newspaper and news websites rejoiced at the stiff upper lip and the British sense of humour in times of national crisis.

A day after the referendum, the tabloid *The Mirror* titled "Brits are managing to poke fun at Brexit - and the results are surprisingly uplifting – Post Brexit life in the UK may look uncertain, but hey, let's try to see the funny side". In this article, Zahra Mulroy assembled humorous twitter responses to the results of the referendum, largely from Remain supporters. The news website *Quartz* ran a similar article "Pub?": Brits respond to Brexit with typically British gallows humor", in which Olivia Goldhill quotes from the twitter accounts of mostly high-profile British comedians like David Mitchell, Jake Whitehall, and Ricky Gervais, the latter tweeting: "I can't believe that it took a referendum for Britain's youth to find out that old

people hate them". Here, Gervais tries to make light of how the different age demographics voted and that the age group that favoured Remain will be the one most affected by the Leave vote.

Brexit – the Flip Side of British Humour?

While many subscribe to “the age-old adage and widely held, yet empirically unfounded, belief that ‘laughter is the best medicine’” (Longo 113), others remain sceptical that British humour can exist in times of Brexit. Zoe Williams, writing for the *Guardian*, alleges that British national identity centred first and foremost on irony, a trait which seems to have become obsolete: “I cannot, however, reconcile myself to this post-English politics, pumped-up, self-regarding and humourless. If our national identity meant anything, Brexit is its opposite”. Her central argument runs thus: any expression of national pride before Brexit had been checked by the British sense of humour that generated an ironic self-deprecation so that nationalism would not run rampant. However, now, she laments “it’s the exceptionalism, freely

vented for the world to hear, that is the most embarrassing” (Williams). But isn’t the insistence on the wonderful British sense of humour, the apparent staple of British identity, one of the pillars of the nation’s exceptionalism? In times of Brexit, this pillar has been shaken. While many are quick to insist on it, others are uneasily reminded that the institution of British comedy has a long and unsavoury tradition of laughing at minorities. Its



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power, which so many believe to be a force of salvation, is therefore limited. As Richard Alexander puts it, “The predominantly right-wing orientation of British humour is a barrier to those who would wish to promote change through comedy” (82). Especially in times of Brexit, with hate crimes against minorities on the rise, comedians have become more and more self-aware of this.

This article included mostly Remain comedians who self-consciously oppose the notion that humour is beyond reproach. They often do not subscribe to the saving grace of the British sense of humour, but see it for what it is: part of the problem. After all, the long tradition of racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist comedy nurtured many resentments that have risen to the surface in the debate about Brexit. The xenophobic implications of Brexit make the debate about what is and what isn't funny in British comedy more urgent. John Finnemore's 'silent majority' character quoted at the beginning parodies the ignorant attitude that uses the British sense of humour as an excuse to be a bigot who can only applaud Britain's isolationist strive: "Shall I tell you the sixth worst thing about political correctness? (...) It is the erosion of the great British sense of humour. I don't mind telling you that I'm renowned in my circle for my jokes, my three jokes. The one about the gay terrorist, the one about the Irishman with a wooden leg and the one about the octopus. And now, under the suffocating, nanny PC regime, I can't tell any of them. – The octopus is Jewish." (S2, Ep.6, 1:00-1:39). Unfortunately, Brexit seems to revive and legitimise that interpretation of the British sense of humour.

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