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# The great Brexit kabuki — a masterclass in political theatre

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Lead actors on both sides are expert in the arts of mask and illusion, writes Andrew Moravcsik



**T**he Brexit debate has become a global spectator sport, which suggests that something very important must be at stake. Yet, unlike issues such as migration, the euro crisis and Ukraine, it lacks real significance: under no circumstances will Britain leave Europe, regardless of the result of the referendum on June 23.

It is instead a long kabuki drama in which politicians, not least Eurosceptics, advocate policies they would never actually implement. Kabuki — the ancient Japanese theatre art in which actors employ masks, make-up and illusions — is a common Washington metaphor for stylised but meaningless posturing. This year's presidential primaries demonstrate how our politicians

have refined this art. Now we are watching the British do us one better.

The illusory nature of Brexit was evident at the start. Politicians do not call EU referendums because they are genuinely dissatisfied with Europe. They do so to extricate themselves from domestic political jams. So in 2013 David Cameron, a moderate pro-European, introduced a referendum as the most expedient domestic political gambit to silence pesky Eurosceptics in his own party.

Yet to justify extended national deliberations over Europe, the UK prime minister needed to stage a negotiation in which he appeared to wring concessions out of other European governments. This proved a challenge. In past decades the EU has moved so far in Britain's direction that there are few principled issues where London suffers outside the European consensus.

Mr Cameron termed the final deal “fundamental, far-reaching change” resulting in a “special status” for Britain. But aside from two modest items — a reduction in non-resident child benefits, which Germany also favoured, and a temporary cut in tax credits — the items he negotiated were symbolic.

This faux negotiation ushered in the referendum. The Remain camp seems likely to prevail since the opposition, business, foreign investors and most educated commentators all back the government. In referendums, moreover, undecided voters tend to favour the status quo — a tendency reinforced by uncertainty about exactly what Britain would do after Brexit. Still, critics are correct that Mr Cameron is playing with fire. Referendums are unpredictable, especially when issues such as migration and terrorism are in the mix.

This uncertainty would be more troubling if the referendum really mattered. Yet Britain looks unlikely to exit Europe even if its citizens voted to do so. Instead, the government would probably do just what EU members — Denmark, France, Ireland and the Netherlands — have always done after such votes. It would negotiate a new agreement, nearly identical to the old one, disguise it in opaque language and ratify it. The public, essentially ignorant about Europe, always goes along.

In contemplating this possibility, leading Eurosceptics have shown themselves to be the craftiest political illusionists of all. Now that Brexit appears within their grasp, they are backing away from it. What they really seek is domestic political power. If Britain votes to leave, the government will fall or, at the very least, the cabinet will be reshuffled. For Eurosceptic backbenchers, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Yet they lack parliamentary and popular majorities to govern alone. They would have to strike a deal, which means moderating anti-European demands — all amid post-referendum economic chaos. Renegotiation inside the EU would be almost inevitable.

Excessively cynical? Hardly. Few Eurosceptics are more prominent (or ambitious) than Boris Johnson, and he has signalled his willingness to compromise. The mayor of London's soundbites remain flamboyant: "The door of the jail [is] open, and people can see the sunlit land beyond." But read the fine print.

When the referendum was announced, Mr Johnson said that voting to leave need not necessarily mean leaving. Britain might renegotiate a better deal inside the EU, followed by a second referendum. So voters need not worry: "If you vote to leave, all your options are good." The prime minister has, for now, dismissed that option, but Mr Johnson's statements continue to leave just enough wriggle room.

A flip-flop? Not at all. Mr Johnson reminds us that he supported Brexit only at the last minute, after Mr Cameron's EU deal failed to include his proposed wording recognising "parliamentary sovereignty" — just the type of frothily symbolic concession on which future renegotiations could be based.

Finally, what if Messrs Cameron and Johnson and other politicians lose control of domestic politics, or if other EU leaders tire of Eurosceptic obstreperousness and toss the Brits out? Even in this worst-case scenario, Britain would not really leave Europe.

Eurosceptics propose that Britain negotiate with 27 frustrated European governments, under tumultuous economic conditions, simply to re-establish its current economic status outside the EU. Britain's bargaining position in such a negotiation would be exceedingly weak because it is much more dependent on Europe for exports and investment than vice versa. The inevitable result, as the Swiss know only too well, is that Europe will dictate which regulations Britain must accept. Worse, Britain will surrender any future democratic control over their making.

The lesson is simple. Europe is real because globalisation means every day more British people rely on the EU to secure and stabilise trade, investment, travel, litigation, national security and political values. So the same politicians who lead a majority of Britons down the path to leave Europe would have to lead them back up again the next day to save their own political skins. Even politicians who have mastered the kabuki arts of mask and illusion must sooner or later face reality.

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