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# Brexit and war rhetoric: an electoral strategy? *Matthew Leggett*

*Key words: Brexit, war, rhetoric, Dunkirk, traitor, surrender, strategy*

## **Introduction:**

The English language is replete with bellicose expressions and references to different battles and wars involving British armed forces, in particular World War Two. This point was highlighted recently by the current occupant of 10 Downing Street, Boris Johnson, who remarked that “*military metaphors are old parliamentary standard practice.*”<sup>1</sup> Many such terms have entered the everyday lexicon of most Eurosceptics and Brexiteers alike. They had already become common currency in anti-European rhetoric since the 1990s, but have reached a greater level of intensity in the last four years since the Brexit referendum, when these groups or individuals discuss or denounce the EU or Brussels. Such emotionally charged words as ‘traitor’, ‘treason’, ‘collusion’, ‘collaboration’, ‘Nazi’ or ‘Gestapo’ alongside terms like ‘the Dunkirk spirit’, take us back to the 1940s and a period of great national pride among many Britons after the country stood fast, resisted and defeated the threat of fascism. For many Brexiteers, Brussels has become the new Berlin and the European Commission the new Reichstag, which were both fought against in the June 2016 referendum and are still demonised in the same way as negotiations over UK/EU relations continue. Using verbatim records of debate from Hansard, references from various books and newspaper articles, as well as an interview with one of the leading protagonists, Dominic Grieve, this chapter will attempt to study the various military forms of language used in the debate over Britain’s place in the European Union and its withdrawal from it. It will culminate with one very heated exchange that took place on the floor of the House of Commons in late September 2019, when the repeated bellicose language of the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and many of his colleagues, was challenged by various members of the opposition parties, and even pro-remain Conservative MPs, in the House. Finally, we will ask the question as to whether, apart from being an appeal to MPs to back the government on its withdrawal deal, this choice of words on the part of the premier was not a deliberate tactic, adopted to win over electoral *support* in the forthcoming general election.

## **The Dunkirk spirit**

Ever since the successful withdrawal of over 300,000 British and Allied troops from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940, thanks to the bravery of a flotilla of small boats, British Parliamentarians have made speeches citing this maritime rescue operation in order to exhort their supporters to rally round and back the government’s efforts in whatever difficult circumstances they faced.. Despite being a humiliating defeat for the British Expeditionary Force from advancing Nazi forces, this event was to take on a near mythical status, as it was seen to exemplify the determined resilience of the British people, the so-called ‘Dunkirk spirit’. In the words of the war premier, Winston Churchill, it was to mark the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany’s invincibility, leading eventually to victory over Hitler’s Third Reich five years later. At the time, Britain was able to proudly proclaim it had stood alone against the mighty Nazi military machine and kept the fight against fascism alive. The day after the successful retreat operation, Churchill made a rallying cry speech to the House of Commons on June 4 praising the successful evacuation of so many thousands of allied soldiers. This speech was to take on near mythical status, as a rousing call to arms transforming Dunkirk and the acts of so many people involved into a symbol of British resilience and bravery during the course of the war and beyond:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpstS9toqyE>

*We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.*<sup>2</sup>

As we shall see later, the final four words of this quotation, especially the word “surrender”, would take on a special significance in pro-Brexit discourse in general and in discussions over Britain’s negotiations to withdraw from the EU in particular. On December 12, 1964, newly appointed Prime Minister Harold Wilson recalled the ‘miracle operation’ of Dunkirk encouraging his colleagues at the Labour Party Conference to adopt the Dunkirk spirit in the context of the massive £800,000 balance of payments deficit it was facing. This reference was guaranteed to resonate with the delegates present as well as among the majority of the UK population who had lived through the Blitz and the famous retreat from the beaches of Northern France. He later acknowledged, however, that he would have done better to stress the long efforts made by the nation to achieve victory after the retreat.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Wilson’s reference is not a unique one, the term is often quoted in the British media, English literature and everyday talk among folk when British courage or resistance are called for; the so called ‘Dunkirk spirit’, which the Oxford dictionary defines as ‘*refusal to surrender or despair in a time of crisis*’, while the Macmillan dictionary explains this term as ‘*an attitude of being very strong in a difficult situation and refusing to accept defeat*’.<sup>4</sup> In an 1990 article on Britain’s position in the EU, British historian Robert Harris used the same example to describe what Britain’s position had always been, and always would be in the face of danger or challenge from abroad, citing the ‘Dunkirk spirit’: “*It [Dunkirk] was and is an affirmation of our insularity... Our future may lie on the Continent. Our hearts are still in the past, in a mythical world of ‘little ships’ delivering gallant Tommies from the clutches of perfidious, cowardly foreigners.*”<sup>5</sup> In the same way, in December 2008, under the headline “*Gordon Brown: We Need the Dunkirk spirit in 2009*”, *The Observer* newspaper attempted to conjure up the same feeling as it ran a story describing what it called the Labour Prime Minister’s “Churchillian” rallying call to the British people. Brown said the public would need to show the same resilience, spirit and character as witnessed in 1940, in the face of the huge challenge posed by the credit crunch of 2008 and the oncoming economic crisis about to strike the country: “*Today, the issues may be different, more complex, more global. And yet the qualities we need to meet them the British people have demonstrated in abundance before.*” He expressed that he was totally confident that the people would summon up the same courageous characteristics shown in the face this economic tsunami “*as another great challenge that was thrown Britain’s way, and that Britain met*”.<sup>6</sup> This obvious call for economic patriotism was clearly made in the hope or even knowledge that such a reference to the spirit of Dunkirk would be bound to stimulate a positive and even emotional reaction among many Britons. As recently as September 2018, Jeremy Hunt, Foreign Secretary, and future candidate for the post of Conservative Party Leader against Boris Johnson, made a similar call, when he gave a stark warning to EU negotiators who he accused of blocking talks and denying the UK the Brexit it wanted, declaring:

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2001, p. 215, reference 10

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, H, 1971, p.53

<sup>4</sup>See <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/the-dunkirk-spirit?q=dunkirk+spirit>, and *the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 765.

<sup>5</sup> “Britain Stands Alone Again, celebrating the myth of Dunkirk”, *The Sunday Times*, 27 May 1990 quoted in O’Toole, 2018, pp. 86-7.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/dec/28/economic-policy-gordon-brown> #maincontent

*The way Britain reacts is not that we crumble or fold but actually you end up invoking the Dunkirk spirit and we fight back... We are one of the great countries of and there comes a point where we say 'we're not prepared to be pushed around, if you are not serious about a deal then we won't either.'*<sup>7</sup>

All of this rhetoric, originally designed to inspire confidence among the British public, at a time when the dark threat of a German invasion of Britain seemed certain to many, has come to take on a new meaning for many hard Brexiteers, as Hunts declaration illustrates. They argue that the 1986 Single European Act as well as various EU treaties such as the Maastricht, Nice or Lisbon treaties have strengthened the powers of a federal Europe that dominates the decisions affecting the everyday lives of the citizens of its 28 member states. Many anti-European MPs, particularly in the Conservative Party, along with the right-wing popular press, have convinced themselves that once again Britain is under threat of invasion, this time from the European Union, or in a more concrete guise, the European Commission led, inevitably, by Germany. They use forms of World War 2 imagery and rhetoric to depict this nightmare of life within the EU. This is perfectly illustrated by an incident in July 1990, in an interview with Nicholas Ridley, Margaret Thatcher's Secretary of State for Trade and Industry with the editor of the *Spectator* magazine, Dominic Lawson, in July 1990, long before the idea of Brexit or the term Brexiteer had even emerged. When asked about Britain joining the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), the prelude to European Monetary Union, Ridley replied unequivocally, giving a nod to his fellow anti-Europeans within Tory party ranks and around the country by evoking the Nazi plan to conquer Europe in World War Two, saying: "*This is all a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe.*"<sup>8</sup> Indeed, according to Lawson, the minister went on to explain that while he was not necessarily opposed to giving up sovereignty, per se, he refused to do so to the Germans, who he crudely dismissed as '*this lot*', concluding with yet another reference to World War 2: "*You might just as well give it up to Adolf Hitler, frankly.*"<sup>9</sup> Though far from being rare in Eurosceptic discourse at the time, this statement by a leading member of Her Majesty's government and close political ally of the Prime Minister, caused great offence to the German government, and was seen as an insult to the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and Margaret Thatcher was forced to call on her close Cabinet ally Ridley to resign. In his biography of Margaret Thatcher, Robin Harris said that it was not Ridley who compared Kohl to Hitler, but rather the *Spectator* cartoonist, Garland, in a cartoon that accompanied the interview in the magazine, but whatever the source may be, the damage was done.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein to Nicolas Ridley's fierce attack on the EU, the leading representative of the Brexit group and current resident of 10 Downing Street, made a disparaging comparison of the European Commission in his biography of his famous predecessor and, most significantly, wartime leader, Winston Churchill. In the book published in 2016, the same year as the Brexit referendum, Boris Johnson, described Brussels as a '*Gestapo-controlled Nazi EU*', a phrase that no doubt went down very well with many of his pro-Brexit readers and sent shivers down the spines of others<sup>11</sup>.

### **Collusion/collaboration**

In wartime, can one imagine an offence worse than actually belonging to a secret police force oppressing the people and inspiring a sense of general terror? Perhaps belonging to the poor downtrodden populace, while actually abetting the occupying security force, could be regarded as such a crime, as insinuated by the headline, "Remainers 'colluded' with French to create Brexit 'surrender' Bill, No. 10 suspects", published in November 2019 by the *Sunday Express*, one of the leading pro-leave newspaper titles in the British popular press. The author of this story cited anonymous 'senior government sources' announcing the opening of a government investigation into alleged links between Conservative and Labour pro-Remain MPs with foreign powers. It

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/09/30/jeremy-hunt-warns-eu-bad-brexit-deal-will-stir-britains-dunkirk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/article/-2680183/Is-EU-just-German-racket-Europe-Nearly-25-years-ago-Tory-minister-told-DOMINIC-LAWSON-lost-job-firestorm-followed-right-along.html>, consulted 28 December 2019. See also <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/from-the-archives-ridley-was-right>, consulted December 30 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Harris. R., 2013, p.310.

<sup>11</sup> MacShane, D. 2016, p. 10

alleged that officials, especially from the French government, had worked hand in hand to draft the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the so called Benn Bill, designed to block a no deal Brexit. Such talk of ‘collusion’, especially with France, calls to mind images of collaboration between the Vichy government of Maréchal Pétain and Hitler between July 1940 and August 1944. This leaves no doubt as to the emotional reaction the *Sunday Express* sought to stir up by publishing this headline.<sup>12</sup>

### **Treason/Traitor/Treachery/Betrayal**

Alongside collaboration, without doubt, another of the most heinous criminal acts that a soldier or civilian can commit or be accused of committing, especially in wartime, is that of an act of treason. A traitor is somebody prepared to endanger the very security of the nation or their fellow citizens whether by colluding with the occupying forces, divulging secrets to the enemy or signing a pact with the latter. Such accusations have been made on so many occasions in their various forms against different MPs and Ministers from the day the referendum result was made public right up to the Parliamentary debates on a withdrawal agreement to be signed between the United Kingdom and Brussels. On March 15 2018, during a Commons debate on European Affairs, Anna Soubry, Conservative MP for Broxstowe and former Minister of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, who later lost the Conservative Party whip and became a leading member of the group of independent Members sitting in the House, spoke out against what she described as:

*an attitude that still exists in our society—led mainly by certain sections of the media—that anyone who has the temerity to speak out about or against the decision that was made in the EU referendum is in some way a “traitor” or a “mutineer”. It is an outrage! We come here to speak freely on behalf of our constituents.<sup>13</sup>*

Like Anna Soubry, along with a group of other Conservative MPs who voted in favour of the European Union (Withdrawal) 2 Act in December 2017, Dominic Grieve, Conservative MP for Beaconsfield and Attorney General from 2010 to 2014, was duly suspended from the Party. Both MPs along with their fellow Conservative ‘rebels’, as they were labelled at the time, subsequently received death threats from angry citizens or constituents. In an interview with the author, Grieve insisted that death threats are a common occurrence in politics and he did not take them seriously himself, yet he was appalled at the use of such threats against women MPs, the number of which had increased during the post-referendum period. He recalled receiving messages suggesting ‘*I should be killed as I was a traitor*’, but insisted he had never received any abuse or threats from Members in the House, and he identified the same source of the venom that he felt lay behind these threats of violence as his colleague Anna Soubry :

*The abuse, in the initial stages, was orchestrated or stirred up by the popular press, particularly the Daily Mail, to a lesser extent by the Daily Telegraph, and that was then reflected in the streams of abusive e-mails from members of the public.<sup>14</sup>*

As the long discussion on the so-called Benn Bill moved on to the question of immigration in January 2019, Sharon Hodgson, Labour MP for Washington and Sunderland West, made a measured yet concerned intervention about what she saw happening across the country. While an outspoken pro-Remainer, she represented a constituency where 62% of voters had backed Brexit

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1184024/Brexit-news-investigation-French-government-European-Union-surrender-act-Boris-Johnson>, consulted September 30 2019

<sup>13</sup> Hansard 15/3/2018 volume 637 column 1074

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Dominic Grieve, January 8 2019

in the 2016 referendum. She felt it important to share with her fellow MPs her worries about the “despicable” harassment and attacks that several women MPs were being subjected to by members of the public. She informed the House that she herself was a victim of such abuse: “*I say this as I have had brought to my attention details of a threat that I have just received, calling me “a traitor who should be hung for treason”*”.<sup>15</sup> These are just a few examples of the numerous interventions during the debate by MPs from different sides of the chamber who described their own personal experiences or those of colleagues who had been accused of treason or treated as a traitor, even to the extent of being sent death threats.

### **Surrender**

Throughout the Brexit debate in the House of Commons, one word, on the face of it quite an innocuous one was transformed into a means to underline this notion of treachery. At the same time, it became a catchword used by Brexiters to denounce any legislative attempts to block any government-backed withdrawal package. By adopting this expression, MPs and Ministers alike could hope to put their message across without actually employing a term that might run the risk of being ruled out of order by the Speaker’s chair in the House. Indeed, this word ‘surrender’ was to take on a new status in exchanges within the House of Commons whenever Britain’s trade and economic relations with the EU were discussed. Over the course of several months, this word was to be coined almost incessantly by several government ministers, even Cabinet ministers, as well as various Conservative MPs, to define legislation introduced in the House aiming to ensure a so-called no-deal Brexit was taken off the negotiating table with the European Commission. Such a deal would mean that the UK would simply walk away from EU membership without any terms of withdrawal being agreed. According to the Oxford dictionary’s definition, the verb to surrender means either ‘*to hand over or relinquish possession of*’ something, or more significantly, ‘*to accept an enemy’s demand for submission*’.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen above, in his famous address to the nation, the newly appointed wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill pledged in the Commons chamber on June 4 1940 that “*we shall never surrender*”.

The fierce tirades and bile-filled wars of words described above were to go on for over three years, before reaching a paroxysm in late September 2019, when a heated debate in the House of Commons over the Benn Act broke out. This was notably the case on September 25 2019, after the Prime Minister stood up in the House of Commons to give an update on the progress of government negotiations with the European Commission. He also wished to comment on the decision taken by the Supreme Court the previous day to rule against the government’s decision to prorogue Parliament and to call for a Queen’s Speech. In particular, he bemoaned the fact that the MPs who had first appealed to the Supreme Court were, in his view, deliberately doing so to delay his Brexit deal. Adopting a Churchillian pose he defiantly declared that “*we will not betray the will of the people who sent us here*.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, throughout the first part of the debate he uttered the term ‘surrender’ a total of 8 times, and was joined in doing so by several backbench Conservative MPs, notably veteran Eurosceptic, Sir Bill Cash, Tory MP for Stone. This frequent use of the word ‘surrender’ provoked an angry intervention from Ian Blackford, Scottish National Party MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber and Leader of the SNP at Westminster, in which he criticized the PM for his constant verbal abuse of Members:

*I hear the Prime Minister talking about a surrender Act. How despicable that, when he refers to Members of this House who are doing their duty to protect our constituents, he uses language such as “surrender”. That language is not suitable for the Prime Minister of any country.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hansard 9/1/2019 volume 664 columns 479-480

<sup>16</sup> *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 3159.

<sup>17</sup> Hansard 25/9/2019 volume 664 column 776

<sup>18</sup> Hansard, 25/9/2019 volume 664, column 781.

Among the several other opposition Members who denounced the PM's constant return of this vocabulary, Rachel Reeve, Labour MP for Leeds West, regretted the “*dangerous language of betrayal and surrender*”,<sup>19</sup> while Justine Greening, the Independent MP for Putney, and former Tory MP herself a direct recipient of similar abuse, condemned the “*dangerous language of betrayal and surrender*”.<sup>20</sup> (Hansard column 793)

These tirades brought the Labour MP for Dewsbury, Paula Shariff to her feet to make an appeal for greater respect on the part of the Prime Minister, whose language she held to be offensive, dangerous and inflammatory. Referring to the murder of her friend and fellow MP, Jo Cox,<sup>21</sup> she called for a direct change of tone, exposing the dangers she and many other pro-Remain MPs faced:

*We stand here, Mr Speaker, under the shield of our departed friend. Many of us in this place are subject to death threats and abuse every single day. Let me tell the Prime Minister that they often quote his words—surrender Act, betrayal, traitor—and I, for one, am sick of it. We must moderate our language, and that has to come from the Prime Minister first, so I should be interested in hearing his opinion. He should be absolutely ashamed of himself.*<sup>22</sup>

Johnson rebuffed Ms Shariff's outburst as ‘humbug’, which brought down the ire of the opposition on him. Despite many other very heartfelt appeals to the Prime Minister to adopt a different, less emotionally charged lexicon, Boris Johnson unapologetically continued to use the term “surrender” on a further five occasions during his time at the dispatch box. He finally sought to put the record straight attempting to justify his insistence on referring to the legislation in this way with the following explanation:

*Mr Speaker, let me just explain why I call it the surrender Act. That is because it would oblige us to stay in the EU for month after month, at a cost of a billion pounds per month. It would take away from this country the ability to decide how long the extension would be, and it would give that power to the EU. It would absolutely undermine our ability to continue to negotiate in Brussels; it takes away the fundamental ability of a country to walk away from the negotiations and I am afraid that is exactly what it does.*<sup>23</sup>

One could claim that the need for a government to be free from any form of restraint in order to present its interests at the negotiating table is indeed a perfectly valid reason for using this term. This point was raised by several loyal Tory Members all through this verbal slanging match. We have seen the case of Sir Bill Cash, but he was far from being alone in applauding the term employed by his leader. Indeed, in what appeared to be a previously prepared, totally loaded question, as is often the case on such occasions, Dr Caroline Johnson, the Conservative Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham spoke out in support of her Party leader's choice of language:

*Whether the Bill is referred to as the Burt-Benn Bill, the humiliation Act, the capitulation Act or the surrender Bill, does my right hon. Friend agree that it still has the same effect of ceding, giving up or yielding control of when we leave the EU to the Europeans, weakening his hand in being able to get a deal in the first place?*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hansard, 25/9/2019 volume 664 column 793.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Labour MP for Bentley and Span and supporter of Remain, Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death by a far right extremist, Thomas Muir on June 16 2016, just one week before the Brexit referendum was due to be held. When later asked his name in his initial court hearing, Muir replied “Death to traitors”.

<sup>22</sup> Hansard, 25/9/2019 volume 664 column 793.

<sup>23</sup> Hansard, 25/9/2019 volume 664 column 794.

<sup>24</sup> Hansard, 25/9/2019 column 799.

Boris Johnson was interviewed live three days later on the BBC flagship news programme, *The Andrew Marr Show*, primarily on the questions of Brexit and the related Commons exchanges of the previous few days. Marr challenged the premier over his insistent use of the word “surrender” to which the latter sought to justify why he continued to utter the term, claiming there was a historical precedent: “*It is entirely legitimate to use such martial, military metaphors. Let me give you an example: martial, military metaphors are old parliamentary standard practice.*”<sup>25</sup> He even quoted the example of one of his predecessors, John Major who at one difficult moment of his leadership spoke of the need to fight when one has one’s back to the wall. Johnson did not leave things there, however, as he again took up the grounds of precedent to defend his choice of words: “*I’ll think you’ll find the speeches of most politicians for centuries have been studded with military metaphors.*”<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the rate at which the term had been used by the head of the government during the previous day’s debate, even after appeals not to do so, given the poisonous atmosphere it was said to create and the fact that ministers seemed totally unapologetic when repeatedly doing so, raises questions about the reasons why they insisted on continuing to use this term, rather than doing anything to assuage the fears of members who believed that this term and others were part of a deliberate rhetorical design to reach a particular objective. During the course of his interview, Johnson said the word a total of 13 times, and when challenged by the BBC presenter, he claimed he had been “*a model of restraint.*”<sup>27</sup> Though acknowledging the validity of his guest’s historical claims, Marr proceeded to remark that the discourse of the premier as well as the popular press had moved on to a darker place, reminiscent of the 1930s, quoting the *Mail on Sunday*’s accusations that supporters of the Benn Act were “*colluding with foreign powers*”<sup>28</sup> The constant referral to a “surrender bill” or “surrender act” on the part of so many ministers and Conservative Members would surely have struck a chord to so many British citizens, harking back to a near mythical moment in the collective memory when Britain stood alone, especially given Churchill’s pledge that the British people would “*never surrender*” in the face of the Nazi aggressor. This imagery, in the mouths of Ministers, would have only served to strengthen a feeling of national pride and determination to oppose the legislation.

### Strategy

As every military leader knows, you cannot fight a battle or a war, without a well thought-out plan or strategy. In fact, many MPs and journalists who backed Remain in 2016 or the Benn Act later, from either side of the political divide, felt that Johnson and his colleagues had ulterior motives and had not adopted the “surrender” term by chance, but rather as part of a strategic electoral move. As seen above, during the Commons debate on the PM’s choice and use of words on September 25 2019, the Labour MP Jess Phillips had requested that Boris Johnson should tone down and reflect on his language in the interest of national safety. The MP for Birmingham Yardley went on to denounce the reason why government members, mainly the Prime Minister insisted on pronouncing such bellicose terminology:

*The use of language yesterday and over the past few weeks, such as ‘surrender Bill’, invoking the war, and talking about betrayal and treachery, has clearly been tested, workshopped and worked up, and is entirely designed to inflame hatred and division. I get it: it works; it is working ... It is not sincere, it is totally planned, it is completely and utterly part of a strategy designed by somebody to harm and cause hatred in our country.*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpstS9toqyE>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Hansard: 26/9/2019 –vol 664, column 893



Kenneth Clarke, former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer and, at the time, Father of the House,<sup>30</sup> voiced his own suspicions regarding the existence of such a strategy. By that time an Independent MP, following his suspension from the Conservative Party over his decision to vote for the legislation in question, Clarke even saw baser electoral motivations behind the head of government's linguistic selection: "*What concerns me is whether there is any sense of a deliberate strategy in all this.*" Outlining his own analysis of this strategy, Clarke argued that the Premier was very keen to hold a general election by the end of October, the deadline for a deal with the EU. Tensions were high in the the House over the Benn Act and the apparent power struggle between the executive and legislative branches of power, already stirred up by the government's earlier advice to the Queen to prorogue Parliament. Many MPs, Clarke among them, felt this advice had been designed purely in order to stifle any debate on a withdrawal in deal before the country went to the polls. This led Clarke to question the government's motivations in speaking and acting as it was:

*Also, I fear that the strategy is to fight it [a general election] on the people versus Parliament platform... Will my honourable friend assure me ... that this not part of some grand discrediting of the usual political institutions in order to fight a populist and nationalist campaign?*<sup>31</sup>

Clarke was the only person to express such suspicions, indeed, just a few days later on September 29 2019, the journalist Hugo Dixon, editor and creator of Infact.org, expressed a very similar view, writing: "*Boris Johnson is whipping up emotions to prepare for an election*"<sup>32</sup> Writing in *the New Statesman*, the weekly news magazine, the political editor Stephen Bush picked up precisely on this subject arguing that, as a savvy politician and former journalist, the Prime Minister was totally aware of "*the importance and power of words*" when addressing his troops in Westminster, as well as the electorate at large:

*Johnson knows full well that when he uses language like "Surrender Bill" it has real-world consequences. Indeed, that's an active part of his political calculation: he thinks saying things like that will help him realign British politics on Leave-Remain lines, and that, thanks to a split opposition, he will be able win a parliamentary majority, perhaps a large one.*<sup>33</sup>

The deputy political editor of *the Guardian*, Rowena Mason, published an article condemning Boris Johnson's "*hardline language and tactics*". In the same way as Stephen Bush, she too saw these as part of a plan "*focused on fighting an election*". She concluded by claiming the Prime Minister was well aware of what he was doing: "*He told his cabinet that the phrase "surrender bill" was hitting home with voters and would form part of any campaign.*"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Father of the House is the title accorded to the male MP who has the longest continuous service in the House of Commons. He has the duty of presiding over the election of the Speaker of the House. Since 2017, the title of Mother of the House has been used when referring to Harriet Harman, the longest continuously serving woman MP.

<sup>31</sup> Hansard: 26/9/2019 –vol 664, column 893

<sup>32</sup> <https://infacts.org/why-eaponising-surrender-and-betrayal-is-so-wrong/>. Infacts.org is a pro-Remain website describes itself as 'a journalistic enterprise making the fact based case against Brexit'.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2019/09/boris-johnson-knows-exactly-what-hes-doing-when-he-talks-about-jo-cox-and>. *The New Statesman* is a weekly political and cultural magazine that describes itself as 'of the left, for the left'.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/26/boris-johnson-refuses-to-apologise-for-language-about-jo-cox>

## Conclusion

Military expressions and terms are commonly voiced in everyday speech in the UK, but the lexicon of political verbal exchange is highly rich in terms of militaristic language employed by Members on both sides, and this has been the case for many centuries. This has been particularly true in the case of the post-Brexit-referendum era, when often bitter and divisive terminology has become almost the norm, be it in terms of the abuse some MPs have endured in the popular press, on social media and even in the House of Commons. Elected representatives have had to put up with charges of treason, their votes and speeches opposing a no-deal or hard Brexit deemed as a means to delay a definitive withdrawal from the European Union, thereby decried as collaborating with the occupying forces of Brussels or Germany or France. Finally, these traitors have been held guilty of committing the cardinal sin of surrendering to this enemy. This all culminated in a series of emotional pleas for moderation amid denials of any wrongdoing that took up at least two days of Parliamentary business, and lasted even longer in the media. Despite making various attempts to explain and justify its choice of wordage, the government constantly insisted on using the controversial term 'surrender' throughout the rest of the debate and on every occasion it was interviewed by the media. This led many politicians and journalists to raise the question of whether, rather than being merely a way to make a point and deliver on its promise to get Brexit done, this was in fact part of a longer-term political ploy to win over pro-Leave voters in the hotly awaited forthcoming general election. As a biographer of Churchill, Johnson knew just how much 'the old lion' and his famous speeches counted for many Britons, especially patriotic English men and women. Therefore, by repeatedly quoting this rallying cry or call to arms, the recently appointed Premier and his pro-Brexit colleagues, were confident of their ability to summon up the support of large sections of everyday Britons from both the right and the left alike. They hoped to tap into the latter's feeling of resentment at being let down or betrayed by Remainers in Parliament and by the EU, who had both done all in their power to prevent Brexit from being delivered over the three and a half years following the referendum. Whether the charge of devising an electoral strategy, or calculation or plan, however one wants to label it, and whether this is true or not, this constant narrative including various military terms proved successful in electoral terms. This supposed strategy led, in part at least, to victory at the polls for Boris Johnson, who led his troops to an 80-seat majority landslide win in the general election held on December 12 2019. Therefore, the decision to adopt and execute a strategy of constantly insisting on the negative aspects of various Remainers' arguments and acts by means of a historically and emotionally loaded lexicon, if it did really exist, can be justified, if it did indeed in some way help to bring about this dramatic win for Johnson and the forces of Brexit, from a purely electoral point of view. However, if this result was in some measure at all due to a strategy based on stirring up anger and threats through repeatedly citing warlike themes, which led to one death and numerous death threats, one is entitled to question the moral dimension of such a strategy.

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