

BRITAIN'S CHOICE

Leaders of 'Brexit' Campaign Backtrack to Limit Expectations

By STEVEN ERLANGER

LONDON — With their giddy celebrations of “independence day” having given way to political and economic turmoil, one thing has become especially clear about the former London mayor Boris Johnson and other leaders of the successful campaign to vote Britain out of the European Union: They had no plan for what comes next.

In the days since Britain voted to leave the bloc, the movement's leaders have often appeared as if they had not expected to win and were not prepared to cope with the consequences. Faced with the scope of the decision, they have been busy walking back promises they made during the campaign and scaling back expectations. They have failed to show a united front or to answer basic questions.

Their faltering performance has added to the sense of political chaos in Britain and, arguably, to the turmoil in the financial markets. And it has undercut their credibility and authority as Mr. Johnson prepares his bid to become prime minister and lead

Faltering and mixed signals heighten the chaos after a vote.

Britain into a new relationship with the Continent.

The stakes are high for Mr. Johnson in particular, as he tries to build an impression as a capable leader amid the chaos that followed the vote in favor of a British exit, or “Brexit.” But the mixed signals coming from him and other proponents of leaving the European Union have left their intentions unclear on such basic issues as when and how they will seek to negotiate a withdrawal, and what kind of new arrangement they want. To the degree that they have signaled a direction, it has often been substantially different from what they promised during the campaign.

On issues from immigration to spending on the National Health Service, the “Leave” coalition has retreated from its more populist and apparently exaggerated claims. Many of those assertions had been promoted by the right-wing U.K. Independence Party, or UKIP, led by Nigel Farage, and benefited the broader Leave campaign, whose most prominent figures included two senior Conservatives, Mr. Johnson and Michael Gove, the justice minister.

In changing their tune, the leaders of the anti-European Union campaign risk undermining whatever trust they had earned from the millions who voted to leave the



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ERIC VIDAL/REUTERS

Little has been clarified by leaders of the “Leave” effort, like Boris Johnson, above in London, and Nigel Farage, far left with Jean-Claude Juncker of the European Commission in Brussels.

may be necessary to begin reeling in unrealistic expectations about the changes the referendum could produce, but it also holds considerable political peril for Mr. Johnson and other Conservative Party leaders of the Leave campaign, especially with populist sentiment spreading and right-wing groups like the U.K. Independence Party eager to build support.

“There is a clear tension between what the voter wanted and what senior euroskeptic leaders want to produce,” said Matthew Goodwin, a professor of politics and international relations at the University of Kent. “If they don't deliver radical reforms on immigration, it would be the equivalent of pouring gasoline on the populist UKIP fire that has been burning since 2010.”

In his regular column in The Daily Telegraph on Monday, Mr. Johnson tried to strike a prime ministerial tone of unity in the wake of the divisive referendum, but he emphasized continuity over change and tried to argue that immigration, clearly the primary motivation for many voters in taking a position against Eu-

rope, was somehow not a major issue.

“It is said that those who voted Leave were mainly driven by anxieties about immigration,” Mr. Johnson wrote. “I do not believe that is so.”

Suggesting that he wants to keep some kind of open flow of people across the border with Europe, Mr. Johnson wrote, “British people will still be able to go and work in the E.U.; to live; to travel; to study; to buy homes and to settle down.”

Not only that, he asserted, “There will continue to be free trade, and access to the single market.”

What he described was a relationship with the European Union like that of Norway, which would allow freedom of movement and labor and would pay money to Brussels in return for access to the single market, but without having a voice in decision-making.

But Mr. Johnson rejected the Norway model during the campaign, and even if negotiations proved to lead to a slightly enhanced Norway, with some sym-

bolic measures to restrict immigration of European Union citizens to Britain, the result would be a betrayal of those who voted Leave. And right now, Norway pays Brussels roughly per capita what Britain currently does as a full member.

“The difficulty for Boris and Gove is that Brexit feels like a column gone wrong, an academic exercise suddenly turned into reality,” Paul Waugh wrote in his blog for The Huffington Post, alluding to the shared backgrounds in journalism of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Gove. “And reality, particularly where the E.U. is concerned, is a messy, complex thing.”

Mr. Johnson is clearly looking to unite the divided Conservative Party behind his own, flamboyant self and to burnish his free-market economic credentials.

But playing down immigration, Mr. Goodwin said, could create more political trouble. “I worry for senior euroskeptic leaders, because there is a misunderstanding of the vote, and that will feed voter dissatisfaction,” he said, driving many of the voters who chose a British exit to turn away from both mainstream parties and move to the populist right.

The referendum was unusual, because it pitted a government on one side, “Remain,” against a loose coalition on the other, made up of Conservatives, some Labour legislators and U.K. Independence Party supporters. The Leave side never had to hammer out an agreement on how to proceed if it won, said Tony Travers, a professor of government at the London School of Economics.

“There was no coherence, because it wasn't a political party fighting for government, but an odd coalition fighting against something, but with no consistent view of what it was fighting for,” he said.

Even on the economy, the Leave side was made of free-market economists who believe in no tariffs at all, those who believe in trade deals and protectionists who want to shield the declining working class against globalization, Professor Travers said.

“And now the government will have to be reformed as if it were representing the Leave side and yet represent both, a one-party government that must reflect the schism in itself,” he said.

In the aftermath of the Leave campaign's victory, the political editor for Sky News, Faisal Islam, asked a Conservative member of Parliament who supported leaving the bloc to see his camp's plan.

The legislator replied, according to Mr. Islam: “There is no plan. The Leave campaign don't have a post-Brexit plan.” Then the legislator added, “Number 10 should have had a plan,” referring to the prime minister's office.

France's Far Right Seizes Opportunity in Anti-Establishment Anger

By ADAM NOSSITER

PARIS — Among the many populist movements in Europe encouraged by Britain's vote to leave the European Union, none was more energized than France's far-right National Front, whose leader, Marine Le Pen, exulted soon after the results were announced that it was “a day of joy.”

For nearly 30 years, the National Front has been vilifying the European Union while striking the same anti-immigration themes that animated the campaign in Britain. Now, with Britain having demonstrated the breadth and depth of opposition to the concentration of powers in Brussels and Europe's open-borders policy, Ms. Le Pen is seizing the opportunity to build support for herself and her party heading into next year's presidential election.

“This gives us additional legitimacy to carry forward this same debate in France,” she told journalists on Friday, calling for a “Frexit” referendum.

The far-right party took particular heart that support for cutting ties with the European Union came from places and voters in Britain that are very similar to the National Front's base of support in France: working people who see themselves as losers from globalization; rural areas; and small and medium-size cities that feel left behind.

With President François Hollande of the governing Socialist Party lagging badly in the polls and the main center-right party wounded by internal problems, Ms. Le Pen is widely expected to do well enough in the initial round of presidential voting next spring to make it to the final round against a candidate from one of the mainstream parties.

Actually winning the presidency remains a more remote

prospect. But the issues raised by the British vote — sovereignty, national identity, immigration and a popular backlash against what is perceived as an out-of-touch elite — provide Ms. Le Pen with a powerful platform.

In an Op-Ed in The New York Times on Tuesday, Ms. Le Pen wrote that the British vote was about one fundamental question: “Do we want an undemocratic authority ruling our lives, or would we rather regain control over our destiny?”

The idea of a referendum in France on membership in the European Union was curtly dismissed by Mr. Hollande in a meeting with Ms. Le Pen at the Élysée Palace on Saturday. The National Front is not backing down, though.

Ms. Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, a rising star in the party, said in a television interview on Monday that the so-called Brexit vote would inaugurate “a Europe where one doesn't give up one's sovereignty as a nation, for the benefit of stateless bureaucrats in Brussels.”

For all the differences between France, a founding member of the bloc and a consistent force in seeking greater unity on the Continent, and Britain, which joined late and rejected membership in initiatives like the common European currency, there are enough similarities in their economies and electorates to give hope to the National Front for a breakthrough.

There are the gleaming stores and corporate headquarters of Paris, and wealth-creating, successful cities like Toulouse and Lyon. But then there is the France of abandoned villages and small towns, from which the last baker and butcher have fled, and the France of medium-size cities whose empty storefronts line main streets — what the newspaper Le Monde on Monday called “Ashfield-sur-Garonne” and “Thurrock-sur-Loire.”

“In France, you've got to recognize the gulf between dynamic metropolises and a rural area that



GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front in France, at the European Parliament in Brussels on Tuesday. She urges a French vote on European Union membership akin to last week's British one.

feels looked down on and abandoned,” Alain Juppé, a former prime minister and likely presidential candidate for the center-right Republicans, said in Le Monde on Monday.

Sixty percent of the population lives in “Peripheral France,” said the French geographer and sociologist Christophe Guilluy calls it, — “those who are no longer useful to the economy, who live in the rural areas and the small towns,” he said in an interview.

“No establishment party represents these areas,” Mr. Guilluy said. “That's why you've got Trump, Brexit and the National Front,” he added, referring to Donald J. Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

Anti-establishment anger is increasingly evident among the working-class left in France, mirroring a phenomenon in Britain in which disaffected Labour Party

voters abandoned their party's traditional pro-European stance to register their displeasure with policies and political leaders they felt had left them behind.

“They've been governing for years against their own program,” said Jean-Marc Sanglier, a printing worker who attended an anti-Hollande demonstration in Paris last week. He was doggedly participating in the season's 10th straight march against a proposed overhaul of the country's labor laws by Mr. Hollande's increasingly market-oriented Socialists — a betrayal in the eyes of Mr. Sanglier and his thousands of fellow marchers.

“Brexit is exactly the same as the National Front; it's a vote based on the same sociology and demographics,” said Mr. Guilluy, whose work has earned him the anger of the French left and much attention in the news media partly

because it stresses working-class cultural anxieties in the face of immigration.

The themes that defined the referendum in Britain have also resonated in France because of the terrorist attacks of the past year and a half and the longstanding problems France has had assimilating Muslim immigrants.

When Mr. Hollande reacted to the British vote in a televised address on Friday, the first priority he cited was “the security and defense of our Continent, to protect our frontiers.”

Nicolas Sarkozy, the former president who is running again as a center-right Republican, called France a “Christian country, in its culture and its morals,” in a much remarked-on speech this month at Saint-André-lez-Lille that called attention to the country's “cultural, moral and even spiritual identity.”

Reporting was contributed by Melissa Eddy and Victor Homola from Berlin, Elisabetta Povoledo from Rome and Benoît Morenne from Paris.