

Toxic MBM still being imported

Importing companies should be made to pay heavily

LAST January, we ran an editorial praising the government ban on the import and sale of meat and bone meal (MBM), the sort of feed the fish and poultry industry uses, because it poses a serious threat to public health. However, as the recent seizure by Chattogram Customs House shows, despite the ban since December 26, 2018, a number of companies have been flouting the rules. We are surprised to see some of the biggest names in the feed industry on the list of importers. MBM was banned back in 2001 by India and a host of other nations followed suit in South and South-East Asia. We would like to thank the authorities for putting in place testing laboratories which were brought into play to test the suspected shipments. Reportedly, the importing companies are working in league with Clearing and Forwarding (C&F) agents to bring in the contraband item using falsified laboratory reports. This incident should act as a wakeup call for all relevant departments that there will be further attempts to bring banned substances in and the only remedy to combat these syndicates is making it very expensive for defaulters to engage in the trade—it requires massive penalties to be introduced for those companies and their respective C&F agents that break the law in importing public health hazard causing agents, like MBM, through customs. Unless such measures are introduced and more importantly, enforced, the lure for fast profits will always be there.

We know that given the size of the fishery and poultry industry, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of MBM are pouring into the country (through mostly illegal channels), which is fuelling, what health practitioners call, a cancer epidemic in the country. The fisheries and livestock ministry need to explore viable alternatives and help introduce those to the market. Public health of millions is at stake here and that cannot be traded off for profits for the industry.

Save the fish and aquatic animals

Deteriorating water quality causing deaths of fish

WE are worried to learn from a news report published in this daily on September 18 that the Hakaluki haor in Moulvibazar has turned into a contaminated wetland with dead fish floating ashore. Reportedly, the deaths might have been caused by ammonia released from rotten weeds, which is replacing the oxygen dissolved in the water. This is affecting the livelihoods of local people, particularly the Boro farmers who incurred huge losses after this year's harvest. During this time of the year, their only source of income comes from fishing in the haor. Sadly, this is not the first time the fish and other aquatic animals in the haor have died from ammonia contamination. After the flash floods of 2017, there was a similar situation in the haor.

Hakaluki haor, which flows over 28,000-hectares of land in four upazilas of Moulvibazar and one upazila of Sylhet, has been declared an Environmentally Critical Area (ECA) under the Bangladesh Environment Protection Act in 1999. This haor needs to be protected at all costs since this is a sanctuary of various species of native fish and aquatic animals. According to the district fisheries department, it is home to 112 species of native fish. If the quality of its water cannot be improved immediately, we may soon witness an environmental disaster in the haor and its adjacent areas.

Therefore, the authorities should investigate the matter and find out the real reasons of water contamination. If the contamination has really been done by ammonia, the pouring of zeolite and timsen into the water could help remove it and bring the temperature of water under control. It is good to know that the district's fisheries departmental has already taken some measures to improve the haor's water quality. But what we think is that they should have taken precautionary measures before the contamination took place, since this is not the first time such contamination happened there. Because of a lack of proper planning of the relevant government agencies in maintaining the environment of the haor, the livelihoods of local people are now at risk.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Our responsibility towards planet Earth

Our physical environment is dependent on the various subsystems of our planet. Despite the wealth of resources that the Earth provides—like air, water, land, vegetation, etc.—its capacity to support the growing number of humans may have its limit.

Human population is now more than 7 billion. According to the United Nation's estimate, it will reach 9 billion by 2050 if the current growth rate continues.

One major concern we have today is food supply. At the same time, human population cannot exceed the environment resources needed to sustain them.

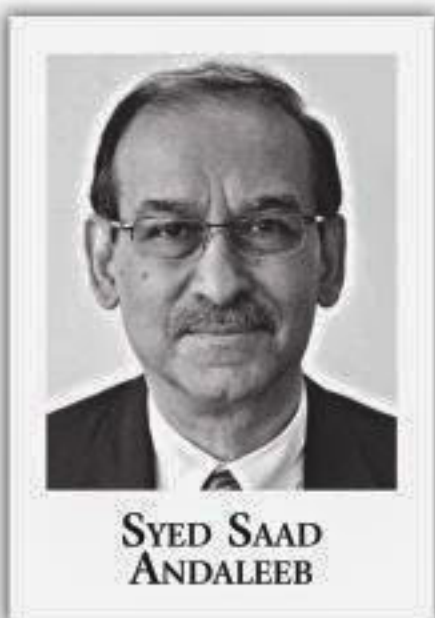
Human should try harder to alter their behaviour to accommodate the limitations of Earth's environment.

It has been said that humans are not passengers on spaceship Earth, but are its crew. This means we have a great responsibility of protecting this planet.

Nusrat Jahan, Jahangirnagar University

BUILDING RESPONSIVE ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Listening to Student Voices



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

built in the right spirit, universities can generate enormous social capital and rich economic dividends.

From new ways of “reaching” the hearts and minds of students to advancing research and innovative programmes, the battle for supremacy in knowledge generation, dissemination and use is now a hard reality. Government and civil society (with parents leading the charge) have also provided new impetus to the universities to be more conscious about enlightening students, empowering them and emancipating them so that they can craft their own lives and pursue their passions.

Considering the universities in Bangladesh, the current ethos is that many of them are unimaginative, lack in vision and vibrancy, and offer old (often very old) and boring programmes and curricula. Faculty and administrators seem to have lost their way on how to lead the universities into the future, thus failing to excite and activate the huge potential inherent in their students.

A few examples, provided by newly hired faculty at one university, will make the point. Asked to reflect on their own experiences as students, they often mentioned the notes of their professors that were prepared for their predecessors a generation ago! Absenteeism, unwillingness to answer questions, maintaining a threatening and taunting demeanour, lecturing rather than engaging minds, encouraging rote memorisation and so on have beleaguered students (and their parents) and squandered the opportunity to build the nation's human capital.

With the rapid growth (in numbers) of universities, both public and private, there has been heavy involvement of people who do not come from academia. Businessmen own most of the private universities with a singular purpose and they recruit bureaucratic, military and political elites because of their purported administrative knowledge, discipline, and right connections. Yet, transformation of the universities has been slow, if at all.

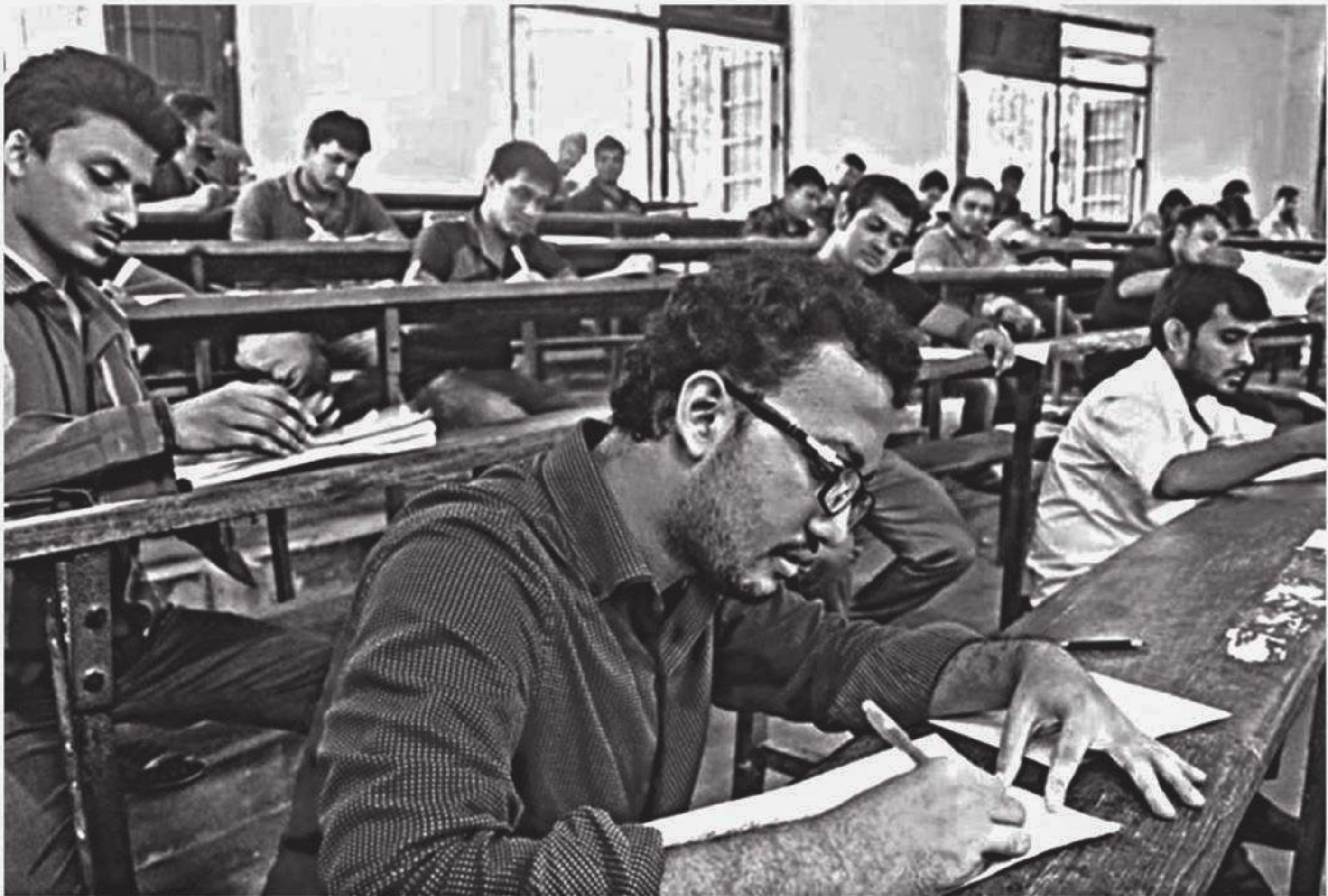
With non-academics running the higher education institutions (HEIs), what students learn, how they learn and how they perform in the real world after graduation has seemingly been ignored. Of serious concern is the refrain from the corporate world, *bhalo chhatro pai na* (we don't get good quality students). The achievements of our universities on the global stage is another indictment of their

efficacy and effectiveness. The academics cannot be absolved from the lacklustre performance of the universities either: I have addressed their failings at length in prior writings (*The Daily Star*: January 16, 2016).

From where, then, will a new burst of ideas come to make Bangladesh's universities become better as knowledge enterprises? While in a leadership position in a recognised university, I often picked the minds of “students” for new ideas. They experience and endure education every day and know a great deal

groups to discuss and suggest two or three changes that they would like to see at the university. In one such session, the four top suggestions were: i) redesign the curriculum based on practical industry applications and remove overlapping courses that add little value; ii) change the scholarship criterion. Don't just use CGPAs; iii) provide Wi-Fi, printers, paper and other IT facilities to facilitate our work; and iv) promote more business competitions and help us prepare to excel in creativity.

The third stage was the open forum



Considering the universities in Bangladesh, the current ethos is that many of them are unimaginative, lack in vision and vibrancy, and offer old (often very old) and boring programmes and curricula.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

about their teachers, evolving technology, exciting programmes elsewhere, and how the administration treats them. Yet, they are allowed little opportunity to weigh in on what is good for them despite the large sums of money they pay for their education.

How might the matter be approached by the leadership (VCs, Pro-VCs, Deans, Department Heads, etc.)? Each semester I invited a group of about 30 students to spend a couple of hours with me in a friendly exchange of ideas.

In an opening statement, I asked them to state the first thing that came to their mind when they thought about the university. They replied with descriptive words such as professional, crowded, provides quality education, boring classes, slow computers, etc. that provided many insights for appropriate intervention.

Next, the students were placed in

where students individually continued to provide additional suggestions worth serious consideration. Here are some examples: i) provide creative assignments, beyond books, which include reasoning (critical thinking); ii) shift to bi-semesters as some course materials take time to learn (suggesting the half-baked learning going on at the universities); iii) establish separate research labs for each department (i.e., sharing of equipment may be efficient but not effective); iv) have teachers administer quick diagnostic tests at the beginning of each semester to assess the quality of students being taught and provide lessons accordingly; v) provide practical forums (e.g., moot courts with teachers having court experience); vi) provide research opportunities with a modicum of funding support (often students

not frivolous. They are very clear in their thinking and have a good sense of what will be beneficial for them. It is important, therefore, to institute mechanisms to listen to their voices to build responsive academic institutions in an era of great change. Students are the *raison d'être*: they must therefore have the right to express their views.

By opening this new channel of ideas, academia can gain substantial insights to attain the right fit or alignment. Listening to students' voices that are reasonable, specific, balanced and sometimes challenging is also a new attitude that must be inculcated and promoted among academic leaders to imbue a spirit of continuous improvement.

Dr Andaleeb is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, a former Vice Chancellor (Bangladesh), and Editor, *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*. Email: jbstudies@gmail.com.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Brexit House of Cards



MARK MALLOCH-BROWN

dragging the United Kingdom over the “no-deal” cliff edge?

The highest court in Scotland has ruled Johnson's prorogation of Parliament to be unlawful, and the House of Commons has forced him to release the gloriously named Operation Yellowhammer document, which contains a highly damaging official assessment of the catastrophic impact of a no-deal Brexit.

The latest divisions within the Conservative Party—including the ouster of 21 MPs who opposed Johnson's approach to Brexit—appear to be of historic consequence. As the UK Supreme Court prepares to adjudicate several cases that have been brought against the Johnson government, it finds itself being drawn into a political role similar to that of its American counterpart. On one level, Britons may be dismayed by this. On another, there will be deep relief that despite the current assault on Britain's uncoded constitution, there are at least still fair-minded judges to stand up for it.

These new points of debate emerged amid scenes of late-night mayhem in the House of Commons, before Parliament was summarily closed on September 9. During those surreal hours, when members of the House of Lords (usually a pretty sedate place) broke a rare filibuster by government loyalists, I ran into my fellow peer Michael Dobbs, the author of *House of Cards*. We wondered what was left for his writing now that facts of political intrigue have so outstripped fiction. The villain protagonist of the story, Prime Minister Francis Urquhart (or US President Frank Underwood in the American TV series), seems like a sober and respectable political operator

compared to many current UK political leaders.

The question now, of course, is whether Johnson has a plan—or at least a compass—for navigating the chaos he helped unleash. A best guess depends on where one sits, and how one is accustomed to thinking about uncertainty. Those rationalists who are in the business of assessing political and financial risk seem to think that Johnson does have a plan. After exhausting his opponents and throwing the country into turmoil, he will make a last-minute lunge back to the

break from the European Union. His key challenge is finding a face-saving way around the so-called Irish backstop, and he does seem willing to contemplate a single Irish market, at least for agricultural goods—as long as the agreed nomenclature avoids acknowledging that for all intents and purposes, it leaves Northern Ireland in the EU single market.

But the thinking among MPs and the chattering classes is different. Here, most see Johnson not as a man with a plan, but as a blundering bull in the Westminster china shop. By closing off his own

opponents have sapped his momentum. His consigliere, Dominic Cummings, has become the story, with the media gleefully casting him as the Rasputin of Johnson's court. Reality is outstripping fiction once again: the real Cummings is proving to be even more demonic than his fictional version, played by Benedict Cumberbatch in Channel Four and HBO's 2019 feature *Brexit: The Uncivil War*.

The financial and policy classes believe in rational decision-making because that is how they operate. But politicians (now more than ever) tend to rely on the powers of emotion and instinct. If Johnson lacks a plan, he is in good company. Labour has tied itself in knots promising to renegotiate a better exit deal, even though its best leaders would then campaign against that very deal (in favor of “Remain”) in the event of another referendum. Reason is not welcome at Westminster.

Still, plan or no plan, the brinkmanship on all sides could facilitate a deal. Like exhausted prize fighters, the warring factions may embrace each other just to stay on their feet. But this would surely lead to a terrible deal. It would have to be cobble together at the October 17 meeting of the European Council, where European leaders are growing increasingly frustrated with the entire process. Moreover, Johnson has already disbanded the civil-service team that led the previous negotiations. Any new agreement will be May's old deal with a few bells and whistles. It will push the real issues down the road rather than ending the Brexit debate. That show has years to run.

With the UK having worked itself into a frenzy, rational decision-making about the future has become all but impossible. Even if the rationalists are right and a new deal emerges, it won't have emerged for rational reasons. For better or (considerably) worse, the Brexit virus still has a deadly hold on the British body politic. A new deal would be a placebo, not a cure.

Mark Malloch-Brown, a member of the House of Lords, is a political adviser and Chairman of Best for Britain, which campaigns for the UK remain in the EU. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)



The latest divisions within the Conservative Party—including the ouster of 21 MPs who opposed Johnson's approach to Brexit—appear to be of historic consequence.

PHOTO: UK PARLIAMENT/JESSICA TAYLOR/HANDOUT/REUTERS

centre, mustering a coalition of relieved Tories and Labourites behind a modified version of former Prime Minister Theresa May's thrice-rejected deal.

In this scenario, Johnson might lose part of his right wing—the European Research Group (ERG)—but he might win over a sufficient number of Labour MPs and Tory rebels. All would be relieved at this point just to avoid a sudden, hard

options for compromise, and by ignoring Parliament's instructions, Johnson is hurtling toward either a no-deal exit or the fall of his government. His one lifeboat—if he can reach it—is a general election, which he would try to frame as a “People versus Parliament” contest.

Johnson himself most likely has no idea how this will end. Since his initial burst of braggadocio, his political