A bull leaps into the Pamplona bullring over the heads of cowering bull runners during the San Fermin festival in northern Spain. The week-long event, a mixture of fiesta, sport and bravado, celebrates the city's co-patron saint. Popularised by Ernest Hemingway, it now draws as many as one million visitors annually.
Unicorns romp through the Brexit debate. We have become accustomed to hearing their calling sounds on our current affairs programmes – instant technology solutions to border checks in Ireland, frictionless commerce with the EU 27 while operating outside the single market, rapidly made free trade deals with the rest of the world, a sovereign immigration policy that both significantly reduces immigrant numbers but keeps Britain’s employers happy – and more.

But the Conservative leadership contest is also frequently populated by what feels like the largest unicorn of them all, best spotted by use of the phrase “unifying the country”. (That normally should mean unifying the UK as opposed to England, but is not always stated, and must grate with millions of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish people.) There are variations on the theme, but the stirring calls for mass togetherness are easily identifiable.

Unifying the population is a virile and seemingly desirable unicorn, embodying a noble enough aspiration, but what on earth does it mean? In current political debate it is self-evidently linked to Brexit. Here are some key soundbites from Team Boris – doubtless crafted by his uber-minder Lynton Crosby. In a Mail on Sunday article on 30 June Johnson wrote: “Now is the time to be resolute, to get on with Brexit and to bring the whole country together.”

The next day, the ever-bubbly Johnson convert Matt Hancock mentioned unity several times on Radio 4’s Today programme, declaring: “[Johnson] is best placed to deliver Brexit and then unite the country… with an optimistic agenda that will bring the country together.”

The idea of unity is lovely and very comforting. Jeremy Hunt knows that too – but this snippet, from his leadership website, takes a rather different tactical approach to the matter. “When we unite we win… We need a leader who will bring our party and our country together – and knows that we can’t win elections by alienating 48 per cent of our country.”

Johnson would not wish to put his quest for unity like this – and indeed Hunt himself, once coshed for his softness on Brexit deadlines, has hardly made it a campaign leitmotif. It is a very tall order to bring together a population of 66 million around anything serious, never mind about something as toxic and atavistic as Brexit. We might concede, even if reluctantly, that unity may be a necessary rhetorical fantasy. You would hardly wish to present yourself to the public as fighting only for the interests of a particular group. “We fight for the working class,” or “liberal internationalists.”
or the “landed gentry”.
But we might at least ask
the candidates – and ourselves
– some penetrating questions
about how they’re going to
to get even vaguely close to
unity nirvana. We have had a
few clues. Johnson wants to
combine public sector pay
rises with lower taxation
(do I spot a frolicking baby
unicorn?). Hunt wants to put
more money into social care
and defence.

There are other, sometimes
more specific, hints. Hunt,
for instance, would bring the
DUP into the Brexit negotiating
team. We all know why: it is
not unreasonable of him to try
to get a parliamentary majority
for whatever his putative Brexit
plan amounts to. But putting
the DUP still further inside the
Conservative tent will rapidly
detach Northern Ireland’s
Catholic population from
your unity ticket – along with
millions more in the UK who
consider the DUP a bastion of
reactionary politics.

Theresa May’s early Brexit
persona (the lengthy “Brexit
means Brexit” phase) did not
talk much about national unity
– though it did talk about the
subtly different idea of the
national interest. She tried
to go it alone – and her late
attempt to get a Brexit deal
with Labour only succeeded in
inadvertently bringing a lot of
Conservatives together to
speed up her downfall. Not
quite the kind of unity she
was seeking.

It is devilishly hard to obtain
even a passable impersonation
of political unity in a raucous
democracy. How do you
measure success? Would it
be through Prime Minister
Johnson’s approval ratings?
(So perhaps anything further
north than 51.9 per cent –
take a familiar figure not at
all at random – would be enough?)
Would Prime Minister Hunt
declare victory for unity if there
were fewer off-stage grumbles
from the armed forces?

Might there be a referendum,
perhaps three years after we
have Brexited, to see whether
we feel happily restored in our
faith in a common enterprise?
We don’t know. The
presenters of the heavyweight
news programmes probably
understand that the “unifying
the country” stuff is virtuous,
semi-compulsory blather. They
don’t have the time to stop
proceedings, and the grammar
of these encounters – at least as
currently understood by both
broadcasters and politicians –
doesn’t allow for the hot air to
be gently coaxed back into the
speaker’s mouth.

The lack of any discernible
national unity about any

Was there ever a
golden era
of national unity?

number of issues is not, of
itself, a problem. We are not
likely all to agree on myriad
things – how to tackle climate
change, the appropriate level
of taxation, how to reform
the police or provide better
social care...

What matters is that most
of us understand the processes
by which decisions are made
and, grudgingly, accept the
outcomes – without resorting
to violence. But maintaining
such a consensus is not easy,
and Brexit is putting a real strain
on our agreement to disagree.

But we could make a start
by asking Messrs Johnson
and Hunt when, outside
war, there was a golden era
of national unity. Macmillan
post-Suez? When Attlee
created the welfare state? Or
under Tony Blair before the
Iraq War? Maybe none of
the above – which does not
mean these were all disastrous
periods either. We just need
a more realistic yardstick
to understand political
achievement and the limits
of what politics can do. We
need a better debate about this
unity thing – but don’t hold
your breath.

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COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

Corbyn’s feuding comrades
Kevin Maguire

Combatants in an
increasingly hostile civil
war within Jeremy Corbyn’s
camp no longer conceal
bitter enmities. One BBC
hack was left open-mouthed
when a chat with Seumas
Milne was interrupted by
a passing Diane Abbott
growing “Don’t believe a
word he says”, the shadow
home secretary character-
assassinating a stunned
director of strategy. The
increasingly fraught tug of
love between rival disciples
over Comrade Corbyn is a
gift to critical Labour MPs.
The revolution’s children are
devouring each other.

Posh philanderer Boris
Johnson’s refusal – or
inability? – to name all his
offspring would see
the bed-hopper
denounced as
reckless and
fetal by snobby
Tony or he lived
on a council
estate rather
than packing
tennis racquets to
spend weekends on the
Chequers country estate.
Eating lip Stephen Pound
was overheard inquiring,
during a Speaker’s House
shindig for single parents,
“How isn’t Boris Johnson
here?” Restaurant-trashing
Buller Boys believe that they
can buy their way out of
responsibility for life.

Iron man Jeremy Corbyn’s
Arnie Schwarzenegger
routine to prove his fitness
to govern isn’t going
unnoticed. The track-suited
septuagenarian was, he said,
hailed on a jog by an Islington
constituent with a shout of
“Fucking hell Jeremy, you’re
supposed to be dead from a
heart attack.” The yes-no-

yes saga over Corbyn going
to this Saturday’s Durham
Miners’ Gala concluded with
the Dear Leader agreeing to
address the northern white
working class masses for
a fourth consecutive year.
Milliband did it once, Blair
and Brown not at all.

Commons Speaker John
Bercow, by the way, privately
consented to speak if asked to
the Durham “Big Meeting”,
but formal invitation came
there none. Brother Bercow
waving at the crowds from
the Royal County Hotel’s
balcony alongside “Red Len”
McCluskey, Corbyn and a
politburo of Tory hate figures
could’ve triggered a wave of
Conservative heart attack by-
elections. Maybe next year?

As little love was
lost between
exiting Brexit
chief negotiator
Olly Robbins
and his former
political master,
David Davis,
as was between
ambassador Kim
Darroch and Donald Trump.
Intimates of Robbins claim
he stood outside a Whitehall
watering hole with a bottle
of champagne after Davis
resigned, yearning to be
papped by a passing snapper.
Sir Humphrey’s anonymity
proved a disappointing cloak
of invisibility.

Should the ballot for PM end
in a tie, a Tory MP suggested
that the casting vote should go
to Richard Ratcliffe, husband
of jailed Nazanin Zaghari-
Ratcliffe. The Foreign
Secretary might agree, unlike
his blundering predecessor.

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