

Events!

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In being asked what he most feared, Tory grandee and Prime Minister (PM) Harold Macmillan is reputed to have stated to whoever asked this question – there is no certainty as to who it was – “Events, my dear boy, events” Macmillan, who was PM between 1957 to 1963 was known as “Supermac” because of his ability to deal with crises, a number of which occurred during his tenure; Profumo scandal, civil servant Vassall being exposed as a spy, and the standoff between the United States as Cuba being notable.

Assuming that he has enjoyed his Christmas holiday in the Bahamas staying in accommodation provided gratis that would, we are told, normally cost £40,000 per week, current PM gets back to work on the main task for this month which is to, as he and every Conservative candidate quoted to the point of tedium, getting Brexit “done”. As all commentators recognise, his victory and, it must be said even a month on, massive surprise majority, the first part of achieving this objective will be relatively straightforward.

Johnson will suffer none of the rebellions by Conservative MPs, including him, that made life so difficult for his predecessor Theresa May. The passage of the WAB (Withdrawal Act Bill) will be passed without a murmur on his side. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that if there was one Conservative MP who opposed this bill, he/she would immediately achieve recognition that no amount of money or marketing can buy.

Any rebel against the WAB would consign themselves to a form of Parliamentary ‘Siberia’ and feel the full force of Johnson’s notorious ability to hold grudges against who cross him. Indeed, with a major reshuffle, including rumours of fewer ministries, scheduled in the aftermath of ensuring that the priority of leaving the European Union is achieved, there will be the usual fevered anticipation as to who is in and, of course, who is out.

PM Johnson has a degree of power within his party that is the May and her predecessors David Cameron and John Major could only have dreamed about. Johnson's situation has resonance with Margaret Thatcher whose ability to exert influence over her MPs was, certainly in her first two terms of office as PM 1979-83 and 1983-87.

Thatcher possessed a steely determination to see through the ideology that she had believed in even before she became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 once Edward Heath whose commitment to the EEC (European Economic Community) had made him a hate figure to the right. She was unassailable and, like Macmillan, dealt with crises, miners strike, Falklands War, terrorist outrages, with assertiveness that earned her the moniker the "Iron Lady".

However, what did for Thatcher were the events over which, ironically, she had control but over which she had developed a pathological fixation and refused to hear counsel otherwise. The prime example was the so called 'poll tax' which, in theory, sounded like a way to make payment of revenue to be used locally more egalitarian (it strikes me that this is an issue that may be revisited by Johnson's government).

Thatcher, like other PMs who have achieved large majorities, appear to suffer from a sense that the mandate they have achieved means they've become infallible. As far as she and, the other fairly recent three-times election winner, Tony Blair, were concerned, there was a degree of what is known as 'control freakery' over detail and compliance by MPs.

What becomes problematical for PMs with large majorities is their ability to pacify restless back benchers with, to all and intents, no hope of career aspirations through ministerial advancement. Unless they are extremely busy with constituency matters or well-paid non-executive jobs, such MPs become bored and have a nasty habit of turning their attention to aspects of the leader they disagree with.

Thatcher, like Blair, had no problem dealing with the opposition but in their third terms spent a great deal of time and their energy dealing with back benchers who were unhappy with stewardship. Thatcher and Blair were replaced by Major and Brown. Major who led the

Conservatives to victory in the 1992 general election but with a much-reduced majority from 102 to 21 experienced internal dissent over the external issue of Europe; in particular, the hated Maastricht treaty he'd pledged the UK to being part of. Brown, who'd inherited the healthy majority Blair had won in 2005 spent the latter part of his period as PM dealing with the chaos engendered by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008.

The GFC was both unanticipated and unprecedented. It created a 'tsunami' of debt that created havoc in all economies and forced governments to respond with a battery of fiscal measure that allowed the Tories to, incorrectly, claim that Labour wrecked the economy. It enabled the Conservatives to form a government in coalition with the support of the Lib Dems. However, growing discontent increased support for those who believed that membership of Europe was somehow to blame for the sense of being forgotten.

Curiously, the most seminal event to affect the UK in recent years, leaving the EU later this month, was what will possibly come to be regarded as the paradox of an unintended consequences of David Cameron's ill-fated decision to hold a referendum in 2016 on continued EU membership. that will, this month, lead to our departure from the EU. Cameron, who'd won an unanticipated majority of 12 seats, thought that he could deal with Eurosceptics within his party by, as had been the case with the Scottish referendum in September 2014, using his public relations skills.

So, over some three and half years on from the referendum and having had two elections and now on the third leader of the Conservative Party, we enter 2020 in a somewhat strange sense of relative calm as far as UK politics are concerned. Apart from the Scottish National Party (SNP) the opposition parties offer no immediate threat regardless of whoever becomes leader of the Labour Party.

Brexit however, regardless of what was stated by the Conservatives during the election, will continue to be the issue of 2020 in so far as there is the not insignificant matter of negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU. Failure to do so will result in a 'no-deal' outcome with all of the attendant potential to undermine industries reliant on a seamless supply-chain.

Manufacturing, particularly the automotive sector, are most at risk of any 'no-deal' outcome. The major manufacturers including Honda, Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover would be negatively affected in such an outcome and, with regularity have made clear their concerns to government. The potential for large multi-national manufacturers in wide range of sectors to simply decant to another EU country cannot be ruled out if there is 'no-deal'.

Johnson's stunning majority in last month's election was based on winning seats from Labour. That the Conservatives won seats in parts of the country that would, under normal election circumstances, i.e. Brexit not being an issue, have voted Labour, means that he is under pressure from MPs representing these constituencies to deal with the sense of dissatisfaction that created the trigger leading to the UK's departure from the EU.

Ameliorating the long-term effects of industrial decline will not be easy and take money; lots and lots of it. Assuming that Sajid Javid is chancellor when the first budget as a non-EU member is presented on 11th March, there is expectation that a phenomenal amount of money, up to £100bn, will be dedicated to as he has stated, "investment in infrastructure over the next few years that will be transformative for every part of our country."

December's election has created a focus on regional inequality that, to be fair, had been recognised by every party but the answers to which have proven extremely complicated. There is also the decision to be taken on the hugely expensive HS2 project that many now believe to be highly questionable as a sensible way to spend, it is now estimated, over £100million.

There is also the difficulty of what sort of jobs will replace jobs that have been lost since Thatcher came to power in 1979 in so called 'traditional' industries in as manufacturing in parts of the country north of London? Moreover, as the *Financial Times* reported on 23rd December, a survey carried out by Make UK and BDO shows that investment in manufacturing in the "midlands and north of England is sharply lower than in the south."

So, the UK economy which is already lopsided in favour of the south and south-east, particularly in its reliance on financial services, is

becoming ever more so in terms of manufacturing. This a dilemma that must be considered by the chancellor in the light of falling revenues caused by a slowing economy caused by the uncertainty of Brexit as well as the impending trade dispute between the US and China.

That there is already believed to be a gap in the budget deficit for last year of £50bn. For a government that has stated it wishes to decrease regional and income inequality through investment and tax cuts, this makes the job all the harder. As is being pointed out, this is the same government that has been in power since 2010 and, with the support of the Lib Dems, instituted austerity measures to reduce debt.

Johnson's administration will be judged in over four years time on his ability to solve apparently intractable economically structural problems that have existed for over a generation. He will be under intense pressure from many of his own MPs whose constituents' livelihoods is dependent on manufacturers remaining in the UK. A 'no-deal' is not going to assist in this. Equally, and with a degree of supreme irony, many of those who lent their votes to the Conservative Party, did so in the belief that Johnson's would take the UK out of the EU regardless of the consequences for jobs and the economy.

And as Margaret Thatcher experienced very early on in her period as PM, events a long way from home and over which you little control can derail assumptions. The targeted assassination of Iranian head of Quds, Qasem Soleimani, last Friday by President Trump could create turbulence in the Middle East that will have a knock on for all economies including the UK's.

Worse, in order to strike the "incredible" trade deal with the US that Trump has claimed is possible, Johnson may find himself beholden to him in supporting any subsequent conflict that occurs. Tony Blair, whose legacy is toxified by his support for America in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, provides a cautionary tale.

Johnson has achieved his goal of becoming PM through promising to deliver Brexit. What Johnson will discover is that any number of unanticipated events has the potential to undermine his ability to ensure that the UK's departure from the EU results in the benefits that were promised during the EU referendum by him as part of the 'leave'

campaign, as well as more recently during the election when the Tories' slogan was "Get Brexit Done".

Though some contend that Brexit offers the UK the opportunity to enjoy its own version of the "roaring 20s", it's salutary to recall that the 1920s were characterised by decadence among the affluent. The wealth of the rich was in stark contrast to poverty caused by rising unemployment that, in the north and in Wales, reached 70%.

Indeed, the task of achieving Brexit successfully would tax even the most diligent PM, let alone one such as Johnson who, unlike Thatcher, does not have a clear ideology nor, it is widely reported, her stamina for immerse himself in the prodigious amount of detail that PM's are expected to be master of.

Hold tight, living through the next few months and years could be, to use the 'ancient' curse that is all-too-frequently quoted mistakenly, "interesting"!

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of [*Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion*](#) (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 978-1694447807)