

Parties and Broken Promises, But What About the Miracle?

Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design, Economic Acceleration & Sustainability (IDEAS) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

In the last couple of weeks in politics, what we've witnessed feels like a rollercoaster of farce. 'Party gate' and questions of whether Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, ate cake at his impromptu birthday party back in 2020, when, as Northern Ireland minister Conor Burns, claimed, he'd been "ambushed by cake" (he subsequently backtracked), has created the sense of confusion and crisis at the heart of government (ITV, 2022).

Ongoing investigations by Sue Gray and the Metropolitan Police have led many to conclude that Johnson's time at PM will be brought to an end by continued stories of what is seen as willful disregard for laws brought in by his government to control the spread of Covid-19. This time last week many thought Johnson was finished.

However, resonant echoing with the words Labour leader Harold Wilson is supposed to have uttered, a week has indeed proved to be a long time in politics. Though Johnson's fate still rests in the hands of Conservative MPs, many of whom, especially those in 'Red Wall' seat, are exasperated at what's been going on, the mood appears to have changed.

Many believe Johnson has managed to buy himself time. Indeed, as he's famously done in the past, he may escape from a situation which looked hopeless a week ago (Woodcock, 2022). As Tim Shipman argues in his Sunday Times article, 'Saving Boris Johnson's bacon: is the PM wriggling free of Party gate?', the "greased pig" may pull off what would probably be his greatest escape yet (2022).

Whatever happens to Boris Johnson as a consequence of the ongoing investigations, that he's acknowledged to be disorganised and to treat rules in a cavalier manner is hardly a surprise. Those who've written about have a profusion of stories of such dating back to his schooldays (Purcell, 2011; Bower, 2020; Osborne, 2021).

Johnson, whose reputation was well known even before becoming an MP, let alone assuming the highest political office in this country, is also regarded as lucky in that he's survived scandals (and sackings) that would have been career-ending for most others. As Shipman and many other political commentators speculate, the notion that Johnson's days as PM were shortly coming to an end has, for the time being at least, receded.

Nonetheless, the scrutiny that the PM is being subject to must surely sap energy in terms of his ability to focus on the major issues which, even in normal times, is significant. That he won the December 2019 general election immediately prior to the worst health pandemic in a century may have counted in his favour, until now.

There's little doubt that the concerns of many of Johnson's MPs is borne of a fear that voters who adhered to restrictions implemented to deal with the pandemic perceive there to be a 'them and us' culture by him and those around him. Moreover, the thumping majority achieved in the 'Get Brexit Done' general election was made possible by the range of claims as to how much better off UK citizens would be once we left the EU.

The reality is that for the vast majority, though no worse off, economic prospects for the foreseeable future are likely to deteriorate. Unfortunately, many in former Labour seats who 'lent' their votes to

the Conservative Party, are going to face a very marked deterioration in their wealth. The economic portents for the next few months are looking decidedly grim.

Brexit has, whatever its advocates may claim, produced a number of problems with supply chains because of the imposition of regulations. Arguments based on increased freedom and ability of companies to import from wherever they wish are all very well but, as those who argued against leaving the EU pointed out, costs of dealing with them are increasing.

As Chapman (2022) points out, the imposition of increased regulation, so-called 'red tape', will be that shoppers in this country face a reduction in choice and, significantly, a rise in the price of many imported goods. The Retail Gazette presents the views of Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium contends that the "trajectory" of consumer prices will continue to be upwards and, worryingly, the rate will increase. As Dickinson explains, "Retailers can no longer absorb all the cost pressures arising from more expensive transportation, labour shortages, and rising commodity and global food prices."

There's also the problem that energy costs will rise dramatically after the ending of the current 'price cap' at the beginning of April. As a consequence, bills for everyone will become considerably more costly. It's believed unit costs for both gas and electricity will go up by at least 50%

Many suggest there's a toxic confluence of factors that will mean energy costs continue to rise. As well as increased demand due to the recommencement of industry across the globe following the pandemic, there's the threat to supplies which that would occur if Russia were to invade Ukraine (Duffy, 2022). Additionally, as the International Energy Agency (IEA) warns, continued underspending by all governments, may exacerbate shortages which will keep the price high (Millard, 2022).

Worryingly, as economic analysts at Rabobank warn, should Russia do as it threatens, wheat production in Ukraine will be seriously affected which, This, they suggest, will cause the wholesale price of wheat grain to double which would inevitably increase the cost of food (Rees, 2022).

It's no wonder many speculate the impending cost of living crisis will become a lot worse. The prevailing rate of inflation, currently 5.4%, may be a good deal higher by the summer. This is going to create some very serious challenges for those whose ability to cope was already at, or beyond, breaking point. Many millions, including two million in Conservative seats, are already in what's known as 'fuel poverty' Halliday and McIntyre (2022).

The need to make decisions on whether to spend money on food or energy, to 'eat or heat', will become acute for such families. Though the situation may improve over the summer as we require less gas to heat homes, the perceived wisdom is that energy costs will not come down before next winter.

Those on mortgages or, indeed, having any form of borrowing, will not be cheered by predictions of some "city experts" that, in order to deal with the threat posed by inflation, interest rates could be by 1.5% by Christmas (Duncan, 2022). Though no bad thing as a way of putting the brakes on house prices – addressed in my soon-to-be-published book – increased mortgage costs may produce even greater momentum to the cost-of-living crisis that's emerging (Elliott, 2022).

The immediate problems facing Johnson concerning parties, even if they prove temporary, are likely to be subsumed by immense economic challenges. The combination of price increases that are almost certain to take place will reduce the standard of living for those whose wages don't keep pace.

Peter Foster of the Financial Times, in a thorough examination of the reasons for lack of productivity in British cities, suggests poor transport and the way accommodation is planned and built undermines efforts to improve the effectiveness of economic output to make it comparable with European cities (2022). 'Levelling Up', touted as the 'miracle' that was going to transform the lives of those who, perceiving themselves to be left behind, will effectively be stymied by the distinct lack of money required, hundreds of billions of pounds, possibly trillions.

That there's a lack of funding to achieve such transformation is causing many, particularly those who gained 'Red Wall' seats, to become increasingly anxious. As Philip Inman, writing in The Observer remarks, the amount of money needed to fix many of the problems caused by austerity implemented under the Cameron-Clegg led coalition, requires vast amounts of money at precisely the point the UK deficit is at a record level due to the pandemic (2022).

As Halliday and McIntyre (2022) describe, there's a litany of promises made by this government that have not been delivered. Critically, promises made in the election manifesto have been broken (ibid). That Johnson has not delivered the miracle he so exuberantly promised at the last general election becomes more obvious by each passing day.

Parties held during lockdown, which Sue Gray reports on (Government, 2022), represented she believes, a "serious failure to observe high standards' at No 10 and 'failures of leadership". Though not a full report due to restrictions imposed by the Metropolitan Police which are carrying out their own investigations, it may become the point at which the beginning of the end of Johnson's period as PM commenced.

Perhaps, in the meantime, we can expect to see a major change in the way this government operates. As a result, things may change for the better for those whose prospects have been blighted by poverty and deprivation.

However, as Phillip Inman argues, this government, whilst claiming to want to make lives of the poorest better, is simultaneously cutting billions in funding to institutions and organisations, notably at local level through local authorities, where its most desperately needed (ibid).

In the chapter written last summer, 'Al promised you a miracle – Life under 'Greased Piglet' Johnson', I explained that history demonstrates there comes a point at which people become exasperated by leaders who appear only to operate solely for their own self-aggrandisement (McCabe, 2021). Given what we discover on a daily basis about the government under Boris Johnson, it would appear we've reached that point.

The trouble is, Boris Johnson shows little willingness to change his ways and will continue to issue proclamations of boosterism and how much better things could be if only he's allowed to get on with the job of running the country. As such, it may be speculated, the rich, especially those connected to the current government, will get richer.

I'll leave it to you to suggest what will happen to the poor.

Boris Johnson would be well advised to heed the words of a Roman emperor and philosopher, Marcus Aurelius (April 121-March 180):

"Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one."

In the meantime, don't hold your breath waiting for any miracles!

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Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenge and Benefits* (ISBN-13 979-8532032347) and companion text, *Green Manufacturing, What this involves and how to achieve success* (ISBN-13 979-8751284619), both recently published by Bite-Sized Books last year. His latest book, *Stop House Prices Rising!* will be published by Bite-Sized Books next month.