

I'm Still Standing

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'I'm Still Standing' is the 1983 single by Elton John based on his experience of surviving the travails and tough times during the early part of his career. As he makes clear in recent interviews, he emerged stronger from these experiences and became a better person.

Given everything that's occurred in his personal and professional life and, especially since he became leader and Prime Minister just over two years ago, Boris Johnson could be forgiven for believing himself to be a survivor. Many seminal commentators had written Johnson off and believed him incapable of occupying the highest UK office of state.

How Boris Johnson has managed to not just 'stay in the game' but, as opposed to many of his contemporaries widely regarded as brighter and more dedicated politicians, has emerged the victor is a difficult question for some. Luck has undoubtedly played a part though, as many have recognised, his schtick of being the lovable buffoon is a front for a much more calculating and ruthless political 'animal' than the general public perceive him to be (i), (ii).

Political leadership is fickle and, certainly as far as the Conservative Party is concerned, utterly dependent on the electability of the person who occupies top position. Losers are jettisoned with little or no sympathy. Any sign the incumbent is a liability being dealt with by senior members of the party with zero sympathy.

At present Johnson's lead appears secure enough for him not to be overly concerned about any immediate threat of him being asked to consider 'his position'. Curiously, foreign policy, most definitely not one of Johnson's strengths, may come to his temporary aid in enhancing his image.

The decision by American President Joe Biden that his country's troops would withdraw from Afghanistan by 31st August has sparked the collapse of the Afghan government and its forces leading to the Taliban being back in control. Sadly, this has caused the scenes at the airport we've seen in recent days.

Johnson may hope he can extract some influence from what seems to be the rapidly-dwindling 'special relationship' between the UK and US in persuading Biden to maintain US sufficient troops to keep Kabul airport open to continue evacuation of those allowed to leave Afghanistan beyond next week's deadline. However, the Taliban's insistence that should this deadline be extended, there'd be "consequences", suggests any arguments for extending the deadline for the US's departure will fall on deaf ears.

Johnson, always the clever political operator, will recognise that he has nothing to lose by appearing to put pressure on Biden who, regardless of the criticism being heaped on him, is merely following through on the agreement made with the Taliban when his predecessor, Donald Trump, was in power. Having seen almost 2,500 of its personnel killed with almost another 1,000 troops from allies, including the UK, which lost 457, die, as well as many thousands more horrifically injured, there's no wish for another drop of American blood to be lost in Afghanistan.

Even the most cursory of the history of engaging in conflict in Afghanistan shows why invasion of this country never ends well. Russia's losses, over 15,000 dead in less than ten years following its invasion on 24th December 1979, and which is believed to have led to a million Afghani deaths, attest to this.

Whatever recent losses suffered by ‘occupying forces’, absolutely tragic as they are, must be balanced against the fact that as many as 240,000 Afghans have died, including thousands of civilians. Lest we forget, engagement in Afghanistan was launched on 7th October 2001 by a coalition of forces led by the US following atrocities committed by Al Qaeda on September 11th when almost 3,000 people were murdered.

Sadly, after so much death and destruction, not to mention the huge amount of money spent by America in attempting to ‘reconstruct’ Afghanistan, almost \$2 trillion – that’s \$2,000,000,000,000 – the somewhat hasty retreat and re-emergence of the Taliban, whose unwillingness in 2001 to hand over the architect of 9/11, leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, led to invasion, makes it all seem to futile.

Many believe the conflict was unnecessary and the Taliban would have eventually succumbed to pressure in handing Bin Laden over (iii).

Johnson will be well aware that whilst the imperative is to evacuate as many of those who should legitimately be evacuated from Afghanistan as possible, the possibility of doing anything without the protection of America is all but impossible. Whatever protestations he may make to Biden of the humanitarian need to continue involvement in the operation known as ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ will largely not be reciprocated by an American public wearied by conflict in a faraway place commenced primarily to avenge the 9/11 attacks.

In commencing the invasion of Afghanistan, intended to apprehend Osama Bin Laden, President George W. Bush stressed that patience would be key to success:

“In the months ahead, our patience will be one of our strengths—patience with the long waits that will result from tighter security; patience and understanding that it will take time to achieve our goals; patience in all the sacrifices that may come.”

Johnson will be acutely aware that the belief that Afghanistan could be rehabilitated from the failed state it had become under the Taliban was followed by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq which has resulted in many more hundreds of thousand deaths in that country. The mayhem of war in Iraq spawned insurrection in Syria and the emergence of ISIS with attendant misery and suffering for millions.

Intervention in the affairs of other countries, regardless of how repugnant the regime, and no matter how great the suffering of its people, eventually proved to be the downfall of the most successful British political leader of modern times, Tony Blair. By so fulsomely backing President Bush, Blair sullied his legacy and undermined any reputation of someone committed to peace.

Johnson will know that Afghanistan is likely to be a temporary story occupying the quiet news month of August. All we can do is hope and that life under ‘Taliban 2’ turns out to be better than last time. The auspices are not, it must be said, encouraging with the likelihood of continual internal conflict.

What matters closer to home is likely to dominate the agenda in months to come.

Perhaps the greatest political threat emerging is the ability to move goods around this country. As we’re discovering to our cost, having a supply of workers to pick crops, process food and, in particular, drive trucks and vans essential for distribution, will mean temporary shortages currently being experienced may become longer-term.

Voters, moved as they may be by suffering of those outside the UK, largely don’t tend to be swayed by such emotion when they vote. As Johnson knows only too well, his election as leader was to

replace Theresa May who'd found herself thwarted by impasse, particularly among Conservative MPs in getting Parliament to agree her withdrawal deal.

Brexit, we always should recall, was advocated as a way to improve the prospects of UK citizens. The UK, supposedly free of EU 'bureaucracy' would be able to achieve lucrative deals with other countries. That, a pretty poor deal with Australia is the only evidence of such a deal, matters not a jot. Indeed, what we are seeing are all the disadvantages so far. The appointment of former England cricketer and now member of the House of Lords, Ian 'Beefy' Botham by Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, describes by Guardian columnist Marina Hyde as "pitilessly bubbly" (iv) has not filled many with unbridled optimism.

The argument that benefits have yet to occur because we are still in a form of transition may start to ring a hollow by Christmas if there are shortages of Turkey and vegetables as well as many other obligatory items such as 'pigs in blankets' (v).

Problems by some breweries in delivering sufficient beer to pubs is already being experienced. And horror of horrors, fast food chain McDonald's has run out of milkshakes in all of its UK restaurants due to supply chain problems caused by a lack of drivers of lorries.

Add in inflation, is likely to be at least four percent by Christmas, and domestic issues start to mount up in a way that will cause concern to strategists in Conservative HQ.

Johnson, who promised so much and has dedicated immense of money to achieve 'levelling up', will surely be aware of the inherent dangers in people feeling worse off than they were promised they'd be following Brexit. There are rumours of a rift between him and his more hawkish Chancellor, Rishi Sunak though these may merely be stories to 'ginger up' the relationship between the two key individuals in government which are historically problematic.

Nonetheless, there remains the issue of the cost to this country of dealing with the pandemic as well as the affordability of spending envisaged when the commitments were made by the Conservatives in their December 2019 election manifesto.

Much has changed since December 2019.

It's still premature to believe the pandemic is over. Many families are left nursing losses in income possible to be made worse by rapidly rising prices in the cost of food, fuel and energy.

These are the so called 'bread and butter' issues that will weigh on people's minds in coming months. The next election, likely to be in 2023, could be held against an economic backdrop much less benign than has been the case in recent months, the lingering economic impact of the pandemic notwithstanding.

We may be starting to experience the full consequences of leaving the EU. As Sarah O'Connor made clear in her article in the Financial Times in July, the 'era of free movement transformed everything from the security and location of work to the prices in shops' (vi) And as she writes on Tuesday, the supply chain issues now being experienced is a sign of a 'broken labour market' (vii).

Realignment of labour markets and rates paid, particularly to those carrying out tasks which used to be undertaken by migrant workers from the EU may eventually resolve the problems but there will be an overall cost that must be collectively paid. Inflation may continue to overshadow economic policy for the next couple of years.

Johnson will know his cheery proclamations that we'll be better off as long everyone keeps 'believing in him' may start to ring hollow.

If Johnson is still able to stand as leader come the next election, and not be replaced by his chancellor man, who's more popular than him among grassroots Conservatives as well as the public, is likely to depend on his ability to deliver on his many promises.

Failure to do so could be expensive for us and end his time as leader of the Conservative Party.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenge and Benefits published by Bite-Sized Books (ISBN-13 979-8532032347) on 5th July. His chapter 'AI Promised You a Miracle – Life Under 'Greased Piglet' Johnson', is included in Populism and the Media, published by Abramis Academic Publishing in June.

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