

## **The Current State of Play of UK Politics – Death, Economic Meltdown, Division and a Few ‘Dead Cats’**

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Casting an eye over recent events is a salutary experience. As always, though there's plenty to analyse, there's little engender optimism.

Next Thursday the country will undergo its first major electoral test since December 2019. Local elections in England, Scotland and Wales, as well as the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, are viewed as a bellwether for the fortunes of the major political parties. In particular, results next week will be scrutinised to judge the ability of Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, to survive in his current position.

As widely anticipated when he became leader of the Conservatives in the summer of 2019, following the resignation of his predecessor, Theresa May, life at Westminster has been something of a rollercoaster. Given his track record and career to that point, Johnson's premiership was inevitably going to be turbulent (see Purnell, 2011; Bower, 2020).

Fears were expressed that Johnson's government, and individuals he selected to be ministers, would be like no other. Others were concerned Johnson would ignore Parliamentary rules and worse, as he'd been sacked twice for engaging in, be willing to lie (Osborne, 2021).

As the past couple of years have demonstrated, life under Johnson has rarely been dull. Johnson, who supporters claimed would develop the gravitas of the highest political office, has largely conformed to the expectations of his many critics. This included his illegal proroguing of Parliament and willingness to lie to the queen (Carrell and Bowcott, 2019).

To be fair to Johnson, he's been confronted by events which would test politicians with far greater inclination to dedicate themselves to the task of being PM. However, as we've also seen, though lacking application, he appears to make up for this by guile, willingness to adapt the rules to suit his agenda and, it seems, enjoys far more luck than he deserves.

Without doubt, no one predicted in December 2019 that the first major task Johnson and his ministers would be face would be a global health crisis.

Questions remain about the initial handling of the crisis caused by the spread of Covid-19 which has resulted in, according to latest government data, almost 175,000 deaths for those who'd tested positive in the previous 28 days. Given the lack of testing in the early days, this figure is considered a gross underestimation. Indeed, data shows that the number of death certificates showing Covid-19 as the cause stands at 191,277.

As to whether we'll ever know the full extent of deaths and whether more could have been done to avert them will depend on the outcome of the public enquiry to be led by Baroness Hallett who's yet to agree the final terms of reference with the PM. It is not expected to begin until next year.

Two years on, though, the narrative is that we've moved on from the pandemic.

Nevertheless, it's sobering to see that the latest data for deaths of those who've died having tested positive for Covid-19 in the UK is 304. There represents a 53.88% increase on this time last week. Granted, data for infections in the UK is falling. However, the most logical explanation is that we're collectively testing much less.

Notably, the worldwide death toll for Covid-19 is 3,022 meaning that the UK contributed ten per cent of all deaths. Significantly, one day last week there were 646 deaths reported which makes one wonder why more publicity is not given to the numbers by government? Daily press conferences are a distant memory though, as we know, the legacy of the pandemic is with us in all sorts of ways, economically, socially and politically.

Depending on how things work out, the most notable political casualty of the pandemic could be Johnson who, of course, succumbed to the virus himself. However, and not for the first time, misfortune elsewhere in Europe has been to his advantage.

Amusingly, the front cover of *Private Eye* number 1571 (15 April – 28<sup>th</sup> April), featured him shaking hands with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on his recent trip to Kyiv. Out of each of their mouths was a quotation bubble stating, “Thank you for coming to my rescue!”

Conflict in Ukraine, caused by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin’s decision to launch an illegal invasion, appears to have rescued Johnson from the opprobrium from within his own party for ‘Partygate’.

Being accused of attending events which contravened laws he’d been responsible for introducing in order to deal with the spread of the virus, and which the overwhelming majority adhered to – the few who didn’t receiving fixed penalty fines – was seen as behaviour not becoming of the office of PM.

Let’s not forget Johnson is reputed to consider himself to be a latter-day Winston Churchill. War, as demonstrated by Churchill, can cement a leader’s reputation for fortitude and instilling a belief among people.

In President Zelenskyy’s case, there’s little argument his international standing has risen phenomenally as a result of his willingness to stand up to Russia’s President Putin. Though seen as a comedian, which he’d been before being elected Ukrainian President, Zelenskyy has resolutely remained in Kiev, despite an offer by the US to be evacuated, and by his leadership has demonstrated “authenticity and immense bravery” (Brookes, 2022).

Nevertheless, regardless of how or when the conflict in Ukraine eventually ends, and assuming he survives, not entirely certain, he will preside over a devastated country. Conflict has led to 5.2 million Ukrainians who’ve become refugees in neighbouring countries as well as another 6.5 million who are believed to be ‘displaced’ (BBC, 2022). The cost of repairing Ukraine’s damaged infrastructure and housing is already estimated to be over \$100 billion (Polityuk, 2022).

Putin’s maniacal actions have already led to tens of thousands of civilian and military deaths including, it’s speculated, 15,000 of his own troops, as many as killed in Afghanistan during the invasion by the USSR, as Russia controlled then (Mitchell, 2022).

Johnson appears to have risen to the challenges posed by Ukraine. As well as visiting Kyiv, he stated willingness to provide weapons needed to enable Ukrainian defence forces to counteract an invasion by its larger neighbour which possesses superiority in both military personnel and weapons at its disposal.

In dealing with the crisis, Johnson, like all other leaders, is well aware of the dangers of being dragged into a conflict potentially fraught with danger. Russia is a country with a fearsome arsenal of nuclear weapons. Recognising this has, until now, regardless of the horrors being inflicted on the

citizens of Ukraine, tempered any temptation by political leaders outside of Ukraine to engage in escalation through direct intervention.

Nonetheless, Johnson's recent dogmatic stance on Russia may be contrasted with the attitude he'd previously shown (Arbuthnott and Calvert, 2022). In this *Times Insight* investigation, Johnson, as well as preceding Conservative PMs, David Cameron and Theresa May, believed Putin could be "contained".

Arbuthnott and Calvert provide details of the way in which successive administrations have, for the sake of business relationships and trade, dealt with Russia's Putin by a combination of soft negotiation and appeasement (*ibid*). Crucially, they point out, when Johnson became Foreign Secretary in 2016, Russia had demonstrated its ability to use draconian methods to silence dissidents internally and externally (including murder).

By 2016 Russia under Putin had also 'annexed' the Crimean Peninsula, been involved in the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 and provided military support to Syria's President Assad, regarded by many as overseeing a brutal regime, which included bombing civilians. There could be little argument that Russia's leader had some very serious questions to answer.

However, after his appointment by Theresa May as Foreign Secretary, Johnson wished to achieve "normalisation" of relations with Russia and, despite Ukraine pleading for weaponry to defend itself against the greater invasion it considered inevitable, he "was a vocal advocate for the policy of sending only non-lethal military equipment to Kyiv" (*ibid*).

It's well known that Johnson has enjoyed a close relationship with Russian-born media mogul Evgeny Lebedev, whose Christmas Parties in London he's regularly attended as well as visiting his villa in Umbria, Italy, a number of times including, on one occasion when, as Foreign Secretary, he slipped away from his security detail (Yorke, Poggrund and Urwin, 2022). Lebedev, it's explained, inherited his wealth from his father, billionaire oligarch Alexander Lebedev who, like Putin, is an ex-KGB officer who's benefitted from his patronage.

Yorke, Poggrund and Urwin make the point that Evgeny Lebedev has publically defended Putin and "raised questions over the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the Kremlin critic poisoned with polonium at a London hotel" (*ibid*). Nonetheless, his relationship with Johnson has paid dividends. In March 2020, having become PM, Johnson recommended him for a peerage which caused concern among those sitting on the Appointments Commission who paused following advice from MI5 (Sabbagh, 2022).

Johnson's links with other Russian oligarchs is subject to speculation (Cusick and Geoghegan, 2022). In this article they point to the number of undocumented visits made by to Chequers, the country residence of all PMs. Citing a source with links to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), *openDemocracy* relates "internal concerns" about Chequers being used by the PM in a way which enables him to conduct business with individuals with links to Russia without sufficient oversight and scrutiny (*ibid*).

So, it may be asked, what does this tell us about the state of political leadership in the UK?

Johnson will never be a Zelenskyy. His reputation is too damaged.

To be fair, whatever we may think of him, he's not a tyrant like Putin though, it must be accepted, many believe him to be as unscrupulous as he considered necessary to maintain power. Willingness

to lie to Parliament concerning attendance at parties in Downing Street, an act many believe he deliberately engaged in, is at the heart of his current predicament (Morris, 2022).

What we know for certain is that the impact of the pandemic and now the most serious conflict in Europe since the second world war has created an economic crisis that is going to cause a cost-of-living crisis for a significant slice of the population. Every major UK charity is concerned that millions will not be able to afford to pay for essentials such as food and utility services.

Even before Ukraine exacerbated the increase in fuel and food prices, according the ONS (Office for National Statistics), 43% of families were finding it increasingly difficult to pay to heat and light their homes in March (Brennan, 2022). Increasing prices for fuel, food, clothes will make matters worse, as will a raise in interest rates that's speculated (Hill, 2022).

Continued conflict between Ukraine and Russia will ensure prices continue to spiral. Indeed, Putin's decision to cut gas off to Poland and Bulgaria on Wednesday increased the wholesale price by 20% (Depmsey and Hume, 2022). Alarming, the rhetoric from Putin is of escalation in conflict.

It's against this background that Johnson leads his party going into next week's elections.

Many will recall that getting Brexit done was going to improve their prospects. However, as a study by the London School of Economics shows, the UK's departure from the EU has caused food prices to rise by 6% (Waugh, 2022).

Little wonder many Conservative candidates campaigning for the local elections do not include any reference to the leader of their party and large losses are being predicted (Waterson, 2022). It's perhaps not surprising that, once again, Northern Ireland is being used as a distraction. Like the proposal to reduce childcare costs as well as reducing the frequency of MOTs, this may be seen as using the tactic of 'dead cats' to convince voters they will be better off with a government that came to power promising so much (BBC, 2022a).

As Behr neatly puts it, rumours Johnson is considering a plan to override the Northern Ireland protocol, negotiated and agreed between his government and the EU as a way of maintaining peace through adherence of the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, "is a tired repeat of the dishonesty that got him elected" (2022).

All but diehard supporters of Johnson's government passionately contend that using Northern Ireland in this way is cynical in the extreme. It risks increasing division in a part of the UK which suffered so much during its own conflict.

Sadly, division across the UK has increased since Johnson became PM. All that appears to count is his personal egotistical agenda and a desire to be close to those who can offer funding and access to incredible wealth.

This is surely not what those considered to be 'left behind' believed was going to be the outcome of voting for the Conservative government almost two and a half years ago?

The country deserves much, much better than the current holder of the office of PM.

It's useful to conclude by quoting the last paragraph of Behr's article (*ibid*) which, so accurately encapsulates how far we've come (in reality moved backwards) since December 2019:

"The pledge to Get Brexit Done had such breadth of appeal because it raised hope of ending the toxic, self-involved national drama over an issue that most people had not considered all that important before a choice was forced on them in a referendum. Only a fanatical minority misses the

fight enough to restart it. And today's Johnson has lost the knack that his former self had for turning crisis into carnival. His levity no longer gets him leniency from an audience that has heard just a few too many lies. Still, there would be a certain tidy symmetry if his downfall included a Brexit bill that offered false resolution to a crisis without end – his last great dishonesty in office being a mirror of the first.”

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