

Should 'Big Dog' Be Looking for a 'New Challenge'?

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So, now we know, a large proportion of Boris Johnson's parliamentary party, his MP's, 148 out of 359, 41%, by voting in the way they did on Monday evening, have demonstrated their lack of confidence in him as leader of the Conservative Party.

As many political commentators point out, though Johnson 'won', and under current party rules, cannot be subject to another confidence vote for twelve months, it's hardly a ringing endorsement for of a leader considered by his supporters to still be an electoral asset.

So much has been written about Boris Johnson, particularly his notorious disrespect of rules and willingness to depart from truth, which have resulted in him being sacked twice (Purnell, 2011; Purnell, 2012; Osborne 2021), that it's hardly surprising he's been subjected to a vote of confidence.

Many believed that when Johnson became leader of the Conservative Party by, effectively, deposing his predecessor, Theresa May, who, when she'd become leader in 2016, appointed him as Foreign Secretary, his premiership would be characterised by chaos and a loss of status.

One warning, made in an article in The Guardian came from Sir Max Hastings who is an eminent journalist, seminal historian and, significantly, his former boss when he edited the Telegraph (2019).

Hasting's entreaty to Conservative MPs and members able to vote on its next leader to replace May, is memorable for being as excoriating as it was prescient. Three years on, it's worth picking out some of the more salient parts:

"There is room for debate about whether he is a scoundrel or mere rogue, but not much about his moral bankruptcy, rooted in a contempt for truth.

"...he is unfit for national office, because it seems he cares for no interest save his own fame and gratification.

"...his premiership will almost certainly reveal a contempt for rules, precedent, order and stability.

“Dignity still matters in public office, and Johnson will never have it. Yet his graver vice is cowardice, reflected in a willingness to tell any audience, whatever he thinks most likely to please, heedless of the inevitability of its contradiction an hour later.

“He has long been considered a bully, prone to making cheap threats.

“... in my own files I have handwritten notes from our possible next prime minister, threatening dire consequences in print if I continued to criticise him.”

“Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade.

“... the Johnson premiership could survive for three or four years, shambling from one embarrassment and debacle to another...

“... his elevation will signal Britain’s abandonment of any claim to be a serious country”

Though Johnson’s supporters argued that attaining the political post he’d spent most of his adult life trying to achieve, and believed to be his right, a thesis advanced in Simon Kuper’s excellent book, *Chums: How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK* (2022), he’d change his behaviour and display leadership qualities allowing him to be compared to his hero, wartime leader Winston Churchill, reality has proved somewhat different.

Johnson, it seems, has found that his old ways have been hard to shake off. His sense of entitlement and unwillingness to be bound by the social rules the rest of us are expected to abide. It is this attitude which has contributed to him being subject to the vote of confidence expected for many months since allegations of breaking lockdown rules, laws his own government introduced, became known (Crerar, 2021).

Johnson’s cavalier approach to life and relationships was developed during his time at Eton where he was a scholarship student. In a letter to his father Stanley in April 1982, made public three years ago, Johnson’s housemaster, Martin Hammond, wrote that he demonstrated “gross failure of responsibility” and considered himself to be an exception who was “free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else” (Rahim, 2019).

Significantly, Hammond suggests that Johnson could, by more fully demonstrating commitment to studies and adherence of rules, restore his reputation. However, in a subsequent report in July of 1982, Rahim reports that Hammond expresses disappointment that there’s been little improvement

and Johnson remains “idle” and an individual with a tendency to assume “success and honours will drop into his lap.”

Forty years on, it may be asked, what’s changed?

Following Monday’s vote of confidence, entirely predictably, Johnson and his supporters, particularly members of his cabinet, proclaimed his victory to be the end of speculation about his leadership and that the government could now concentrate on dealing with issues that are important to voters.

Such issues would, of course, include the rapidly rising cost of living caused by a spike in essential commodities such as food and clothing and the eye-watering increases in gas, electricity and fuel.

Inflation caused by rising prices, unless there’s a commensurate rise in wages, make us poorer. Given current inflation, measured by CPI (Consumer Price Index) is already at 9% and is likely to rise, millions, means those whose income is not keeping pace, will be feeling the pinch. Unfortunately, the poorest, whose financial resources are either extremely limited or, more probably, non-existent, suffer most.

Many of those who voted Conservative in December 2019, did so on the basis of the promises contained in the party’s manifesto that by ‘getting Brexit done, something Theresa May had signally failed to achieve – caused by rebels in her own party including, notably, Johnson – their prospects would improve.

Any chances to implement ‘levelling up’, an explicit promise to produce greater equality, a ‘Holy Grail’ that’s eluded every post-war government, were delayed by a once-in-a-century pandemic which, two years ago caused large swathes of the economy to be temporarily closed.

‘Lockdown’ a word practically unheard of in this country, let alone implemented, before the arrival of Covid, necessitated billions to be spent by the government to maintain incomes of those required to remain at home, as well as a plethora of other measures to support businesses. The costs of these measures have resulted in a level of public debt that is, according to the ONS (Office for National Statistics) in February, £2.3 trillion, 94.7% of the UK’s GDP (gross domestic product).

Whilst a million is inconceivable to most people, a thousand, thousand million pounds (£1,000,000,000,000) is meaningless.

However, what many resent is the fact that despite the promises made at the last election of being better off, because of a combination of ‘fiscal drag’ (tax allowances not rising), increases in national

insurance, ostensibly to fix the NHS (National Health Service), and inflation, this is currently not the case.

For the majority, quite the opposite.

Moreover, what people increasingly witness is a PM who appears to believe he can not only 'live it up' at public expense and who did not comply with the lockdown laws the overwhelming majority of citizens dutifully observed for collective good.

This is at the crux of 'Big Dog' Johnson's current problems.

As observed by all many who've worked with him, his strategy is to promise whatever he believes will produce short-term support and, more or less, hope for the best.

Unfortunately, as Johnson is discovering, making rash promises to the north (levelling up), is costly and, by the time of the next general election, even if the humungous sums required were available – they aren't – won't produce the benefit promised by leaving the EU. As a Commons public accounts committee report concludes, the way that £1.7 billion of funding initiatives would be allocated was decided once the bids had already been selected (Rojas, 2022).

Damningly, this report concludes, the money being used will represent to "little more than a slogan" intended to suit the government narrative. Worse, it seems, the allocation of funds appears to be based on what's referred to as 'pork barrel' politics in which money is dedicated entirely to suit the political agenda of those in power.

We're likely to see the Wakefield by-election, taking place on 23rd June, demonstrate how vulnerable 'red wall' seats are which is causing incumbent MPs to experience increasing levels of anxiety.

Equally, many so called 'blue wall' seats, those which would traditionally vote Conservative, are also in danger of swinging to the LibDem Party, something that's already occurred in recent by-elections in the south, and predicted to happen in the Tiverton and Honiton by-election also taking place on 23rd June.

Add in the fact that both of these by-elections were cased by sexual scandal involving the sitting MPs, and there's a dangerous cocktail of influences which caused four in ten Conservative MPs to express no confidence in their leader who was seen as the party's greatest election asset.

Johnson, who traditionally reaches for what he sees as an easy solution finds he's facing concerted opposition on multiple fronts and that he cannot, even if he had the resources, pacify all of the disparate factions within his party.

As the Telegraph's Tony Driver reports, there are "six rebel tribes" of Conservative MPs whose grievances may be regarded as contrary to one another (2022). These factions, which include 'Traditionalists', 'One Nationers', 'The 2019ers', 'The Overlooked', 'The Morally Outraged' and 'The Scots' is a broad church encompassing those who supported leaving the EU as well as those who wanted the UK to remain.

What's likely in the short-term is that Johnson will attempt to rejuvenate his leadership credentials and credibility by a series of eye-catching policy announcements (Tapsfield and Robinson, 2022). This, it's reported will include extending right-to-buy social housing, pumping money into alleviating the cost-of-living crisis.

There's talk of the Johnson government effectively ripping up the Northern Ireland Protocol, an international treaty he agreed to with the EU, as a way of throwing 'red meat' to his Brexiter MPs (Payne, 2022). In this report, a leaked document shows that a senior legal adviser has warned that this engaging in unilateral action, which would breach international law, could be "credibly" argued to be the only alternative available.

As reported, by Merrick (2022), Sir James Eadie, the government's independent barrister on national legal issues, has not been consulted on the legal ramifications of unilateral action which, as Johnson will be well aware, will potentially result in trade war. Merrick also reports that a "former cabinet minister" claimed it was "unprecedented" for the First Treasury Counsel not to be consulted.

It's also rumoured there'll be a reshuffle to 'freshen up' his team and, it's suggested, purposely used to punish those judged to be either seditious or not sufficiently supportive (Grylls, Scott and Zeffman, 2022). Culture Secretary, Nadine Dorries, regarded as one of Johnson's chief cheerleaders, is seen as a 'loose cannon' due to her Twitter attack on former health secretary Jeremy Hunt for presiding over "inadequate" preparations for a pandemic (Woodcock,2022).

Supporters of Johnson would do well to consult the BBC report 'Has Boris Johnson met his pledges?' (BBC, 2022) which analyses the many promises made, many of which have been broken. As Johnson's critics passionately stressed when he became PM, this would be the nature of his government.

The next few weeks, especially if the by-elections on 23rd June go as badly for the Tories as expected, are going to be instrumental in determining the future of 'Big Dog's' ability to hold on to the top job.

It's speculated that if required, the 18 members of the 1922 Committee which determines Conservative Party Rules may alter the rule requiring twelve months to elapse before another vote of confidence on his leadership can take place.

If this were to happen, Johnson, irrespective of his infamous powers of survival that have likened him to the 1960s Gerry Anderson puppet Captain Scarlet who was indestructible', may find he's reached the limit of the levels of tolerance of a majority of his MPs. As a consequence, Johnson will be forced to resign.

As such, his "massive agenda" for change would be thwarted and responsibility passed on to a successor.

At this point 'Big Dog' Johnson will be forced to seek out a new challenge though, it must be said, it's hard to imagine what that might entail.

Those who believe he engineered Theresa May's downfall may see this as just retribution for Johnson. Certainly, Max Hastings in his trenchant criticism of the current PM stated that the only people who believed him to be "a nice guy are those who do not know him" (ibid).

Indeed, as Hastings concluded in his warning almost exactly three years ago claimed, "I have a hunch that Johnson will come to regret securing the prize for which he has struggled so long, because the experience of the premiership will lay bare his absolute unfitness for it."

There are undoubtedly many within the Conservative Party who regret not having heeded the advice from those such as Hastings as to what life 'greased piglet' Johnson would really be like (McCabe, 2021).

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