

Can We Ever Move On From Johnson's Toxic Legacy?

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So, it seems, we've seen the end of the political career of Boris Johnson.

Undoubtedly, given the nature of his character, there's likely to be much more written about him and, in particular, any pronouncements he makes.

However, there's a very definite sense that whilst it might be unwise to believe he will never return to 'frontline' politics, we're experiencing the end of his time as an MP during which he will be forever remembered for skulduggery and 'colourful' behaviour and actions.

Last night's vote in Parliament when MPs voted on the Privileges Committee report into whether he lied about parties in Downing Street during lockdown was pretty emphatic. 354 MPs voted to accept it and just seven against though 225 Conservatives were recorded as abstaining or did not turn up.

Whether this really is the end of Boris Johnson, who celebrated his 59th birthday yesterday, will remain unanswered for the foreseeable future and any return to frontline politics seems highly unlikely until, at least, after the next general election.

One possibility, finding a 'chicken run' seat with a much healthier majority than his former seat, such as standing in former culture secretary Nadine Dorries' who also announced her resignation on Friday, would appear to be blocked by No 10 who, regardless of the noise being generated by what's gone on over the last week or so, seem glad to be rid of him (Crerar and Stacey, 2023).

There's a growing belief that Johnson's brand and popularity as a 'Heineken' politician who can reach parts of the electorate others can't and proven vote winner is in decline. Significantly, as Crerar and Stacey point out, polling by YouGov shows little appetite for a Johnson to return to parliament with only 25% thinking this should happen (*ibid*). Indeed, and contrary to claims among his decreasing band of loyal cheerleaders, YouGov polling shows a "majority of Britons (56%)" as being against any rehabilitation which allows Johnson to return to Westminster as an MP.

Sam Coates, Sky News' deputy political editor believes that any return will be extremely difficult as his decision to resign is "less about taking a public stand" borne of his appreciation that there's dwindling support for him amongst his own MPs who no longer view rebelling and "causing trouble [as] fun" (2023). Moreover, Coates believes that Johnson's resignation letter, rather than being a "declaration of war against his enemies," should instead be seen as the "rage-fuelled" recognition of a man who knows his political career has come to an end.

When asked what I thought would happen to Johnson who'd just resigned as Prime Minister (PM) last July, I compared him to Captain Scarlet, the late 1960s 'Supermarionation' fictional character created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson.

Set a hundred years in the future, in 2068, Captain Scarlet, because of a weapon used by the Mysterons from Mars known as 'retrometabolism', was able to return to life if killed.

Captain Scarlet was, as the memorable theme tune went, an 'indestructible man'.

Though very different in character to Captain Scarlet, a hero selflessly fighting to save humanity from the evil Mysterons, Johnson appeared to be politically indestructible.

No matter how serious the allegations thrown at him, Johnson was impervious to either shame or the imposition of sanctions.

Indeed, like other notable political leaders who manipulate argument and twist facts in their favour, when faced with suggestions of wrongdoing, Johnson claimed this was an attempt by unseen enemies to silence him.

The Privileges Committee report into Johnson's actions during 'Partygate' and subsequent lying to Parliament underlines the magnitude of his errant behaviour.

Published last Thursday it concluded he deliberately misled the House of Commons and committed a serious contempt, impugned the Committee and was "complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee" is as devastating as could have been expected.

In stating so categorically Johnson lied to Parliament about his role in 'Partygate', the members of the Privileges Committee demonstrated their belief in the importance of speaking the truth in Westminster and, of course, the sacred principles of the democratic process.

Johnson, who, having seen sight of the report and resigned a week ago last Friday published a resignation that was positively dripping with anger and opprobrium for those he believes to have been instrumental in his downfall.

Peter Walker (2023), deputy political editor of the Guardian neatly dissects the contents of Johnson's letter and suggests it contains "plenty of barely hidden subtext" of his what many consider to be contempt for those who have judged him to have lied.

However, the question that may be asked is how Johnson, who has a long pedigree for wilfully disobeying rules, was tolerated for so long?

Even going back to his time at Eton as a teenager, the former PM was noted as an individual with barely hidden contempt for obligations which bind the rest of us.

It begs the question of how he was even allowed to stand for the Conservative Party, let alone become the most important figure in this country.

A vast amount has been written about Johnson's life, career and memorable ambitions.

Last year I wrote a chapter, 'What's in a name? How Alexander de Pfeffel became Boris through the media and with the media' in which there was examination of his erratic upbringing, indulgence and development of celebrity status through his selective use of facts as a journalist which allowed him to become an MP and, ultimately, PM (McCabe, 2022).

Even before entering Parliament Johnson was well known as a journalist.

Initially employed at the *Times*, he was sacked by editor Charles Wilson for making and attributing a quote to his godfather, historian Colin Lucas. This was followed by him being given a job by editor of the *Telegraph*, Max Hastings, who he'd met while a student at Oxford University.

It's notable that though many raised concerns as to Johnson's suitability to become Prime Minister in the summer of 2019, having undermined the PM Theresa May because of her deal to allow the UK to leave the EU in as benign a way to business as possible, his former boss Hastings in a *Guardian* opinion piece, was especially trenchant (2019).

Those who claimed that Johnson was popular and deserved a chance to prove himself were warned by Hastings that he was someone who "cares for nothing but his own fame and gratification" and warned with unnerving prescience a Johnson premiership might "survive for three or four years,

shambling from one embarrassment and debacle to another, of which Brexit may prove the least” (*ibid*).

Whatever feelings Hastings may have eventually developed towards the young journalist he employed, he will surely have been aware of Johnson’s propensity to write reports that were without any factual basis and explicitly intended to play to the base instincts of the paper’s readership.

In Hastings’ excoriating critique he may also have recalled the scandal which engulfed Johnson in June 1995. This involved a telephone recording involving him in 1990 when talking to his friend Darius Guppy who was being investigated for fraud by Stuart Collier then working for the *News of the World*.

Johnson, having been asked by Guppy to use his journalistic network to supply Collier’s private so he could be given a warning by, receiving “a couple of black eyes and a cracked rib or something like that”, agreed to the request.

Though no such attack ever took place and Johnson claimed he never supplied the address to Guppy, who was eventually convicted, Hastings reprimanded him.

As a critic of what was regarded as the expansionist vision of the European Union and, following the Maastricht Treaty signed by PM John Major in 1992, Johnson happily stoked the fires of Euroscepticism then growing among Conservative MPs.

Sonia Purnell, Johnson’s deputy whilst he worked in Brussels for the *Telegraph*, a city he knew well having attended the European School when his father worked for the European Commission, wrote a hugely informative and entertaining biography of the man who’d eventually become PM and makes clear her belief he’s a ruthless opportunist (2011).

After returning from Brussels, to become assistant editor and chief political columnist on the *Telegraph*, Johnson was allowed to present opinions which, it must be said, contained outright bigotry and racism. These articles were to come to haunt him during his time a Mayor for London, when he presented himself as being Liberal.

Not content with only writing for the *Telegraph*, Johnson commenced a column for *The Spectator* which he’d go on to edit between 1999 and 2005.

As Sabbagh and Perraudin (2019) contend, it was while at the right-wing *Spectator* that Johnson developed a reputation as a journalist willing to push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable.

Developing support among right wingers within the Conservative Party, combined with a burgeoning media profile made Johnson a household name and proved vital in him becoming an MP in 2001, leaving Parliament to become Mayor for London for two terms between 2008 (when he beat Ken Livingstone) and 2016 (though he’d returned to Parliament in the 2015 general election).

It should not be forgotten that in November 2004, Johnson was sacked by then Conservative leader Michael Howard as vice-chairman of the party and shadow arts minister. This was due to his exposure in having had an extramarital affair with *Spectator* columnist Petronella Wyatt since 2000 which resulted in two terminated pregnancies.

Having denied the veracity of the story, and been found to have lied, Johnson was asked to resign but refused.

Truth, as Hastings wrote in 2019, was something Johnson would not recognise, “whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade” (*ibid*).

Arguably, because his many misdemeanours had proved so unproblematic until re-entering Parliament in 2015, Johnson was emboldened.

Having taken a ‘sabbatical’ to become London Mayor, Johnson recognised the referendum to be held on continued membership of the EU in June 2016 as an opportunity to set himself apart.

The rest, of course, is history.

Johnson is credited with having influenced the outcome of the referendum by convincing sufficient numbers of people to vote to leave the EU. As such, he deliberately pitted himself against the official government line under then PM David Cameron of ‘remain’.

When Theresa May became PM she appointed him as foreign secretary in the belief that he’s be easier to control as a minister. This lasted only until 2018 when Johnson resigned in protest against her ‘Chequers Agreement’.

Being outside May’s cabinet and, as a consequence, outside the orbit of collective responsibility, allowed Johnson to be a ‘lightening rod’ of Conservative Eurosceptic malcontent.

Being a Brexiter allowed Johnson a supposed ‘fig leaf’ of decency as a man of principle and in possession of ideology to implement policies to make people’s lives better.

That on becoming leader he negotiated an ‘oven ready’ deal which was, at best, half-baked and merely a rehash of what May had already agreed with the EU, mattered not.

That Johnson, having lied to members of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) about where a border would be for goods crossing the Irish Sea was apparently acceptable to many.

That he was involved in illegally proroguing Parliament, as well as sending Jacob Rees Mogg to lie to the Queen about doing this, should have been a warning of the nature of ‘Boris the clown’ who so delighted in playing the lovable buffoon.

Equally, in expelling a number of his own MPs considered insufficiently supportive of his stance on negotiating with the EU, some of whom were longstanding and extremely influential, demonstrated the way in which Johnson intended to take the Conservative Party.

All of the above created severe concern for the state of British democracy among everyone apart from Johnson’s legion of fans, many of whom are still prepared to defend him even in the aftermath of publication of the Privileges Committee report.

If, as those of us who revere democracy and upholding of Parliamentary standards hope, Johnson’s political career has now permanently ended, he’ll be forever noted as delivering a Brexit much ‘harder’ in terms of the conditions attached than necessary.

As a plethora of diligently researched reports continue to stress, Brexit has proved utterly destructive to this country’s economic prospects.

However, because Johnson won a surprise 80 seat majority in December 2019, ‘Get Brexit Done’ general election, this seems to have cemented his sense of privilege.

Though having had the bad luck to be in power when the worst health pandemic for a century occurred, which his supporters will claim was a major reason Brexit was not ‘done’

properly, Johnson's legacy will forever be remembered as characterised by allegations of behaviour which involving wrongdoing, scandal, cronyism and, all too frequently, chaotic mismanagement.

What's concerning is the sense that even though Johnson is now gone, the consequences of his premiership will linger on for years to come in terms of the way he seduced his party to believe in the rhetoric of Brexit and the supposed, and ludicrous, freedom it would supposedly bring.

Rafael Behr in last week's *Guardian* article, 'Boris Johnson is gone, but his toxic Brexit myths will go on poisoning UK politics', makes clear his views about the continuing damage Johnson has inflicted on the system which "swallowed his shtick [but] also disgorged him" will not be remedied by his departure (2023):

"The real tragedy is that he was host to a more stubborn parasitic worm of an idea – the Brexit delusion that has nested in the guts of British politics and will not so easily be excreted."

In 'AI promised you a miracle – Life under 'Greased Piglet' Johnson' (McCabe, 2021), in analysing how the former PM had been a 'shapeshifter' *par excellence* who developed the clown persona to play the fool to become PM and that "In the process, he played us all as fools."

Sadly, it seems, the legacy of Johnson will be with us for the foreseeable future. Even though Rishi Sunak can, justifiably, may claim to be better, he needs to do more to prove how he wishes to move on from the legacy of the man who used to be his boss.

Not voting to support the Privileges Committee report on Monday hardly suggests this.

We can only hope that the political establishment are more willing to learn the lesson of the dreadful impact on the system of allowing someone so narcissistic and self-serving as Boris Johnson to be allowed to become an MP and, more especially, to rise to the office of PM.

For collective good this must never be allowed to happen again.

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