

# Boris, Brexit and the Briefest Reigns of British Prime Ministers

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Current Prime Minister Boris Johnson officially took over from Theresa May on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2019. A hard-fought campaign whittled down the field which consisted of rank outsiders, such as Sajid Javid and the ‘*modern day Lawrence of Arabia*’ Rory Stewart, as well as Johnson’s fellow Vote Leave alum, Dominic Raab and Andrea Leadsom. In the end, Boris Johnson defeated Jeremy Hunt, his successor as Foreign Secretary, by a voting ratio of roughly 2:1 in the poll of Conservative Party members.

Johnson’s popularity, fuelled by decades of comedic television appearances and a PR-friendly, eight-year stint as Mayor of London, looked to give him and his party a major boost and a little time to work out its strategy. As discord spreads throughout parliament, his *Blonde Ambition* may well be to survive 2019 with his job intact. As Boris approaches the end of his first month at the helm, we will consider a couple of figures from history who held the office of Prime Minister for brief, eventful periods.

The unofficial record for shortest reign of Prime Minister was held by William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath. The two days in office, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February 1746, were known as both the ‘short-lived ministry’ and the ‘Silly Little Ministry’. The government formed by Lord Bath and his deputy Lord Grenville collapsed within two days of its establishment; they hadn’t the chance to fill all the vacant ministerial roles before power has handed back to Lord Bath’s predecessor Henry Pelham.

The title at the time was Prime Minister of Great Britain (rather than of the United Kingdom); this fact, coupled with the humorously short reign often precludes historians from considering Lord Bath as a genuine Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

The man most widely agreed to be the shortest reigning British Prime Minister was, like Boris Johnson, an influential leader of the Conservative Party. George Canning assumed the top office of state

for 119 days in 1827; a premiership which was cut short by a deadly spell of pneumonia.

Canning's curtailed reign as Prime Minister was preceded by a far more influential period as Foreign Secretary which coincided with British involvement in the Napoleonic Wars and the building of alliances with a number of soon-to-be emancipated Latin American states. His is often considered a trailblazer in the modernisation of his party at the time. The Conservatives, currently in government, seem considerably less forward looking than their Canningite forebears.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> August, Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn formally announced his plan to call a no-confidence vote as part of his plan to defeat a No-Deal Brexit. His plan was dependent on gaining enough support from his own party, other pro-Remain opposition parties and a sprinkling of dissatisfied Conservative MPs to afford him the position of Caretaker Prime Minister.

No sooner had Corbyn announced his plan than counterproposals were brought forth by those equally fearful of a Corbyn government. The Liberal Democrat Leader, Jo Swinson, and Change UK chief, Anna Soubry, rejected the idea of the Labour Leader taking the helm before an emergency General election. A host of backbench names, from the Conservatives' Ken Clarke to Labour's Harriet Harman, have been mooted as potential 'caretakers' until the crisis engulfing British politics abates.

Roughly twenty-eight years elapsed between Margaret Thatcher's day as Prime Minister and the day Tony Blair handed over power at a special party conference in Manchester. Those twenty-eight years average out at more than nine years per Prime Minister. Even the shortest reign, that of John Major, was longer than the Premiership of David Cameron between 2010 and 2016.

Additionally, the wafer-thin majorities and hung parliaments which have shaped the post-Labour years are far-removed from the landslide victories of the more dominant Thatcherite and Blairite ministries. Some have speculated that the absence of clear, overwhelming victories in UK General Election provides strong evidence that the two large parties, Labour and Conservatives, no longer command the respect or loyalty of the electorate.

On the other hand, the end of the landslide era in British politics may be symptomatic of the declining quality of leadership at the top of these parties. History may judge David Cameron's decision to hold an in-out referendum on EU membership as a mistake. It will consider Theresa May's 2017 General Election to be a monumental blunder. I

If those two Prime Ministers, widely considered to be more competent and professional than Boris Johnson, can fail so spectacularly, how will the current PM fare? Will the man who gets stuck on zip-wires, rugby tackles small children, and, makes innumerable cultural faux pas, be able to rescue the United Kingdom from one of its greatest constitutional crises?

Johnson has already surpassed the two days of Lord Bath, but he will have to remain as Prime Minister until at least Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> November in order to outlast the official record of George Canning. Unlike Canning, the greater threat to this Prime Minister's tenure will be political rather than medical.

Consistently growing anger at rumours and reports of Johnson's desire to prorogue parliament, or to allow the UK to exit the European Union without a deal during the middle of a General Election, increases the likelihood of drastic action which could give Boris the boot.