

Boris Keeps Swinging.....

By Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

The title of this blog is based on David Bowie's 1979 single, 'Boys Keep Swinging', from his album *Lodger*. This song contains opening lines that seem apposite to Tory Party leadership contender, Boris Johnson, "Heaven loves ya, The clouds part for ya, Nothing stands in your way,...."

Until last the early hours of last Friday, it appeared, Boris Johnson's path to becoming the next leader of the Conservative Party and, of course, Prime Minister (PM) looked all but certain. As one wag quipped, "the only thing that could stop Boris was Boris himself." As the saying goes, never a truer word spoken in jest!

Becoming PM is, according to those who know him well, the prize Johnson has long believed himself to be entitled to. If he does indeed make it to No 10 Downing Street it will prove to be a journey that has been far from straightforward and, if nothing else, demonstrate Johnson's tenacity in striving to achieve this position.

As many are asking after last Friday's much publicised 'domestic dispute' with partner Carrie Symonds in the flat they share in Camberwell, does Johnson have the personality and temperament to become PM? As those who have looked at Johnson's political career attest, his past is somewhat chequered and he has been involved in a series of incidents that would have undermined the career aspirations of most people let alone someone who wishes to become PM .

The reason we are in the midst of another leadership contest for the Conservative Party is due to Europe. The result of the EU referendum that took place three ago on 23 June 2016 ended David Cameron's tenure as PM. His successor, Theresa May, became leader after a contest during which the other four challengers were either eliminated or withdrew after two rounds of voting by Conservative MPs.

It's frequently overlooked that the favourite to become Tory leader in 2016, as is the case now, Boris Johnson, never got as far as being subject to being voted on by his fellow Conservative MPs. His co-campaigner for leave, Michael Gove, with whom Johnson had worked intimately, made a statement that has since been described by *The Telegraph* as political assassination.

Gove, in a statement that was intended to be excoriating claimed that Johnson could not "provide the leadership or build the team for the task ahead." This caused Johnson's immediate withdrawal from the contest and, it can safely be presumed, created the sense of mistrust and mutual loathing that, it's widely speculated, led to the 'lending of votes' last week that resulted in Gove being eliminated.

Instead the contest to select the next PM will be between either Boris Johnson or Jeremy Hunt who, it is rumoured was the preferred candidate of those supporting Johnson and avoids the possibility of a potential psychodrama between two individuals with huge egos. And in a first for the Conservative Party, these two candidates will be elected by the votes of the estimated 160,000 Conservative Party members.

Though members of the European Research Group led by Jacob Rees Mogg and Mark Francois are the bellicose face of the Conservative Party, and those who vehemently oppose anything other than a 'hard' Brexit and most certainly not in favour of Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement (WA), a good many others are much less strident in their views. Such Conservative MPs are not inclined to engage in the sort of rebellious behaviour exhibited by members of the ERG and were perfectly happy to support the WA to ensure an orderly departure from the EU.

Recent events aside, Johnson should still be pretty optimistic about his prospects among the members. The hard part was seen as ensuring that he remained as detached from the normal hustle and bustle of campaigning seen by, most particularly, Rory Stewart. The essential thing was to get to the ballot paper that will be decided by the Conservative Party. According to EPSRC-funded research into membership of the Conservative Party members conducted last year when there were 124,000 a study – a significant reduction from the 3

million in the early 1950s – over half of these members are aged over 55 and largely made up of the middle-class.

The members of the Tory Party who are going to decide on the person who will oversee the next stage of the Brexit process are, unsurprisingly, far more right-wing than the population in general and, crucially for Johnson, they are more likely to be aligned with members of the ERG than the majority of ‘average’ Conservative MPs. Indeed, research shows that these members agree with the view of ERG that Theresa May was far too compliant with the EU during negotiations.

According to a YouGov poll, 84% of Conservative Party members want to see a leader, ideally Johnson, who will be prepared to countenance a ‘no-deal’ departure from the EU. Alarming, for members who would be assumed to be dedicated to the protection of business interests and what is good for the economy, the YouGov poll discovered that 61% would be happy to see the economy “sustain significant economic damage” as long as the UK leaves the EU.

The YouGov poll threw up other startling statistics including the fact that 63% of Tory members saw the end of the union between England and Scotland as worth it to achieve Brexit. Slightly fewer (59%) believed ending the union between England and Northern Ireland was a price worth paying to achieve Brexit.

Perhaps the most amazing statistic that emerges from the YouGov poll is that in order to achieve a break from the EU, 54% of Conservative Party members would be willing to see their party destroyed. As some have pointed out, being a member of the Conservative and Unionist Party has clearly altered in recent times.

Writing on *The Independent* website on Sunday, Simon Allison who is chairman of Citizens for Britain, the group behind the Tories Against Brexit campaign makes plain his exasperation at the changes in attitude among members of the party he belongs to:

“The Conservatives have been the party of economic rectitude for as long as I’ve been a member – over 30 years – and we are also supposed to be the Unionist party, determined to keep the UK together. However, today, the membership base doesn’t care about the union or the economy; all it cares about is leaving the EU.

“Over the last three years, via attrition and infiltration, our party structure has been taken over and the policy base that has sustained it for half a century overturned by people who, to judge by the people whose votes they seek, are not true Conservatives”

Using data from a Survation poll carried out in 2015 showing that only 32% of Conservative Party member wished to see a ‘no-deal’ ad that 51% did not wish to be worse off, Allison acknowledges an increasing misalignment between those who belong to party and those who vote for it:

“...we have a situation where a majority of traditional Conservative voters don’t want to be worse off due to Brexit – but a massive majority of Conservative members are not bothered, and where 84 per cent of these members want to impose a policy of no deal which two thirds of their own voter base reject!”

However, as many Tory MPs, fearful of their prospects at any election are fully aware, there is a threat from Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party. As recent elections – local and EU – have shown, the Tory party’s inability under Theresa May to have achieved Brexit by the 29th March is seen to make it look weak. This is where Johnson, who has stated categorically that he will be happy to walk away with ‘no-deal’ by the next deadline of 31st October, proves to be so potent as putative leader.

Jeremy Hunt, whatever his credentials as a self-made entrepreneur who is willing to embrace the dynamic opportunities that are supposedly available after the UK leaves the EU, is dismissed among many members of the Conservative Party as “Theresa May in trousers”; he, like her, admits to having voted to remain but claims to have been converted.

Hunt’s protestations that the UK leaving without a deal will potentially result in economic chaos and that more time may be needed to achieve a workable and effective deal may have proved popular among many MPs, but will cut no mustard with the members. Some may think that given the intractable views of members, his main role was simply to be the second name on the ballot paper.

Whatever Johnson's spat with his partner may be forgotten in the 'cut and thrust' of the rolling news agenda. Nonetheless, Boris Johnson is a man who divides opinion and, given that he is highly likely to be selected by members of the Tory party as the next PM, his suitability to this role is once again being considered.

Boris Johnson is, one level, a strange and enigmatic figure. Some argue that his peculiar brand of charisma is what makes him so attractive to voters. Others believe that he is too mercurial. Critics cite numerous incidents in his past that demonstrate he is simply overindulged and contend he displays the characteristics of narcissist. Even at Eton, to which he was admitted after winning a scholarship, he had made an impression as his housemaster, Martin Hammond, wrote in a school report in 1982:

"I think he honestly believes it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else."

Having won another scholarship to study Classics at Balliol College, Oxford, Johnson ensured that he continued to make an impression, joined the infamous Bullingdon Club, widely accepted to be an "upper-class drinking society known for vandalism". Johnson cultivated friendships that gave him access to the most those from extremely privileged backgrounds including Earl Spencer, both of the late Diana, Princess of Wales and Darius Guppy who would subsequently be convicted of fraud in 1993.

Johnson's friendship with Guppy was subject of scrutiny as a result of a telephone conversation the two had in 1990 when he was asked by Guppy if he could, as a journalist for *The Telegraph* supply the address of a News of the World journalist Stuart Collier who was probing Guppy's business relationships so that he could be beaten up. A tape recording of this conversation surfaced in 1995 and demonstrated that whilst no address was supplied, Johnson was happy to engage in discussion of physical violence against journalists who have the temerity to ask questions of those who believe their sense of privilege makes them immune to such enquires.

Writing in *The Guardian* last August journalist Robert Verkaik in an article titled, 'Boris Johnson's burqa remarks are no surprise – his

misogyny goes far back' stated his view that the "seeds of his bigotry were sown in Eton and cultivated at Oxford, forming an outlook that is central to his politics."

After Oxford Johnson worked at *The Times* newspaper from which he was sacked by editor Charles Wilson for making up a quote. From there he worked under editor Max Hastings at *The Telegraph*. Hastings whose reputation as a journalist and historian is beyond reproach makes his feelings clear about what he thinks of the person he worked with and who may become the next PM. In a column for *The Times* last year Hastings wrote, "It is a common mistake to suppose Johnson a nice man. In reality he often behaves unpleasantly."

However, in an article in *The Guardian* on Tuesday 25th June titled, 'I was Boris Johnson's boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister' Hastings makes a vociferous argument that this is someone whose personality means he should not be let anywhere near the role of PM:

"I have known Johnson since the 1980s, when I edited the *Daily Telegraph* and he was our flamboyant Brussels correspondent. I have argued for a decade that, while he is a brilliant entertainer who made a popular maître d' for London as its mayor, he is unfit for national office, because it seems he cares for no interest save his own fame and gratification."

Many other issues lurk in Johnson's background that are, to say the least, questionable, including his penchant for relationships with women and the uncertainty of the number of children he has fathered. In 2004 following reports that he'd been having an affair with *Spectator* columnist Petronella Wyatt and that there had been two terminated pregnancies.

Though Johnson claimed the allegations of his affair were untrue, "piffle", when they were proven to be true, the then Conservative leader Michael Howard asked Johnson to resign as vice-chairman of the party and shadow arts minister for publicly lying. It says something that despite evidence of lying Johnson refused to comply with his leader's request and, as a result Howard sacked him.

Statements made by others who have worked with Johnson are such as to make one wonder at the character of the man and, it must be said, his ability to simply ignore them and continue his quest for power:

“Boris, well, he’s the life and soul of the party but he’s not the man you want driving you home at the end of the evening.” Cabinet minister Amber Rudd, speaking during a 2016 debate before the Brexit referendum

“[He is] much diminished in terms of integrity, in terms of political courage and in terms of credibility... I used to think he would be fantastic at Number 10 but those days look a long time ago.” 2018 BBC interview with Guto Harri, director of communications for Johnson’s mayoral administration, 2008-2012

“[Johnson is] a man who waits to see the way the crowd is running and then dashes in front and says, ‘Follow me’.” Michael Heseltine, Good Morning Britain interview in 2018

“The Johnsonian creed [is] that it is, in his own words, acceptable, sometimes desirable to lie. Certainly that approach has been advantageous to him. But it must come at a price.” Sonia Purnell, Johnson’s biographer and one-time deputy in the Telegraph’s Brussels bureau, writing after he withdrew from the leadership race in 2016

“He’s lied his way through life, he’s lied his way through politics, he’s a huckster with a degree of charm to which I am immune. As well as being mendacious he’s incompetent.” Conservative former minister Chris Patten in May interview with Bloomberg

“I’m afraid he’s shown, especially during his period as foreign secretary, that he doesn’t have the necessary skills and capacity [to be leader].” Conservative MP and former attorney general Dominic Grieve in May interview with LBC

“He’s an enormous character but not a team player... And he doesn’t know if he’s a journalist or a politician, but he does know it’s all about him. The more he repeats what everyone can see is not credible, the

more his own credibility disappears.” Former foreign office colleague Sir Alan Duncan

“The worst foreign secretary we’ve ever had... Disinterested and out of his depth he cared nothing for our situation. Good riddance.” John McKendrick, attorney general of Anguilla, bidding farewell to Johnson as foreign secretary

There may be a belief that given the Conservative Party appears to have lurched to the right and its membership seem to enjoy their reputation as swivel-eyed loons, the election of Boris Johnson as leader is a good match. However, that this is someone who takes over the country in the midst of what is arguably the worst crisis since the second world war should make us profoundly worried.

Johnson sees himself as being in a similar position to Winston Churchill, about whom he has written a book, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*, in which he makes direct comparison of their attributes. Max Hastings in Tuesday’s Guardian article begs to differ:

“Like many showy personalities, he is of weak character. I recently suggested to a radio audience that he supposes himself to be Winston Churchill, while in reality being closer to Alan Partridge. Churchill, for all his wit, was a profoundly serious human being. Far from perceiving anything glorious about standing alone in 1940, he knew that all difficult issues must be addressed with allies and partners.

“Churchill’s self-obsession was tempered by a huge compassion for humanity, or at least white humanity, which Johnson confines to himself. He has long been considered a bully, prone to making cheap threats.”

Theresa May, a politician whose commitment and decency cannot be questioned, found that achieving a negotiated deal to ensure the UK’s effective withdrawal from the EU to be a herculean task. History may judge her tenure negatively but, it should be stressed, her objective, though undoubtedly too late, was to bring all sides to agreement through convergence.

Should he become PM, Johnson's claim that he possesses unique skills as a negotiator will be sorely tested. Whether he can achieve success where May failed is a question that will be answered over the next few months. The portents do not look good and, as many in this country and in the EU appear to believe, the prospect of 'failure' in that we leave with 'no-deal' has increased considerably.

Max Hastings is particularly pessimistic about what will occur if Johnson becomes PM and, having called an election, manages to achieve a majority against Labour led by Jeremy Corbyn:

"As it is, the Johnson premiership could survive for three or four years, shambling from one embarrassment and debacle to another, of which Brexit may prove the least"

Hastings thinks that this would "signal Britain's abandonment of any claim to be a serious country" and that "And with resonance to the oft-quoted idiom, 'careful what you wish for', Hastings thinks that Johnson's quest for what he ultimately wishes to achieve may not end well:

"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."

In gaining power Johnson may consider himself to be like the Greek God Zeus. However, Zeus was known to punish those that lie or break oaths. Perhaps Johnson is more like Zeus' bother Poseidon as he was reputed to have a quarrelsome personality, was greedy and had a series of disputes with other gods when he tried to take over their cities.

Hastings concern as to Johnson's unsuitability as PM may result in the sort of personal tragedy for him that the Greeks were very fond of hearing in stories and myths. If that were the only consequence of Johnson becoming PM that would be his business. Unfortunately, we may all become part of a much wider tragedy if, as Johnson has continually stressed, he is willing to take the UK out of the EU with absolutely no arrangements in place.