

Fizz with Liz

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

As the PM continues to extoll for his many critics to await the outcome of senior civil servant Sue Gray's investigation into the social event held at No. 10 in May 2020 in apparent contravention of Covid-19 restrictions, I don't think any conclusions in her report will make Johnson resign. Indeed, whether or not the Prime Minister breached lockdown protocol is not in the remit of her inquiry and thus it is not surprising that Johnson's public line is to "wait for the report" as I believe he thinks he will be let "off the hook". Frankly it would be inconceivable that Gray would deliver any findings that would condemn her own boss, so once "the facts" surrounding these events are established by her they will be left to public opinion to decide. The PM clearly hopes the public will move on and forget.

What could change the matter and make it more difficult for Johnson is if the London Metropolitan Police decide to conduct a criminal investigation, depending on what Gray establishes. With continued revelations of other events emerging, there is growing pressure for the police to investigate and/or for there to be an independent judicial inquiry, which in turn could lead more Tory MPs to turn against Johnson.

If so, then MPs will first and foremost look at how the Party is performing in the opinion polls and whether they would be at risk of losing their seat in a general election. With the Conservatives trailing Labour by 9 percentage points according to Politico (a gap that has grown since the revelations of the scandals at No. 10 have surfaced)[\[1\]](#) should the current trend continue many would be at risk of losing their seats. A recent YouGov poll suggests that in London the gap between Labour and the Tories is even greater – at 32 points in Labour's favour[\[2\]](#). Conservative MPs have also received hostile feedback from constituents – should public anger not abate at the revelations then that would increase the likelihood that MPs would move to oust Mr Johnson by a No Confidence vote.

In this context I would expect the pressure on Johnson to resign or be forced out to only increase. The Times newspaper did an analysis of Conservative MPs' emails, web pages and Facebook accounts, which suggests that there is a lot of anger within the Parliamentary party – they found 58 mentions of Johnson being rebuked since he apologised to Parliament last week. Of these 58, 16 were from MPs elected in 2019[\[3\]](#).

However, as Johnson seemingly has no intention of resigning, placing his professed faith in the outcome of Sue Gray's report. However, I don't think his position is tenable – his credibility in asking the public to believe that he didn't realise the May 2020 event wasn't a work do, is in tatters – for he is effectively asking the voting public to believe that he didn't understand his own rules. So if Gray's report does not sufficiently sanction him then I think public anger will persist and the May local government elections will be a bloodbath for the Conservatives. It could well be at that point that enough of his MPs move against him.

Beyond that, there are wider issues looming in the months ahead which will further impact on the fortunes of this Conservative government and impact on the May election results, regardless of whether Johnson continues to lead it or not. Namely, the basic state of the economy. With inflation having hit 5.4% in the 12 months to December 2021 (a thirty-year high)[\[4\]](#) as energy prices continue to rise, ordinary people will really be feeling a "squeeze" on their finances, and the Government's tax rises due in April will further erode living standards for many. Johnson is already coming under pressure from many of his MPs to reverse these tax (National Insurance) rises, which raises the prospect of conflict with his own Chancellor in Rishi Sunak.

With Sunak looking to cut spending and raise taxes and so-called “Red Wall” Tory MPs elected in 2019 in former Labour constituencies increasingly disillusioned at the Johnson Government’s inability (or unwillingness) to provide substance (in cash terms) to “levelling up”, the fractious coalition Johnson put together in winning an 80-seat majority is beginning to unravel. I do not expect the MP for Bury South, Mr Christian Wakeford, to be the last Conservative MP from a Red Wall seat to defect to the Labour opposition. Add to this the Scottish dimension, where Scottish Tories are almost unanimously of the view that Johnson should go, for they know he is toxic with a majority of Scottish voters and they are tarred by association with him, Johnson’s continued presence in office poses a clear threat to the unity of the United Kingdom, which the SNP Government in Edinburgh are only too happy to exploit.

The challenges facing Johnson and his Government then are, to put it kindly, “formidable”.

In such a context then, who would take up leadership of the Conservative Party in the current dismal situation, should Johnson be forced out? Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss, the Foreign Secretary, are names that are often mentioned. If we abstract from the polls and the state of the economy, as a process, an MP wanting to become Leader of the Conservative Party would have to declare their intention to stand, be nominated by eight fellow MPs and then Tory MPs cast a succession of votes in a series of secret ballots until there are only two candidates left, who are then voted on by the Party membership.

So they would have to be good at lobbying fellow MPs first – something that Liz Truss is attested to have been doing in what have been dubbed “Fizz with Liz” receptions, though she denies it, saying that she backs Johnson, stating that he is doing “a fantastic job” as PM and that he has her “100% support” and should stay in Number 10 “as long as possible” [5]. But they would also have to be popular with the Party membership. Given the dominance of right-wing factions in the Parliamentary Party and the ultra-conservative views of the membership, this suggests that who came forward in that situation would profess a patriotic pro-Brexit, low-tax and limited government mind-set. Current polls suggest that Sunak is the front-runner in any would-be leadership contest, with Opinium figures suggesting that about half of Conservative Party members think he would be the best future PM. [6]

However, it is difficult to predict how this pantomime will play out as there are many factors in the mix. We could well end up with Prime Minister Steve Baker, should Johnson be ousted. Now there’s a thought..

[1] <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/#93847>

[2] <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/01/19/labour-now-32-points-ahead-conservatives-london>

[3] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10415969/Dozens-new-intake-Red-Wall-Tory-MPs-launch-pork-pie-plot-bring-Boris-Johnson.html>