

When the Going Gets Tough

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Undoubtedly, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, born in New York to peripatetic father Stanley in June 1964, is a politician with 'character'. Whatever his failings, of which there are many, and which normally preclude someone being considered for high office, Johnson has been able to convince many that, if nothing else, he has the ability to entertain and engage in joie de vivre (Purnell, 2012; Bower, 2020).

Last Sunday, was the second anniversary of the general election. This represented Johnson's greatest political triumph. Having been sacked – not for the first time – by then Conservative leader Michael Howard as a shadow minister in 2004, because of lying about his relationship with Spectator columnist Petronella Wyatt, Johnson's shown immense fortitude in shaking off scandals and moving on without any sense of lingering shame or the taint of lacking integrity that would blight most.

Though we'd been warned that should Johnson become leader of the Conservatives and, by dint of being the party in government, Prime Minister, any Premiership under him would be characterised by chaos and inconsistency, there's a growing sense it's worse than feared. Though his actions don't deserve any defence, it must, however, be recognised that exactly two years ago, whatever concerns there were about a range of issues, the possibility to a global health pandemic was not among them.

So, two years on, having achieved Brexit which, of course, remains unfinished business and continues to cause economic problems, (Dempsey and Plimmer, 2021), there's a sense we're about to enter the next phase of a pandemic. As the government's own figures show (Gov.uk, 2021) covid-19 has already claimed the lives of over 170,000 people in the UK.

The latest variant of covid-19, omicron, is believed to be the most contagious thus far and, as headlines in the last few days indicate, is spreading at a phenomenal rate. According to health secretary Sajid Javid, speaking in the House of Commons on Monday afternoon, there are 200,000 infections a day due to it (Thomas, 2021). The fear, proven one since we started being affected by Covid-19, is that this will result in a spike in hospital admissions.

Notwithstanding the impact of the NHS being overwhelmed, which causes all other procedures to be postponed with consequential risks to those with undetected conditions, as well as the potential long-term impact of what's referred to as 'long covid', experts from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) warn that the omicron variant could result in between 25,000 and 75,000 deaths in England over the next five months (Ambrose, 2021). For this reason, many argue further restrictions on interaction are urgently required.

There can be little doubt that two years ago, as Boris Johnson and his team, including Dominic Cummings, who he sacked in November last year, were revelling in having achieved the largest Conservative majority of 80 seats in a generation, the future looked bright. Having vanquished those in his party who, at best, doubted the wisdom of leaving the EU without at least securing continuance of business relationships through a negotiated hybrid of the 'single market', Johnson knew he'd be now able to deliver on his election promise to get Brexit done through his 'oven-ready' deal.

Other promises, far more ambitious, could wait a little longer.

As it has turned out, because of Covid-19, this government's attention has been diverted from longer-term ambition of, for example, 'levelling up'. Instead, it appears to be experiencing an inability to produce coherence and consistency. Indeed, and probably because Johnson selected his cabinet in the basis of obsequious adherence to his narrative, there's an apparent dearth of talent when compared to the intellectual heavyweights who populated Margaret Thatcher's cabinets.

Significantly, Johnson who has always been noted for his proclivity to be a libertine, has presided over the imposition of restrictions on movement and interaction between citizens. These were explicitly intended to cut down on interaction. This, combined with a tendency to make rash spending commitments, have caused those from the more traditional ranks of his party to question whether he is sort of leader needed?

The contention that Johnson is a vote winner at elections is, because of stories of sleaze and, it's believed by many, an apparent unwillingness to follow rules imposed on everyone else in previous phases of covid, means his leadership is now being seriously questioned.

Though some question whether Johnson will survive the litany of crises that have beset him and his government in recent weeks, his uncanny ability to survive should not be underestimated. Writing in the Sunday Times at the weekend, Francis Elliott quoted a 'former ally' who stressed that though Johnson "bumbles on amiably enough until he's trapped," when challenged will resort to any range of tactics to deal with the threat. As this person stated, "he'll chew through bone, kill anyone, do anything to get free."

Johnson, whatever may be said of him, surely instinctively recognises the threats he faces from a party fast losing confidence in him as a vote winner. Polly Toynbee who has not held back her criticism of someone she considers a liar and wholly incompetent (2021), thinks the pressure will increase in the future. Her analysis is that the Conservative Party's 'Brexit' right wing, instrumental in toppling Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, because she was considered too partial to the EU, are coming to the conclusion he's no longer 'conservative'.

Like many other commentators, Toynbee identifies the greatest threats Johnson faces will be due to the need to impose additional restrictions in order to deal with omicron. Many on the right of the party instinctively resent these (Pearson, 2021). That Johnson achieved their passing in Parliament with the support of the Labour Party in the face of what was a very significant rebellion by 99 of his own MPs, excluding two Conservative tellers, against 'covid passes' will make many within his party decidedly uncomfortable (Stewart and Allegretti, 2021).

As Parliamentary voting history shows, this ranks as one of the largest rebellions suffered by any Conservative leader. For the record, the largest by 118, was suffered by Johnson's immediate predecessor, Theresa May, on 15th January 2019 when she asked Parliament to consider the deal agreed with the EU, what's referred to as the 'First Meaningful Vote'.

It's perhaps an inevitable irony that one of those rebelling against May almost three years ago was an MP who'd made no secret of his intention to usurp her, the member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Boris Johnson. Though May lost the vote, many point out that the size of the rebellion suffered meant she'd lost her authority as leader.

Many ask whether the rebellion suffered by Johnson on Tuesday evening is the beginning of the end for him?

Additionally, businesses, notably in hospitality, are likely to experience considerable negative impact as a result of these new restrictions. They, unsurprisingly, do not wish to see further reduction in their trade following two previous lockdowns (Parker, Thomas, Cameron-Chileshe and Payne, 2021).

And though a sitting government losing a by-election is hardly novel, the fact that this is even possible in North Shropshire, a seat won in December 2019 by Owen Patterson with a majority of 22,949 gaining 62.7% of the vote, makes tells us much about Conservative nervousness.

It's salutary to acknowledge that the only reason this by-election is taking place is because, following Patterson being found guilty of egregious conduct and being threatened with a temporary suspension from Parliament, Johnson whipped MPs to support an amendment that would have effectively got him off the hook. When Johnson eventually writes his memoirs, it'll be fascinating to see how he reflects on this fateful decision which continues to have major repercussions for him.

In her analysis of Johnson, Toynbee considers him to be dithering "between levelling-up and small state austerity, zigzagging between slogans without policies, while laced into an eye-watering budgetary corset" (*ibid*). Notably, ex Tory MP, Matthew Parris in his weekly Times column, 'Don't replace a charlatan with another sham', pulls no punches in his contempt for the way the party he served in under Margaret Thatcher has become. Like Toynbee, Parris sees considers the Conservative Party to have been taken over by extremists who act only purely in limited self-interest.

That the NHS is currently unable to cope with demands being made for booster jabs as well as lateral testing kits used at home, following Johnson's pre-recorded television broadcast on Sunday evening, is indicative of a willingness by him to make major commitments without consulting stakeholders, in this case the NHS (Waugh, 2021).

What's needed in the current phase of Covid-19 – and there are some who argue that there will be others – is a sense of confidence in doing the right thing and, of course, following scientific advice. Johnson, in implementing, however grudgingly, even with Labour backing, has done the right thing. Many argue more will be needed which will test his resolve even further.

Johnson will then need to demonstrate, for the sake of the country, and not the specific interests of a cadre of right wingers within his own party, that he is prepared to act to protect collective wellbeing.

Very significantly, though, as Elliott explains, Johnson follows the maxim Labour leader Tony Blair wrote in his memoirs that most people are largely uninterested in politics (*ibid*). This, it's believed, is why Johnson is so disrespectful of Parliamentary procedure and, as shown regularly over his career, brazen about rules not applying to him in the same way as others.

As Johnson may be reflecting over the Christmas recess, vacillation, unwillingness to tell the truth and grubby compromises are not an effective way to retain his position as PM.

As he may also reflect, the line that 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going', is absolutely true.

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Johnson', is included in *Populism and the Media* (ISBN-13 978-1845497859), edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait and published by Abramis Academic.

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