

Time for the pavilion (or: there are only 365 Conservative MPs)

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Since late summer 2020, it has looked as if the impact of an incompetently managed mass pandemic and a ludicrously self-inflicted 'hard' Brexit (think here up to 85,000 dead, shortages of food and medicine, the Police losing control of the streets, a steep rise in unemployment and many businesses closing down permanently) might produce in early 2021 a move by a sufficient number of Conservative MPs to either replace Boris Johnson or to opt, with suitably statesmanlike behaviour, for a different version of government the much mentioned 'national unity' option. The advantage of the latter being that they get to spread the blame.

For a flavour of how this might happen, consider that on 4 November, the day before England went into its second national lockdown, the House of Commons voted 516 to 38 in favour of the restrictions, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats backing the government. But 50 Conservative MPs rebelled, either by voting against the motion or abstaining; and in the three-hour debate before the vote they lined up to condemn the measures. Graham Brady MP, one of the senior grey suits in the powerful 1922 Committee, stated: 'It is essential Parliament should have accurate and sufficient data before decisions are taken.'¹ The idea of government restrictions (of any type) clearly offends the views of quite a number of Conservative MPs, but for now they don't wish to bring matters to a head, thinking, presumably, that the virulence of the COVID-19 pandemic is sufficient common knowledge to justify the continuation of measures to contain it. But 50 not voting in favour? Johnson is in trouble, and not on that score alone.

Apart from COVID-19, and the cocktail of civil liberty, health and economic issues that it causes, the UK is finally leaving behind all its arrangements with the EU on 31 December, with, as yet, nothing

¹ Not something he was worried about during the fraught Brexit debates. Like many Conservative MPs, Brady's employment prior to becoming an MP in 1997 was with lobbyists, PR companies and right-wing think tanks. His majority in Altrincham and West Sale is about 6,000 and the seat only became relatively 'safe' for the Conservatives in 2015.

significant agreed by way of replacement. Johnson and his team remain adamant that they will drop bits of the Withdrawal Agreement they don't like. This despite (a) it being a legally binding international treaty; (b) having agreed it only a few months ago; (c) the EU declining to offer trade terms if that is confirmed; and (d) the US, via President Biden, also declining to provide the UK with a free trade arrangement if it continues down that path.

For anyone numbed by the outcome of the December 2019 general election, and the subsequent behaviour of Johnson (and Dominic Cummings), it is easy to forget that there are only 365 Conservative MPs. In fact, so loudly has their 2019 victory been proclaimed and so quiet have been the opposition parties since that debacle, an acceptance seems to be abroad that either very little can be done to change matters or that very little will happen that will produce such change – whatever the conduct of the government. Looking at the current Tory cohort through background, age, majority, education, employment history, and position on the EU in 2016, produces an interesting picture.

Firstly, the most common characteristics of a Conservative MP in 2020 are: private, fee-paying education; an employment background in financial services/PR/lobbying/think tanks/corporate consultancy; and having been strongly anti-EU both in 2016 and subsequently. This much is known and commented on by those who study UK politics in detail.

Secondly, and less remarked upon, Johnson's majority of 80 is actually quite fragile. No fewer than 78 Conservative MPs have a majority of 5,000 or less, and of these 34 have a majority of 2,000 or less. Indeed, *all* the fabled 'red wall' seats that Johnson gained are in this category. Any MP in this situation would be aware that it really wouldn't take much of an electoral swing to oust them.

Finally, and a puzzling anomaly, there are still 102 Conservative MP's who were pro-EU in 2016. Admittedly, some of these may have been so at that time because it was party policy (i.e. now party policy has changed, their views will have changed, too); and there will be others who were 'pro-EU' on the basis of Cameron's re-negotiation of 2015-2016.² But, nevertheless, amongst those 102 there must be some (40? 50?) who would much rather the UK stayed as close to the EU as possible, including membership of the Single Market, Customs Union and the EEA rather than exit everything, in its entirety.

² Had it been agreed and implemented, this would have had the UK 25% 'in' the EU and 75% out in all practical senses, whilst still being treated as a full member.

The arithmetic is clear: for Johnson to be replaced on the grounds that his manifest incompetence was jeopardizing (for whatever reason) the re-election of Conservative MPs, wouldn't require very much exertion within his party. And, ousting him in favour of a government of national unity – if events appear to merit that – would require only 45 Conservative MPs backing the formation of such an enterprise.³ On the face of it, should circumstances with either Brexit or COVID-19 get desperate, this doesn't seem too improbable. The extent to which Johnson is in a dangerous place now, and will be more so in the months to come, can be clearly determined.

Brexit

Firstly, on Brexit, should a deal be agreed, he faces the challenges caused by a thin limited deal (severe economic damage) versus no deal (extreme economic damage). Both, and particularly no deal, may well have an impact on food supplies, employment and the wider economy, the last not understood by many MPs. Both Brexit outcomes challenge the integrity of the UK as a nation state, especially with regard to Northern Ireland. This, in turn, impacts on the future relationship the UK would have with both the US and the EU. Johnson could compromise. But there is no sign he wishes to. Were he to compromise – and this could range from dropping the illegal clauses of the Internal Markets Bill, to applying for an emergency extension to the transition period, to applying for membership of the EEA (this last utterly unlikely) – his difficulties with the EU, the US, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, some in the House of Commons and many in the House of Lords, would subside. But his difficulties with the majority of his MPs, the European Research Group, the Conservative Party membership, the Conservative Party funders and Nigel Farage would increase significantly. Logically, then, he won't compromise; and if there is a 'deal' it will be completely oversold.

COVID

Secondly, on the COVID-19 pandemic, he faces challenges caused by the scale of the economic dislocation and on-going slump related to the lockdown, the number of deaths and the threats to public safety that would ensue were there to be a premature lifting of the lockdown; and related to that, the threat that incompetent handling of this in winter would cause so many casualties that it would completely collapse the

³ The presence of 8 DUP MPs increased the number required to bring down Johnson from about 40 to 45. Tim Bale in *The New European* 5 November 2020 notes that a Northern Research Group of 55 Conservative MPs has been formed and that the Tories may now be splintering.

NHS. Here the issues are different in that COVID-19, unlike Brexit, is an international phenomenon and not something caused by a faction of the Conservative Party. However, many of the same people who are enthusiastic for Brexit are also opposed – on libertarian grounds – to any notion of a lockdown, even if imposed by the government on the basis of expert medical advice. It is clear that some of his MPs, many of the European Research Group and Nigel Farage – sniffing around for openings – would object to the current lockdown continuing, being extended and probably being re-imposed at some later date, if required.⁴

On the lockdown, an interesting point was made by Jonathan Sumption in *The Irish Times* on 8 November 2020, namely that the legal restrictions Johnson uses are based on powers given to the government under the Public Health Act (1984) to control the spread of infectious diseases. However, this only authorises restrictions on *infected people*, and as most people are neither infected nor known to be infected by Covid-19, they are ultra-vires. Sumption argues that Johnson *could* instead have used the almost unlimited emergency powers in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. But powers under the Civil Contingencies Act must be renewed regularly by parliament . . . and Johnson doesn't do answering to Parliament.⁵

Johnson must, therefore, be grateful that the recent arrival of various vaccines that – apparently – seem to be 90% effective, partially heads off the COVID-19 crisis, allowing for at least the notion that the lockdown will gradually be lifted with fatalities contained to a 'reasonable' level. But vaccinating the entire population will take until March-April 2021, the economic damage already done may not be reversed in many cases and deaths from COVID-19 will continue for some time to come. Added to which, given their record to date, is the possibility of the government simply mishandling things.

Despite the above considerations, the last few weeks have been characterized – in England – by earnest discussion amongst the political class about 'levelling up' and it being 'time for a reset'. Indeed, the

⁴ For an interesting analysis pointing out the overlap between Brexit, COVID-19 and the increasingly poor conduct of Johnson and his colleagues see Peter Geoghegan, 'Cronyism and Clientelism' in *The London Review of Books*, 5 November 2020 at <<https://tinyurl.com/y6qy2wsp>> or <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n21/peter-geoghegan/cronyism-and-clientelism>>. This concludes with a quote from *The Daily Telegraph* damning the government, written by Nick Timothy, former advisor to Theresa May MP and an indication of the state Johnson is now in.

⁵ One wonders why, rather than 'supporting the government', Labour leader Keir Starmer doesn't say this.

departure of Cummings should be seen as a warning shot, from Brady, worried Conservative MP's and the party funders in the tax havens beyond them in a battle for control over, and access to, the Prime Minister's ear.⁶ One is struck by the boundless ability of these shadowy figures to either ignore real economic difficulties, or maybe not even be aware that such problems exist in the first place. (Both propositions assume they either do, or might, care). Even if COVID-19 is – sort of – cleared up, the difficulties the UK has caused itself in trading with its neighbour, the largest and most prosperous economic bloc in the world, are still little understood. The ending of automatic access to the EU single market will shut down, over time, 60-65% of UK manufacturing. This will cause significant unemployment. As anyone living in a port, with the nights punctuated by constant lorry traffic, will testify, there has been much stock-piling since 2017. But this can only tide the UK over for a few months. The lack of unfettered access to the EU, and the re-introduction of 60s and 70s style queues at borders will produce shortages, not least of food. It is instructive to note, in this respect, that virtually all of the UK's major ports are either foreign owned or owned by companies in tax havens.⁷

The truth is that Johnson can now be ambushed by so many different groupings for so many different reasons, that the chances of him remaining PM after he has delivered the hard Brexit his backers require must be doubtful. And why would he anyway? He looks bored most of the time and wants money. Leaving Downing Street – and the cleaning up – to others, gives him time to spend with his many different families, time to write his memoirs for a hefty advance, the chance of a US TV show and

⁶ Dominic Cummings may be right-wing, a bully and odious as some maintain. But hatred of him is overblown. His approach is the same as that outlined by US management guru Tom Peters in his 1987 book *Thriving on Chaos*. Advocates of this type of 'management' have been common in both the UK private and public sectors from the late 80s onward and have thrived under both Labour and Conservative governments. The problem isn't Cummings per se: it is the tolerance of Peters and his ilk by UK politicians

⁷ The owners of the UK's main trading ports are Associated British Ports (owned in Canada, Singapore and Kuwait), Forth Ports (Canada), Hutchison Port Holdings (Singapore), Peel Group (the Isle of Man and Saudi Arabia), PD Ports (Canada) and Peninsular and Oriental Group (complex, but seemingly Dubai, China and Hong Kong). The latter group include P&O Dover Holdings Ltd, which operates most of the ferry services out of Dover, and is owned by the Peoples Republic of China. (The other ferry services at Dover, DFDS, are owned in Denmark). The intention post-Brexit of declaring many UK ports 'free ports', when so many can be connected back to tax havens anyway, is striking, and one wonders to what extent the owners of these ports have lobbied for that outcome.

time to kick on, as all ex-UK PMs do, with earning serious money on the US after-dinner speaking circuit. The possibility that some formula will be devised to facilitate his exit, possibly a supposed medical retirement, looks likely.

After all, he's been sacked from every job he's ever had. Why would he wait until he is sacked from this one?