

Dave Kellaway asks if Boris Johnson can...

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Dave Kellaway asks if Boris Johnson can survive the latest party scandal.

When Boris Johnson was editor of the Spectator he made it into a hard right publication that took on political correctness and the consensual approach of one nation Toryism. At the same time the magazine's office was notorious for hard drinking, boozy lunches and bed hopping. Bottles of wine were part of the desk furniture.

So there is no surprise that this sort of culture was replicated inside 10 Downing street. Of course the big difference is that the Spectator parties were not held when government Covid restrictions were in place. Alongside his lifelong attachment to having a good time there is his habitual lying. Parties become work events, quotes in articles are made up, he allows inaccurate articles sneering about Liverpool people and uses false racial stereotypes.

Underlying the partying and the lying is a ruling class sense of entitlement. He is one of masters of the universe (the king of the world as he wrote as a young man) who deserves the pleasures he takes and can lie because there is one rule for the little people and another for his class. The Jennifer Arcuri affair when he was London Mayor encapsulates all that. He lobbied her a hundred grand of public funds while he just happened to be sleeping with her.

One characteristic which sets him apart from other Tory leaders like Theresa May or John Major is his penchant for risk taking. He took on what was the dominant sector of the Tory party establishment led by May and defeated it. He rode the UKIP tiger and consumed it. His unorthodoxy and opportunism led him to enlist an elitist thinker like Cummings who helped him win the Brexit vote and then the 2019 election. Johnson presented himself as the insurgent, stoking up and benefiting from the frustrations and anti-migrant racism of many people disorientated by the rapid changes and insecurity of their lives.

As we saw in Italy with Berlusconi or with Trump in the USA being perceived as a womaniser or 'a bit of a lad' is not an electoral negative in the modern era of celebrity culture, the dumbing down of politics and the lower levels of civic or labour movement participation. Johnson received support from voters who were voting for him and his narrative about Brexit rather than for the Tory party.

Risk taking, a nonchalant attitude that tended to wing it rather than study and seriously discuss issues may not hurt him in elections. However when it comes to managing or leading a country in a pandemic it becomes a liability especially as the ex-Labour voters were voting for Brexit and Johnson in 2019, their votes are not a given. They were only lent.

Polls of between 50 and 62% saying Johnson should go suggest voters are losing confidence in Johnson as a result of partygate. At the same time they are not now so enamoured of the benefits of Brexit. It is easy for their support to melt away quickly and this is what is concentrating the minds of many Tory MPs, especially those in the Red Wall seats of the Midlands and North. One Tory MP this week said that they always knew Johnson was a numpty but he was a numpty that won elections for them so they put up with him. This may now be ending.

The upcoming squeeze on living standards with the doubling of energy bills, a hike in National Insurance contributions, increased council tax charges and inflation hitting 6% will not make it any easy for the Tory party to hold on to their new electoral coalition

Polls this Sunday in the Observer record the Tories are ten points behind Labour and Johnson has slipped to his lowest personal ratings with Starmer leapfrogging him.

Only a few months ago with the relative success of the vaccination programme and what seemed to be an easing of the pandemic (before the arrival of Omicron) Johnson and the Tories still had a healthy lead in the polls.

Essentially it is the continued revelation about the partying in Downing Street combined with his lies about them that has seriously weakened him, perhaps fatally. Two images have particularly created outrage in public opinion, Allegra Stratton laughing and the picture of the queen, in black, at the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh while Downing Street was partying the night before. If you show contempt for the public - one rule for us and one rule for the people - it is bad enough, but if you also disrespect the Queen then you are shooting yourself in the face with two barrels.

Johnson's fall fits within a cycle we have seen since the MPs expenses scandal of a decade or so ago and was a key element in the Brexit result. As the capitalist class finds itself faced with the need to carry through neo liberal adjustments - particularly since the 2008 financial crash - it has struggled with its traditional political tools for maintaining consensus and stability.

The Tory party has been completely split and the Brexiteers and ex UKIP people have taken it over against the interests of the key sectors of the ruling class. This crisis of what has been one of the most successful pro capitalist parties has been seen in the number of leaders it has gone through in recent times. Unlike during that exceptional period of the long post-war boom, capitalism can no longer deliver profits, decent wages, stable jobs and a half decent welfare state

The short-lived leadership of the Corbyn team with its left social democratic challenge to the establishment was another reflection of this crisis. Labour is the back up team to maintain capitalist stability when needed, that is if voters got fed up with the Tories. It reinforces support for a system where people could always vote for a supposed alternative. A tried and tested way of making sure there were only ever some managed tweaks to the system. Starmer's witchhunt and ditching of any remnants of the Corbyn project has meant Labour is safe again for playing its role in the two party charade.

One of the reasons the Tory press is now turning on Johnson is that the establishment no longer sees any threat to capitalist stability from a Labour government. It may push for a new leader like Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss or Jeremy Hunt to renew the Tory brand and maintain their preferred party in power but today they are much less worried about a Labour victory. They can ditch Johnson without being too concerned about this leading to a Tory defeat down the road.

This may explain why people who knew in Westminster or in the media sat on the stories about partying which had been going on for nearly two years. Johnson still looked like a winner and Starmer had not yet totally sorted out the Labour party. The Mirror and the ITV have made the running and only now have the bulk of the Tory press joined in.

Nevertheless Johnson's removal is not so straight forward. At the moment he is playing for time, hiding behind both a quarantine due to a family member infection and the Sue Gray report which may take longer to produce as the list of parties grown longer by the day. People seem to think that Sue Gray's report is equivalent to a properly independent enquiry. But she has to report to the prime

minister who then decides what shape the report takes.

The Metropolitan Police has said it is also waiting for the Gray report on the facts before they decide on any action. It does seem an extraordinary dereliction of duty that while police in Hackney a few miles north were assiduously giving black people organising parties during lockdown £10,000 fines they were waving people through with suitcases full of booze and hearing parties obviously going on. Maybe the fact that Johnson has kept Met Chief, Cressida, in post despite a number of crises such as the Sarah Everard protests has persuaded her to hold her fire.

What scenarios are possible ? Ministers or party elders could more or less discreetly ask him to step down - the equivalent of the glass of brandy and the pistol. More formally 54 Tory MPs have to send no confidence letters into the chair of the 1922 committee (essentially the governance of the parliamentary tory party). It then triggers a leadership contest that can go to the Tory membership if two candidates stay in after nominations are all in.

Most columnists, including pro-Tory commentators, are saying it is a question of when, not if he will go. Johnson is the great Houdini of politics and although his odds are as bad as those of the England test team in the Ashes matches you just never know with him.

At the moment the word is that he will try and fight on. He could try several moves. One is to make a big deal of lifting all Covid restrictions in a week or two. Already some of his defenders are saying that partygate was perhaps understandable and not such a big deal. Lifting all restrictions could play into this narrative. It would please some of the 100 odd Tory MPs who voted against Johnson's Plan B measures voted in December.

So his survival and party politics could well override the science and lead to the pandemic taking off again. He would combine this with his dubious self-promotion as the mastermind of vaccination and making the right call on not going for more restrictions at Xmas. All through the pandemic Johnson has actually not followed the science that much.

Sacking a number of his Downing street team in the same way he threw Allegra Stratton under the buss is another action he could take but this depends on how far the Grey report implicates him directly in attending the parties. Whether this would appease his MPs is another matter since a lot of them think he is responsible as the boss for the office culture in Downing street and that his loss of support in the polls has gone too far.

One other possible survival hope could be the fact that the Tory party is now dominated by the Brexit right wing. It is split between those calling for him to go (like Andrew Bridgen) and others who are still defending him like Peter Bone or Rees Mogg.

Does either of the touted candidates, Liz Truss (a late adopter of Brexit) or Rushi Sunak meet all the selection criteria of this dominant current ? Jeremy Hunt has his hat in the ring but as a Remainer he is out of kilt with the Tory membership even if he may well be an establishment choice. None of these candidates are proven electoral assets.

Can Johnson pull some Brexit rabbit out of the hat that could keep enough of his Brexit base together to keep him in post ? Could he make an announcement of a more belligerent line on the Irish border question or some other dramatic move ?

Although the left has to be happy for Johnson to go we should not get too carried away. It might mean a rejuvenated Tory party with a new leader who could do enough to stop a Labour government in 2024. Johnson pulled off this trick when May had brought the Tories close to defeat against Corbyn. But he had the Brexit project which will not work twice, especially if its benefits are today

far from evident.

Johnson's demise is hardly a result of a pugnacious Labour opposition. Starmer is calling clearly for Johnson to go (finally !) but continues his tepid, constructive opposition that has seen him through the depths of the pandemic. Johnson had not suddenly become unfit to govern ; it was obvious to many before.

Neither is the crisis a result of an upsurge in struggles or campaigning. There is no equivalence of the Poll Tax mass campaigning that did for Thatcher or the 1972 miners' strike that finished Heath. Indeed the big Labour lead and the increasing possibility of a moderate Labour government could encourage those parts of the Labour left who take a 'realist' view of the Starmer regime - focussing on 'left' policy, protecting positions and keeping their heads down.

However the popular revulsion against Johnson does, to a degree, reflect a reaction against an elitist, 'one rule for them and another for us', contempt for ordinary people. A crisis and disunity in the enemy camp is nearly always helpful. A socialist message of the need for anti-capitalist resistance and fighting to save our planet may find a wider audience.

Unfortunately it also provides a fertile recruiting ground for right wing populists feeding on a rejection of all politicians and democratic institutions.

Dave Kellaway

P.-S.

• "On Johnson. Anti*capitalist Resistance. 17 Jan 2022 :

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/on-johnson/>

• Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.