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Boris Johnson: a political career in freefall

The Conservative Party used to be famed for its pragmatic retention of power. It's lost that muscle memory

'Meltdown' was the word Britain's newspapers reached for as Boris Johnson's administration fell apart at the end of last week. As a metaphor, it's accurate.

In a literal nuclear meltdown, the fuel rods overheat because the water cooling them becomes unavailable. Then the rods liquidise, fall to the bottom of their pressurised container and — potentially — generate enough steam to blow the roof off, spurting toxic materials into the atmosphere.

'Partygate'

The prime minister's meltdown has likewise occurred in stages. The first was the holding of a series of parties in and around No 10 Downing Street — amid government-mandated pandemic restrictions for citizens — which are now under criminal investigation. Some 12 social gatherings have passed the evidential test set by the Metropolitan police for serious and flagrant breaches of the lockdown laws.

The second, unrelated, was an attempt to save a Tory backbencher, Owen Paterson, from being suspended from Parliament, after breaking rules that forbid lobbying in return for money, using contacts he had made with a Northern Ireland company after being a minister there. Though this failed, the strong-arm tactics Johnson used to mobilise support convinced many MPs that he was more concerned about his friendship network than the wider interests of their constituents.

The third stage was the 'Partygate' cover-up. Once the existence of the parties was revealed, officials in Downing Street agreed that Johnson could deny that they had been 'parties' — rather they were described as 'work events'.

Stage four was critical: it became clear Johnson knew the events were parties, that his own senior officials had organised one, that his chief spokeswoman had rehearsed lying about them and that he had attended at least two.

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The final phase — when the roof metaphorically blew off No 10 — came with a Johnson counter-attack in the House of Commons on the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, when he repeated a fascist-inspired libel that, while director of public prosecutions, Starmer had failed to prosecute the serial child rapist and TV personality Jimmy Savile. This precipitated the resignation of Johnson's closest policy adviser, Munira Mirza, the instigator of numerous right-wing 'culture war' offensives for whom this turned out to be one disgusting act too far, and other figures from the court.

Letters are accumulating from Tory MPs to the backbench '1922 committee', demanding Johnson's resignation. The only question is whether the police, the parliamentary authorities or his MPs deliver the final blow. Most insiders think it inconceivable he will still be prime minister by the summer.

Obvious danger

In a real nuclear meltdown, there's a chance skilled technicians can limit the damage at almost every stage but the last. The precondition is they have to recognise the meltdown is happening. As viewers of the drama *Chernobyl* will remember, this does not always happen.

Johnson failed to see an obvious danger — that allowing more than 70 of his political staff flagrantly to breach lockdown rules might one day provide them with ammunition to sink him. He attended illegal parties in his own 'home', apparently oblivious to their nature, despite warnings from his staff that they were illegal.

Then, to put it bluntly, he lied. He claimed he had no knowledge of the parties despite attending them. Finally, he persuaded himself that, by defaming Starmer, he would somehow make things better.

Viewed through the lens of the 'bad people' theory of history, this is a story of hubris. The man who, as a child, declared his desire to become 'king of the world' convinced himself that his power was, indeed,

monarchic. He told underlings that he was 'the king around here' and could do as he wished. His wife, Carrie — dubbed by insiders 'Carrie Antoinette' — also began doling out jobs, favours and political patronage.

Self-destruction

But there is a more accurate, structural framing of this crisis, which situates Johnson's self-destruction not as a personal drama but as part of the wider implosion of British Conservatism. Put bluntly, the Tory party no longer knows what its purpose is beyond self-preservation in power.

It has become a machine for running a favour-based capitalism — handing out pandemic-related contracts to friends and neighbours, and lobbying for contracts on behalf of companies as did Paterson. It has attracted all kinds of *arriviste* flunkeys from the outer reaches: Mirza, for example, had once been a member of a bizarre far-left cult called the Revolutionary Communist Party.

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The famed pragmatism of British Toryism was always constructed around philosophical assumptions. The most fundamental was that the political elite it presumed perennially to constitute ruled through trust, competence and disinterest. It was semi-hereditary because the society it ruled was held to be 'organic' — this being a natural state of affairs, arising spontaneously, not to be tinkered with on behalf of abstract principles, such as human rights or utopian schemes.

Margaret Thatcher blew that apart with her zealous ideological commitment to neoclassical economics — her administration from 1979 became described in the coinage of 'Thatcherism'. But once the global market-fundamentalist model she had helped to engender crashed with Wall Street in 2008, British Conservatism — almost for the first time in its history — found itself struggling to contain not one but two incompatible utopias.

Rhetorical warfare

The first was promulgated by David Cameron, its leader from 2005 and prime minister from 2010. This was a socially-liberal, globally-focused European Union member state, albeit still freelancing militarily and

economically in the Indian sub-continent and Asia against the historic backdrop of empire. It collapsed, as did Cameron's leadership, in his failure to win the 2016 'Brexit' referendum on the United Kingdom's continuing EU membership.

The second was the one Johnson, somewhat uncertainly joining the Brexit bandwagon, came to represent: a xenophobic, nationalist capitalism, cut adrift from Europe, engaged in rhetorical warfare against the liberal and educated half of the population. Its relationship with Russia and China would be bipolar, veering from active collusion with their criminal oligarchies and the maintainance of London as a money-laundering centre to sudden attempts at confrontation.

When Johnson's vision triumphed in mid-2019, succeeding the hapless Theresa May as party leader and so prime minister, the liberal-globalist wing of Conservatism was not just defeated: it was purged from the parliamentary party. In the process many of the informal relationships and networks which had held the party close to Britain's non-financial business community — that is to say, the real economy — were damaged.

When Johnson famously said 'f... business' — after being told of capital's objections to Brexit — this was no mere outburst. The promise of Brexit was that, in place of the old, eurozone-aligned domestic industries, new startups — in technology, biotechnology and space exploration — would flourish, oriented to the United States and Asia. Britain would incubate a 'trillion-dollar tech company', which, as the Johnson adviser Dominic Cummings once grandiloquently put it, would be the key to 'owning and coercing' other countries in the 21st century.

Techno-nationalist utopianism

What we are dealing with here is not Toryism but a techno-nationalist utopianism. Never in its history was the Conservative Party captured by a clique so determined to wage relentless cultural warfare, against not just the left but liberalism.

The result was a party of acute contradictions: committed to austerity in principle yet fiscal profligacy in practice; committed to a 'high-wage economy' alongside rampant deregulation of the labour market. It became a party prepared to court white-supremacist sentiment—as in the 'taking the knee' controversy during the European football championships in Britain last summer, when England's players supported the symbolic protest begun in the US — while appointing numerous senior ministers of Asian and African descent.

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The only thing holding it together was Johnson. He could be all things to all people, because he was prepared to lie openly and shamelessly: one viral video alone documents eight falsehoods told to Parliament. And he was helped by willing media: Johnson had himself been a journalist (sacked from his first job at the *London Times* for making up a quote and originator of many Euro-myths while a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Brussels) and political journalists too were drawn into Johnson's grotesque Camelot.

Looking back, the most explosive moment came when Johnson's spokesperson, Allegra Stratton, a former broadcaster, was caught rehearsing lies about Partygate on camera. This not only exposed organised lying and lawbreaking inside Downing Street but put on notice many of the journalists who had tolerated Johnson: they, like Stratton, could face reputational disaster. Since then, some of the most important scoops exposing Johnson's misbehaviour have come from journalists inside the Tory Westminster bubble.

Already over

The obvious question is how it ends. It could end with a vote of 'no confidence' from MPs, an intervention from 'grandees' within the Tory hierarchy or with Johnson's (and/or his wife's) conviction for a crime.

But in a political sense Johnson's reign has already ended. As he fills the gaps caused by numerous resignations he can only circle the wagons tighter, around himself and Carrie. Who will take over from the resigned advisers and civil servants? Most likely the same kind of people, only worse.

Since mid-December British politics have been dominated by only one story—that of deceit, incompetence and lawbreaking inside Downing Street. The result has been a sudden swing in polling, moving Labour from level-pegging with the Tories to ten points ahead, for which there is no recent precendent.

It is hard to see the polls reversing while Johnson remains in post. Therefore, sooner rather than later, the survival instincts of Tory MPs will overcome their fears of the unknown.

But at this point the battle begins for the soul of Conservatism. With

Johnson in charge it didn't really have one. Now its adherents must decide not what favours they want but what ideas they believe in — and whether there is a viable route from utopianism back to pragmatism.

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