

UK: The decision about Johnson's leadership has merely been delayed

The outcome of tonight's Conservative confidence vote in Boris Johnson is neither enough to end his premiership, nor for the PM to feel safe in his job going forward. 211 Tory MPs voted in favor of Johnson, 148 voted against him.

Under current Conservative Party rules, Johnson cannot be challenged in another confidence vote for the next twelve months. However, there are two risks for the PM. One is that rules can change. But the far bigger threat is that the large number of defections tonight translates into a gradual process in which the PM's political authority continues to erode further over time while internal fighting over the party's direction heats up. The experience of Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, is a case in point. May survived a Tory no-confidence vote in December 2018 and could, therefore, not be challenged for another twelve months. However, just over five months later, May resigned.

One factor that might protect Johnson from his predecessor's fate is the fact that there is no comparable focus on a single issue that requires a decision under a timeframe dictated from outside. In May's case, this issue was Brexit, and the outside regulation came in form of the deadlines set under the relevant articles of European treaties. The absence of such a single make-or-break issue today might increase Johnson's relative ability to linger on.

In fact, Brexit might be helpful for Johnson again, having become prime minister after May's loss of authority during the negotiations with the EU and having then built his new voter coalition around the promise to "Get Brexit Done." Re-escalating the row with Brussels over the Northern Ireland protocol could be a useful tool to paper over the internal differences that have ever since emerged between traditional Conservative Eurosceptics and new Tory voters from working-class constituencies outside London. New efforts for legislation to give the UK the power to unilaterally scrap the protocol might be ahead, perhaps as soon as this week. This is also the context in which preparations for a new, national science and research fund should be seen, as this could be used as a replacement should the EU decide to retaliate by shutting the UK out of its Horizon scheme.

However, the very purpose of a renewed focus on Brexit would be to gloss over the fact that on the economic front, the two halves of the new Tory electorate remain difficult to unite, especially under conditions of constant crisis politics. To reassure traditional Conservatives, Johnson, once again, promised to focus on tax cuts today. But the traditional Tory agenda of sound public finances and low taxes has been delayed, budget after budget, amid ongoing pressures for continued fiscal support, not least given Brexit, the pandemic, inflation, and the Ukraine war.

The next signposts to watch are the two by-elections on 23 June – one in a traditional Tory seat where the Conservatives are under pressure from the Liberal Democrats, and one in a former Labour seat which the opposition might now take back from the Tories. But the most important factor to watch is whether any senior Conservative eventually emerges who could speak, like Johnson, to all sides of what has become the new Tory electorate ever since the fateful 2015 decision for an EU referendum.

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