



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 9th April 2020



[Being Boris. The attributes of an unusual politician and their relevance to the coronavirus crisis.](#)

A year ago exactly, Theresa May was then Prime Minister, her Withdrawal Agreement with the EU had been defeated for a third time and she was about to accept another extension of Article 50, on this occasion to expire on October 31 2019. Boris Johnson was on the backbenches having resigned as Foreign Secretary some nine months earlier. Although he was the bookmakers' favourite to be Mrs May's successor, on the basis of his undoubted popularity within Conservative Party members, there were real doubts among even his closest supporters, never mind the wider commentariat, as to whether there were enough Conservative MPs willing to take the risk of making him their leader.

As matters were to transpire, events were about to break in his favour in utterly spectacular fashion. On April 12th, Nigel Farage formally launched his new The Brexit Party. Within six weeks it would top the European Parliament elections that the extension of EU membership had compelled the UK to conduct. The party then came within 700 votes of obtaining a seat at Westminster at a by-election. A combination of internal Cabinet dissent and overt 1922 Committee discontent forced Mrs May to set a date for her departure. With the overwhelming factor influencing their choice having become the absolute requirement to deal with and disarm The Brexit Party threat, many Conservative MPs who had harboured severe doubts about Mr Johnson nonetheless

stampeded to him. He won every stage of the parliamentary contest by a large margin, defeated his final rival, Jeremy Hunt, his replacement at the Foreign Office, by a comfortable two-to-one tally, and became Prime Minister on July 24th and then conducted the most fundamental reshuffle of a Cabinet in the entirety of UK political history.

Yet it was far, far from obvious then, that he would ultimately manage to reach his own Withdrawal Agreement with the EU, convince the most hard-line of his Eurosceptic MP colleagues to endorse it, survive the fact that his own “do or die” deadline for departing the EU on October 31st was dropped and eventually manage to hold and prevail at a general election before he secured a belated Brexit. Furthermore, if anyone had suggested on that polling day that before the next Easter, a new global pandemic would strike the UK, forcing the wholesale restructuring of the economy and society, and that as a consequence the Prime Minister would record an approval rating of 70% and have much of the country fall into deep unease at the state of his personal health and the implications it may have for the effective functioning of public administration, such a person would have been deemed mad.

That is, though, where we are. It would appear (although this could always change) that the Prime Minister is in a stable condition, that his chances of a full recovery and return to work are sound and that the broad goodwill expressed towards him as he first fell ill, then was admitted to hospital and after that placed in intensive care, might prove to be something of an asset for him and Whitehall more broadly as we move towards an inevitable extension of the existing lockdown (possibly with a few tweaks) and the huge conundrum of devising an exit (in reality, a re-entry) strategy thereafter.

So, how did Boris (the fact that he is the only politician in the UK known universally by a given name alone speaks volumes) somehow transition from a bumbling buffoon to a national necessity? With a long Bank Holiday weekend coming up, it is perhaps worth reflecting upon his exceptionally unusual political attributes and characteristics, and their possible relevance to the coronavirus crisis.

There are at least three features of Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson which render him a one-off. They largely explain why a man who once said that he had as much chance of being reincarnated as an olive that becoming Prime Minister has entered Number 10 and come to dominate UK politics.

RESILIENCE.

The Boris record in overcoming personal and political setbacks that would have sunk others without trace is remarkable. After leaving Oxford University in 1987 he went to the management consultancy L.E.K and lasted precisely a week before leaving (it was a bizarre choice for any Classics graduate as it was manifestly the most mathematical of any company in its sector at that time). He then went on to The Times as a graduate trainee but was fired when his godfather complained to the editor that in an article written about the apparent discovery of a former palace once occupied by King Edward II a totally fabricated quote in his name had appeared (the young Boris had apparently tried and failed to contact him by telephone so inserted his own words instead). This would finish most people off. In fact, it just served as a prelude to a pivot to The Daily Telegraph where he would make his name.

His political ascent has involved similar setbacks. He was not supposed to become an MP at all in that the price for him being appointed as editor of The Spectator in 1999 was that he would put an end to his parliamentary ambitions (instead he was elected to the House of Commons in 2001 and carried on in charge of the magazine for a further four years). In 2004, he was first obliged to make a grovelling personal apology to the people of Liverpool for a seeming slur on them in an editorial that his publication had produced (although he was not the author of it) and then shortly afterwards fired for having denied his affair with Petronella Wyatt, one of his writers. For most aspiring politicians, this too would have been terminal and led to their retreat from public life. Not so in this instance.

His recovery started in earnest as Mayor of London. That role was, however, supposed to come with the distinct disadvantage that it would take him out of the House of Commons and sideline him from the national political scene at least until his second term had ended in May 2016 and possibly much longer if no convenient parliamentary by-election occurred, hence rendering him beyond the race to replace David Cameron as the Conservative Party leader when that vacancy arrived. Indeed, this was a part of the appeal of electing him in the capital city as far as Mr Cameron and (especially) George Osborne were concerned. The notion that he would think that he might be able to come back into Parliament at the 2015 election while continuing to be Mayor of London was not one that they had considered to be remotely credible. Conservatives in Uxbridge and South Ruislip thought otherwise.

More recent times have brought incidents of a similar scale. Having led and won the “Leave” camp in the 2016 EU referendum and with the keys to Number 10 seemingly in his sight (although it does not have an actual keyhole, but never mind), his candidacy was capsized by Michael Gove, his campaign manager. He re-emerged shortly afterwards as Foreign Secretary, but this was an unhappy tenure in many respects which did not enhance his reputation and he looked far from a Prime Minister elect when he left the Cabinet in July 2018. He himself acknowledged this three months later when he observed that Philip Hammond has said in a radio interview that morning that he (Boris) would never serve as Prime Minister and this was “one Treasury forecast that might be accurate”. Even after becoming Premier, it took a mere ten weeks for the Supreme Court to declare unanimously that he had improperly, and in essence illegally, advised the Queen to prorogue Parliament. This should really have finished even a very new Prime Minister off. Instead, about ten weeks after that judicial reprimand he romped home in a general election with an overall majority of eighty seats. In terms of the sheer number of implausible comebacks, Boris is squarely in Frank Sinatra territory.

REINVENTION.

If a Sinatra for resilience, David Bowie is the model for reinvention. It has been a life-long exercise. An extremely introverted child (in part due to grommet-induced hearing deficiencies until removed), called Alexander or Al, and a (perhaps reluctant) adherent to his mother’s

Roman Catholic faith had by the time he reached eighteen become an extrovert rebranding himself as a Boris (he was named after a mysterious Russian émigré friend of his parents who lived in Mexico City) and as an Anglican. I had the chance to witness this capacity for change while a student contemporary in the 1980s. The first time that he stood to be the President of the Oxford Union Society he was a conventional and somewhat aloof High Tory, Old Etonian, whose main distinguishing aspect was the colour of his hair. He lost by a wide margin with a lack of the common or popular touch the line of attack against him (full disclosure, I was the campaign manager for his rival and believed that politics is a blood sport). A year later he was on the ballot again, but no longer looked like an Old Etonian, was supported by the student SDP and the even the Greens, had developed a comedy routine and was unstoppable. It was hard not to admire the self-awareness required to make him know what he had to do to win.

That flair for invention and reinvention has transpired all the way through. To build a successful career in domestic journalism out of a stint as a foreign correspondent is really rare. To manage it as an EU reporter in the early 1990s was staggering. News from abroad then was treated very much as a secondary item by all the main broadsheet newspapers bar the FT. They even had different names for the pages concerned reflecting their own cultures. The Times referred to it as “Overseas News” and focused on the main actors and theatres of the recently ended Cold War, namely the US, what was the USSR but became Russia, China and Germany. The Guardian labelled it as “International News” with a strong emphasis on what was then described as the Third World. The Independent opted for “World News” and went heavily for stories from the Middle East where their star writer (Robert Fisk) was located. The Daily Telegraph deemed material from beyond the UK to be “Foreign News” and had a diet of material about countries which had once been part of the Empire but were clearly now in a much worse state since independence. Brussels was a complete backwater as far as the print media was concerned. Despite this, Boris contrived to create a market for (anti) EU writing which led to him being returned to London and swiftly becoming the principal DT political columnist.

The decision to stand for and the direction taken as Mayor of London also demanded an incredible degree of reinvention. Boris was born in New York City (and held a US passport as well as a UK one until 2016), not London. His parliamentary constituency was in rural Oxfordshire, not the capital. The primary responsibilities of the Mayor – crime, transport and planning – were ones in which he had little qualification. He had done absolutely nothing in

life relating to local government of any kind. He became the Conservative contender because Mr Cameron's initial preference (Nick Boles) fell ill, many other possibilities thought that Ken Livingstone would be very hard to defeat, and besides which it was not viewed as a shrewd career move toward seizing a senior Cabinet portfolio later on. Despite all of this, Boris was elected in 2008 (assisted by it being a very bad year for Labour) and was re-elected in 2012 (a quite difficult year to be a Conservative) and remained popular to the very end. He did so by recasting himself as a socially liberal figure, advocating immigration, and choosing his causes selectively (such as cycling) to appeal to an electorate beyond those of a traditional Tory.

This adaptation reached its zenith in somehow becoming a One Nation Conservative for Brexit when almost everyone else in what could be described as the centre-left of his own party backed Remain, and then, once Prime Minister, having been assisted in his rise by the DUP's resistance to Mrs May's Withdrawal Agreement, deciding to throw the DUP under the proverbial bus to strike a deal with Dublin once it became clear to him that this was the only route to a new Withdrawal Agreement. What is more, the DUP seems to have forgiven him. All politicians tack at least a little to the wind but none of them (not even Churchill, of whom Boris wrote an approving biography) on this epic scale.

By his standards, therefore, finding himself obliged to shift from advocating mitigation as the main strategy to address coronavirus to advancing suppression instead in the light of changing scientific advice and implementing a vast increase in the social and economic role of the State has been easy.

PERSONALITY POPULISM.

A final series of features can be assimilated under the notion of personality populism. We live in an anti-party, anti-politics age. Historic voting alignments have collapsed. Populism is the new order.

This Prime Minister is a paradigm example of that but also a very atypical one. Most populists have come from outside the political mainstream and advocate views which were once thought extreme. Boris has come from within the political system, not without it. He may have consistently bent the rules, but he has not broken them. Although his stance on Brexit is

undoubtedly controversial, he is basically a creature of the political centre. He is that rare item in our time – a populist moderate. His main ambition in life appears to be wanting to be liked, not finding groups of people to aim hate at. This is the core of his ability to cross normal electoral lines, first in London and then at the election.

He has also taken ownership of the notion of optimism (conventional populists exploit pessimism). It is arguably the one trait which he has completely consistently stood for. The 2012 London Olympics are an intriguing case study. Once he had become Prime Minister, and with the austerity introduced as a response to the global financial crisis in mind, Mr Cameron favoured scaling back the Olympics much as the 1948 competition in London had reflected the aftermath of World War II. The Mayor of London would have absolutely none of it. His instinct was the complete opposite. He saw it as a big chance to raise national spirits, to showcase the city to the outside world and to double down in stating how well the home team would do in terms of medals. Even though it was Mr Livingstone who had “won” the Olympics back in 2005, and Mr Cameron was in Number 10, they became (in a political sense) the Mayor’s Olympic Games because the spirit adopted for them suited him nicely.

The last aspect involves administrative style. Boris is a big picture politician par excellence. He is an admirer of the Reagan model of the US Chief Executive. He much prefers concentrating on one very important issue or even one very important aspect of one very important issue (such as the vexed Irish border “backstop” dimension of Brexit) than spreading himself over several subjects many of which he is entirely disinterested in. As a communicator he is best understood by his having been a newspaper columnist for so many years. An effective columnist appreciates that 90% of thought and effort has to be directed at the first 10% of your words. Failure to do so means that a sizeable slice of your prospective audience will never travel beyond those first 10% of the words written. That Boris (supposedly) made his final decision as to which side to come down on over Brexit by writing two columns, one for Remain and one for Leave, and determining that the case he had made for Leave came over the better is a rational means for him to have proceeded (if that is what he really did).

CONCLUSIONS.

There are many pitfalls in being Boris in the present crisis climate. Resilience can mutate into a false sense of invincibility. Reinvention can run out of road eventually. Personality politics falls apart if the public fall out of love with the personality. Mainstream populism might find itself outflanked by the real McCoy if an alternative figure emerges with a much more forthright message. Optimism can be crushed by the sheer weight of events. Big picture politicians need very competent details people to surround them. Coronavirus is a crisis that could still be the political undoing of this Prime Minister.

On balance, despite that, it is clear why even his detractors want to see him return to Number 10. The central very short-term task for the Government and Prime Minister is to convince people to stick with unappealing restrictions on their social and economic liberties. The next step will be to convince them that a re-entry approach that does not risk a severe second wave of virus infections that lead to deaths has to be phased and so some people will have to wait longer than others for a return to a new version of normality. The final element is to identify the (possibly very small) ways in which our society and the economy will have to change over the longer-term. All of this would be a brutal challenge for a conventional politician with an orthodox approach towards politics. It may be one which is better suited for an individual whose ability to bounce back from adversity is evident, who has few psychological problems with having to adapt their position fundamentally to adjust to unanticipated new circumstances and who prefers direct and populist engagement with the public, projecting optimism and pursuing a small set of major priorities over everything else. Time will tell.

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