



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 9th October 2020



BoJo Mojo? The Prime Minister's hold on his party is secure enough.

The fringe meeting element of the rather surreal virtual Conservative Party conference and some modest revolts among Conservative MPs in the House of Commons this week were indications of an irritable mood, to put it mildly, within the party in Parliament. The regular survey of sentiment amongst the party membership (or at least the most active element of it) by ConservativeHome also suggested that discontent with the direction of events as they stand was held more deeply than merely within Westminster itself. This has translated into media speculation about the performance and even the psychological state of the Prime Minister and, at times, whether his tenure in 10 Downing Street might expire involuntarily before the next general election currently scheduled for May 2024.

Boris Johnson felt obliged to respond to these suggestions directly both in a television interview on Sunday and in his conference speech when he denied a diminished “mojo”. His colleagues did their best to minimise the sense of internal disagreement over policy.

This is, nonetheless, almost certain to be a very challenging few months for ministers even if the development of a vaccine at the earlier end of the credible timetable range allows them to offer a sense of a light at the end of the tunnel. It is a racing certainty that this will reinforce a whispering campaign against the Prime Minister within Westminster

itself and continued media musings as to whether Mr Johnson has the stomach for the role that he has been obliged to play and what his prospects of remaining leader may be. This has the potential to be a destabilising factor in politics during this difficult period.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The mood of the Conservative Party in Parliament has clearly changed over the past few months and especially since additional restrictions locally and across England have emerged. Much of the frustration being directed at the Prime Minister is really a proxy for dissatisfaction at the nature of recent events.
- The discontented are divided, though, into two quite different camps and the capacity of the Prime Minister's internal opponents to form any kind of common front against him is extremely limited. This alone renders him relatively secure.
- The size of the Conservative majority in the House of Commons and the strategy being adopted by the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer means that the chance of a major defeat on a significant aspect of COVID-19 policy is distinctly modest.
- There has not, furthermore, been movement of yet in the opinion polls of a scale that constitutes a serious political crisis for the Prime Minister or Government.
- While the "economy first" constituency probably now has the support of the majority of backbench Conservative MPs, what survey evidence exists suggests that the public at large, for now, are still in the "public health first" corner. A decisive victory for Joe Biden over President Trump on November 3rd would also serve to undermine those who favour allowing the economy to reopen as fully and as fast as possible alongside enhanced shielding of the very most vulnerable.
- Ministers will, however, be sensitive to sentiment among their own MPs and there are likely to be adjustments in approach designed to reassure them.

The Conservative Party in Parliament is not in an especially upbeat frame of mind at present and this is manifesting itself in public expressions of discontent and in certain instances by the coded desire to see the "Old Boris" return to the political fray. This shift of mood has three core aspects to it:

- A general outbreak of “COVID fatigue” in the ranks of Conservative MPs along with the sense that ministers have been “captured” by scientific advisers whose track record during the crisis has not been consistent or stellar and who have little appreciation of the degree of economic harm their measures entail.
- A narrower frustration at the apparent imperfections of the tracking and tracing system which mean that additional local restrictions, which in parts of England are now quite severe (although short of those that have been and are about to be extended in Scotland) do not seem to have resulted in a reduction in cases. The announcement last weekend that almost 16,000 new virus infections had been missed by Public Health England due to archaic computer spreadsheets (an error of a size to make all assessments of whether the increase in the spread of the virus was, as it seemed last week, slowing, all but redundant) has symbolised the sense that Whitehall is struggling in attempting to suppress the second wave.
- A particular hostility to the decision to shut bars, pubs and restaurants at 10pm across the entirety of England (irrespective of infection rates locally). This move strikes most Conservative MPs as lacking any intellectual or scientific coherence (let alone evidence that it is having an effective impact) but seems instead to have been a “split the difference” compromise between either shutting these facilities completely (as is about to happen north of the border) or allowing them to trade normally but with social distancing and tight restrictions on household interaction enforced much more vigorously across the board.

The level of dissent is absolutely clear to senior ministers and it will have an influence over how decisions are framed between where we are now and the moment that the prospect of a mass vaccination campaign becomes a serious aspect of considerations. Yet there are also reasons why Downing Street is not unduly concerned about insurrection.

The discontented within Conservative MPs will find it hard to make common cause.

There are broadly speaking two sections of the Conservative Party in Parliament that have a form of organised discontent, plus a much smaller but vocal third segment.

The first consists of those who never wanted Boris Johnson to become the party leader and Prime Minister in the first place, who largely served, often at senior levels, under Theresa May and were either dismissed by the new Prime Minister in July 2019 or resigned beforehand to deny him that opportunity and who have been awaiting the time at which they could start to stake out their territory in apposition to his Government. They are overwhelmingly located on the centre-left of the Conservative Party. They do not want the “old Boris” back, they would rather have no Boris of any kind at all.

The second contingent involves MPs who almost universally supported the Prime Minister when he was a candidate for the leadership in 2019 but have been disheartened by the line that has been taken in response to COVID-19 either on constitutional grounds (the executive has usurped and marginalised the legislature) or for libertarian reasons (distaste for the prohibitions on individual movement) or concern for the economy. They are emphatically on the right of the Conservative Party in Parliament (albeit sometimes in different sub-strands of that thinking) and they do hanker after the “old Boris” back.

Finally, there are literally a handful of MPs who were introduced or restored into ministerial positions in July 2019 when Mr Johnson entered Downing Street but then sacked in his February 2020 reshuffle with little prospect of future preferment. They are almost completely detached from the control of the Whips and are high volume people.

It should be clear that other than insisting on more parliamentary involvement in the construction and/or approval of COVID-19 policy, there is little that these two larger factions have in common. The first has no coherent collective stance on COVID-19 at all and in so far as they might have individual instincts, most ex-ministers will have sizeable sympathy with the difficulties that serving ministers find themselves in and be disinclined

to express criticism of their actions openly. What unites this faction more than anything else is the desire to see some sort of deal between the UK and the EU reached before the end of December and for this to be the basis of a closer, not more distant, relationship.

Hence their most overt demonstration of opposition to the Prime Minister has been on the Internal Market Bill and the provisions which indicate a willingness to be in breach of international law in certain circumstances relating to intra-UK trade viz Northern Ireland.

That collective preference for a soft Brexit places them completely at odds with the second contingent whose hallmarks are support for “Leave” in the 2016 referendum, opposition to Mrs May’s Withdrawal Agreement and a relatively relaxed view of the UK reverting to WTO rules if no satisfactory accord with the EU comes before December 31. Indeed this set of MPs is far more troubled by the possibility of notable concessions to the EU in order to secure a compact than it is about a failure to strike a bargain with it. And as noted, while virtually all of those in the second section of Conservative MPs are not convinced about current COVID-19 policies, they have subtly different worries which makes it possible for Ministers to pick off sub-sections of them with new promises.

This incompatibility extends to whom the two segments would support in the event of there being an unexpected vacancy for the leadership in the near future. The strong favourite if this were to occur would be Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor. As he was a far more convincing supporter of Brexit in 2016 and afterwards than the Prime Minister, his elevation would not necessarily be advantageous at all to the soft Brexit set of MPs. In reality, they would not have a natural contender in any leadership contest who really shared their views on post-Brexit policy and out of pragmatism would probably tilt to Sajid Javid, the ex-Chancellor, but with no compelling expectation that he would win.

The second contingent, while it would take a lot to make them abandon the Prime Minister, would be entirely comfortable with the “economy first” stand on tackling the virus which Mr Sunak seems to represent and a more detached position from the EU in terms of the UK’s approach to regulatory policy which he again appears to champion.

It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that there will be very few first order issues on which it would be possible to fuse the different sources of Conservative discontent.

Labour's strategy in Parliament makes cross-party alignment very difficult too.

In theory, at least, the Government could be undermined on either COVID policy or Brexit if one of the two Conservative factions were to collaborate with Labour. This would be a high stakes approach and risk expulsion from the parliamentary party but as witnessed in the last Parliament it is a direction that some might be willing to take.

It does not appear very likely to take place, not least because of the strategy that the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer has adopted on the virus and towards Brexit.

On COVID, with minor exceptions it has been Labour's position that it supported the restrictions that were imposed in March, backed the liberalisation of the lockdown that followed from June to August and has endorsed the restoration of the harder rules both locally and across in England since September. It has instead focused its attacks on the Government almost entirely on the execution of policy. Sir Keir took a populist tack on the 10pm closure rule at PMQs on Wednesday but did so not on the notion itself but the absence of published scientific evidence to justify matters. He is likely to maintain this stance almost irrespective of what ministers might or might not do in the months ahead.

The Labour leadership has no more desire to make an emphatic choice between "public health" and "public wealth" than senior figures in the Cabinet do. They want both (and being the Opposition do not have to concern themselves with the tensions in this stand). Neither the civil libertarian nor economy first set of Conservative MPs are likely to find a policy matter of serious principle where they can force their hand in league with Labour.

The soft Brexit set of Conservative MPs is also set to be disappointed by Sir Keir. The Leader of the Opposition is taking care to immunise himself from the charge that he is obstructing the Brexit outcome that the December 2019 election was seen to certify. The only matter on which he has prominently stood up against the Government has been on the contentious aspects of the Internal Market Bill but he was more than willing to let others, especially past leading figures in the Conservative Party, be more prominent. This strategy would be put under severe strain if the UK does appear to be heading towards

WTO rules by the end of this year, but even then the chances of an overt alliance with dissident Conservative MPs appear to be exceptionally finite and the scale of the revolt that this camp could mobilise would not be large enough to derail the Government. In such circumstances, almost all of Mr Johnson's internal opponents on the centre-left would hold fire and hope that the switch to WTO rules proved to be a debacle on such a scale as to undermine his standing completely and force a fresh approach to the EU.

The movement in the opinion polls is still well short of seismic in magnitude.

A catastrophic shift in the opinion polls of a sort akin to that which struck the John Major Government after the UK's exit from the exchange rate mechanism in September 1992 or the twin hits that Gordon Brown received after encouraging speculation about an early election that he then did not call in 2007 and once the global financial crisis struck a year later, would certainly make Conservative MPs contemplate the leadership issue even if they had backed Mr Johnson in July 2019 or thought they owed their victory in their own constituency to him in the December 2019 contest. The Conservative Party has always been much more ruthless in this regard than the Labour Party is to its leaders.

Although the polling numbers have plainly plummeted from the unprecedented heights of the Spring when the ratings for the Prime Minister and the Government were close to sensational (lockdown, despite obvious inconveniences, was wildly popular at the start), they have been broadly stable for a number of weeks now. They tend to show a small Conservative advantage, a dead heat, or, and less often, a slight Labour edge at times.

This is not movement of a magnitude that would compel Conservative MPs to dust off the party rulebook on leadership elections. This is particularly true when there is such a long period of time to elapse before the Government needs to face the electorate (a duration that would be extended further if and when the Fixed-Term Parliament Act of 2011 is repealed which, presumably, would make late 2024 not May 2024 the deadline).

What is really interesting about the recent opinion polls is what is not happening. The headline number in terms of percentage of the vote in a national election for the

Conservative Party has fallen slightly from where it was at the 2019 election but only modestly and often to the advantage of the Brexit Party (who appeal to those who are really, really hostile to lockdowns of any type). The Labour vote has risen from 33% at the last election to 38%-40% as of today but the vast bulk of that increase has come from the Liberal Democrats, whose 2019 supporters clearly prefer Sir Keir to Jeremy Corbyn. Evidence of direct switching from Conservative to Labour over COVID-19 policy or the efficiency of conducting that policy is, for now, close to invisible. It would be precisely a shift of that kind and of substantial scale that would be needed to undercut the PM. If it does not manifest itself, then the case for internal insurrection is a rather weak one.

There is no data, for now, that suggests the public backs an “economy first” stance.

A majority of backbench Conservative MPs, if obliged to declare their private thoughts, would probably prefer the balance between maximising public health and minimising the damage to the economy to fall on the “economy first” side of that divide. The difficulty for them in attempting to press ministers in that direction is that on the data that is available now, not simply a majority of all voters but a plurality of Conservative voters are not convinced that this is the direction that they would want to take and are ready to tolerate some additional restrictions on both personal movement and the hospitality and leisure sectors until the numbers of new cases are seen to be heading downward again. Whether that sentiment holds true when unemployment starts to rise after the end of October is a matter of debate, but for the moment those who might favour an approach that was considerably more Swedish than Scottish do not have the wind at their backs.

Their difficulties in this regard will be compounded if Joe Biden comfortably defeats President Trump on November 3rd. Rightly or wrongly (as the situation is a much more complicated one than simply the short-term response to the coronavirus crisis), Mr Biden and the Democrats are perceived as placing more weight on public health than protecting the economy, while the President and the Republicans are thought to favour the opposite approach. The aftermath of a Democratic victory would be held up by ministers as evidence that even in a country which has experienced a much larger shock to unemployment than is the case for the UK, public health overrides public wealth and that the Conservative Party should continue to seek a balanced approach rather than do

anything that smacks of putting business interests ahead of hospital admission rates. The hard core of “economy first” Conservative MPs might dispute this interpretation but the bulk of mainstream opinion within the parliamentary party would align with ministers.

The prospect of a vaccine is making all sides careful about their commitments.

The working assumption at Westminster has to be that a vaccine announcement will be made at some point within the next few months but that it involves multiple political uncertainties depending on the public response, the schedule for a mass vaccination strategy and the perceived coherence of implementing an exercise of this scale. The best case for the Government is that if it is the Oxford/AstraZenica version of a vaccine which crosses the line first, then it is the equivalent of an Ace of Trumps in the wider debate as to how well the crisis was handled. The worst case is that execution of vaccination turns out to be as difficult as testing, tracking and tracing have been and that the potential positive impact of the arrival of a vaccine is cancelled out by poor implementation. The knowledge that the vaccine may enter the equation is, nevertheless, a strong argument for caution both for the Prime Minister’s external and internal opponents in Parliament.

The factors outlined here do not mean that ministers can dismiss the discontent that they are well aware exists amongst Conservative MPs and frame policy regardless. The level of parliamentary information and consultation increased when there was the threat that the “Brady Amendment” might be called to a vote by the Speaker (which in the end it was not). Ministers will want to minimise the size of the rebellion if and when a vote is held on the 10pm curfew in the House of Commons next week. Whether this is done by the carrot of pledging to review it in the relatively near future (or allowing local directly elected Mayors and Councils more of a voice about the measure) or the stick of warning that the real alternative to a continued 10pm closing time is not a later one but the sort of restrictions than have been announced in Scotland, depends crucially on the hospital admission rates, the latest ONS estimate on the number of new case infections and the revised SAGE calculations on the R number that will be released in the course of today. Much the same will be true of the fine-tuning which will occur over the weekend as ministers finalise a new three-tier formula for imposing local restrictions in England.

The media narrative about the standing of the Prime Minister within his own party in Parliament should, though, continue to be taken with an extremely large pinch of salt. The preconditions for a full-blown serious leadership crisis are some distance away still.

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