

## WINNING TRUST, LOSING SUPPORT

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In his first major test following his party's thumping victory in the 2019 general elections, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, last week, won a no-confidence vote within the Conservative Party by receiving 211 of the 359 MP votes. By doing so, he secured the comfort of not having to face another such trust vote for at least one more year. But a look at past such votes among the Tories and how the leadership fared following such relatively close votes shows that Mr. Johnson is headed towards a period of more turmoil for his leadership.

Mr. Johnson's latest troubles were on account of his brazen conduct during the COVID-19 pandemic when he and other Conservative party colleagues organised and participated in parties and gatherings even as public health restrictions were imposed in the country in late 2021 and early 2022.

An internal investigation led by civil servant Sue Gray released a report that squarely blamed the Tory government leadership for the parties held during the lockdown, including those that had "excessive alcohol consumption". Ironically, after a series of policy gaffes during the first COVID-19 outbreak in Britain, a chastened Mr. Johnson had sought to correct his government's record on public health after himself being infected with the novel coronavirus and having been admitted to intensive health care for cure. In the subsequent COVID-19 waves, though, the "partygate" scandal erupted again to discredit his government's efforts.

Bogged down by this scandal and economic woes that have afflicted Britain following Brexit and later the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Tories suffered a massive defeat in local body elections held in May 2022. All these issues emboldened rebels within the Tories to call a trust vote against Mr. Johnson and for now, he has survived it.

Mr. Johnson's performance in the trust vote was worse than that of predecessor Theresa May. Ms. May won the backing of 63% of her party's MPs in 2019, but had to resign six months after the vote with the leadership passing on to Mr. Johnson. His strong backing of Brexit allowed him to not just take the helm of the Tories but also deliver a telling victory in the 2019 elections. The December 2019 win, however, seems to be Mr. Johnson's apogee moment as his government's performance especially, during the pandemic since then, has only led to a gradual slide in the Tories' popularity.

As things stand, pollster Yougov showed that 69% of adults polled in the first week of June said the Tory government was performing "badly" as opposed to only 24% who said it was doing "well", a reversal of positions in December 2019 when the corresponding numbers were 26% and 66%, respectively.

Mr. Johnson's reversal of fortunes will not come as a surprise to those who have followed the career of a politician who was described in an article in *The Hindu* by British writer Richard Seymour as a "gaffeur, entertainer [and] Brexiteer". Formerly, the Prime Minister served two terms as London's Mayor and during both tenures, went through a series of scandals, reminiscent of what he is going through during his premiership. As a columnist in the British press, Mr. Johnson was well-known for provocative remarks about black people, gay men, and British colonialism. In his earlier tenure as the Foreign Secretary, he was equally prone to embarrassing gaffes and old conservative chauvinism that celebrated British colonialism.

## Public persona

But a carefully cultivated public persona of being an entertaining, gaffe-prone politician and a public celebrity who was the cynosure of Britain's vast right wing press helped him stave off any serious scrutiny of his otherwise weak public record even as new political currents in Britain such as the Brexit issue helped him climb the ladder to the top. Mr. Seymour calls Mr. Johnson the embodiment of "not just the 'celebrification' of politics, but also its relentless and poisonous triviality" — an outcome of the British right wing's deliberate cultivation of the "cultures of flippancy, contrarianism and online irony".

Mr. Johnson's championing of Brexit began as prominent support of the "Vote Leave" campaign in the 2016 EU membership referendum. Using rabble rousing rhetoric such as voting leave would mean that the referendum day could be "Britain's independence day", Mr. Johnson came across as a prominent voice for Britain's exit from the EU. Later, as PM, after complications over Brexit that was being negotiated with the EU, Mr. Johnson declared that he had asked the Queen to prorogue Parliament from September 2019.

This was a tactic to narrow the window for Parliament from blocking a "no-deal Brexit". This move was stymied by the Supreme Court, which ruled that Mr. Johnson's advice to prorogue Parliament was unlawful.

Yet, after much confusion on the Brexit matter with the Tories unable to reach a consensus in the House of Commons for a withdrawal agreement of their liking, his strident support for the Leave position, exemplified in the Tories' 'Get Brexit Done' slogan helped him and the party win a landslide parliamentary majority in the 2019 elections. The victory allowed Brexit to finally happen on January 31, 2020 with the U.K. becoming the only sovereign country to have left the EU. The exit was not without consequences for the British economy, which has endured a series of setbacks in recent years.

The Brexit agreement also included the thorny Northern Ireland protocol that tackled the question of Northern Ireland being part of the EU's single market (and therefore to follow the EU's product standards) by allowing for inspections and checks for products from the rest of the U.K. to be done at Northern Ireland ports instead of the border between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland.

After the withdrawal of support for the Tory-led government by the loyalist Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland and following its historic defeat and the rise of the republican Sinn Fein there, Mr. Johnson now proposes to override the protocol, which he himself negotiated with the EU, in new legislation that is reported to be due for publication next week, according to *The Guardian*. Clearly, Mr. Johnson is seeking to revive his sagging fortunes following much disenchantment — both within the Tories and among the general electorate — with his governance record and trying to use the "Brexit" trump card yet again.

His ploy to play up support for Euro-scepticism is also ironically coming at a time when Britain has taken a strident position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine seeking to rally other countries in Europe to isolate Russia. Such contrary positions are not new to Mr. Johnson and his brand of politics. His attempt to "reset" his leadership following the trust vote victory seems yet another desperate ploy to recast his flagging image but it remains to be seen whether he can buck the trend of previous Tory PMs who faded into oblivion after such narrow victories in their own party's trust votes.

According to a recent poll, 69% of adults are of the view that the Tory government was performing “badly”, a huge fall from December 2019 when 66% said the govt. was doing well

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