

New Directions:

Boris Johnson and English Conservatism

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Andrew Gamble (Sheffield) places Johnson's Conservative Party in the tradition of pragmatic One Nation Conservatism. Due to the contradictory nature of its commitments, the party cannot possibly deliver on all its promises, and Gamble predicts "a lot of pork barrel politics" to come. Ultimately, however, he suggests that the commitment to Global Britain, associated with a neoliberal agenda, will trump other political interests.

The Conservatives under Boris Johnson won a substantial victory in the December 2019 General Election, finishing with a majority of more than eighty seats. This ended a decade of hung parliaments, small majorities and coalition government. Although the Conservative party had been in office since 2010 the Johnson Government flush with electoral success presented itself in the few heady weeks before the Covid emergency struck as a new Government with a radical new agenda, as though some other party had been in Government for the previous ten years. The central promise the Conservatives made in the election campaign

was that it would get Brexit done, but Brexit meant different things to different parts of its coalition, as it had done during the Referendum. It meant both *Global Britain* and *Britain First*. Should Britain become Singapore on Thames, a global free market trader, or turn inwards and build walls to protect itself? During the election the Conservatives played up the *Britain First* theme, successfully targeting 'Red Wall' seats in the North of England, many of them traditional working class Labour strongholds. These new voters were promised that a new Conservative Government would invest heavily in these neglected left behind areas to level them up with London and the South East. To his new red base Johnson promised state intervention, and state spending and immigration control to look after them. To his blue base in the South of England Johnson promised tax cuts and deregulation, the next stage of the Thatcherite revolution in setting the people free. Is this a new Conservative party in the making, or just the old Conservative party in new clothes?

The Conservative party is Britain's oldest and most successful political party. It has been the party of the Land but also the party of the City; the party of little England and the party of Empire; the party of protectionism and the party of the free market; the 'nasty' party and the party of gay marriage; the party of Europe and now the party of Brexit. The list of its many mutations is a long one. Conservatives dreaded the coming of universal suffrage but after it arrived they have governed either alone or in coalition for two thirds of the time. That required drawing at least half their support from working-class voters. Boris Johnson's pursuit of working class votes is not new. It is a condition of Conservative success.

Opponents have often wondered why this party of property and privilege has been so successful and so long-lived, compared to many other parties of the European Centre Right. Part of the answer lies in the ability of the party to reinvent itself, never allowing itself to get stuck in a ditch defending the indefensible, and always striving to be pragmatic and flexible. This has meant giving priority to statecraft and the pursuit of power rather than to ideology. As Anthony Trollope remarked about the nineteenth century Tory party (he might have been writing about Boris Johnson): "No reform, no innovation ... no revolution stinks so foully in the nostrils of an English Tory as to be absolutely irreconcilable to him. When taken in the refreshing waters of office any such pill can be swallowed."

The classic Tory One Nation formula for government was set out by Benjamin

Disraeli when he said at Crystal Palace in 1872 that the three great objects of the Conservative party were to maintain the institutions of the country, to uphold the Empire of England, and to elevate the condition of the people. How best to do this and build an electoral coalition sufficient to keep the Conservatives in government has always preoccupied Conservative leaders.

As soon as he became Leader Boris Johnson sought an early general election. His decisive victory secured his leadership and crushed his opponents, particularly those in his own party. His dream of governing for a decade needed a big majority to have any chance of success. The last time the Conservatives won such a majority was in 1987, the third of Margaret Thatcher's emphatic wins. Since 2010 the Conservatives have fought three elections, but only won an outright majority once, in 2015, and then a small one. Johnson needed to win big, and is happiest when taking risks and creating chaos, reshaping the Conservative party and British politics as he does so.

Johnson's aim in the 2019 election of persuading Leave voters in northern working class Labour seats to vote Conservative was not a new strategy. It is what the Conservatives have always had to do. Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May both pursued it. The Conservatives built their dominance around the pillars of Union, Empire, the Rule of Law, Property and Welfare. Conservatives were traditionally the party of the Establishment, the Crown, the Aristocracy, the Armed Services and the Police, the Law, the Church, the public schools, and Oxford and Cambridge. They supported the Empire and

the Union, protectionism against free trade, the gradual improvement of welfare services, and state intervention when necessary to protect citizens from hardship.

This tradition of pragmatic One Nation Conservatism was associated with Baldwin and Chamberlain in the 1930s, and then with Churchill, Eden and Macmillan in the 1950s, with increasing moves towards economic liberalism. Edward Heath tried to continue it but his government suffered a spectacular shipwreck, and in the ensuing chaos Margaret Thatcher seized the leadership in 1975. She was responsible for another hugely significant reinvention of the Conservatives as the party of the free market, ending its interventionist and collectivist Chamberlainite tradition.

Thatcher's legacy has been mixed for the Conservative party. She transformed its electoral and governing fortunes, allowing the Conservatives to win four elections and rule for eighteen years. She broke Labour's post-war settlement which most Conservatives had come to accept and many of its institutional bases, and set the UK political economy on a new path. But the way she governed ultimately undermined many of the pillars which had supported Conservatism for so long and paved the way for Labour's longest ever period in government under Tony Blair. Her social background and her gender made Thatcher an outsider in the party and even when Prime Minister, she still thought of herself as an outsider fighting against the Government and the Establishment. This populist (and very unConservative) pose of being anti-Establishment and for the people

against the 'elites' is one which Brexiters including Johnson have tried to copy, not very convincingly. It is hard to be taken seriously as an outsider when you have been educated at Eton.

In forging her new electoral coalition Thatcher lost an older one. The Conservative and Unionist party used to be able to claim that it represented all parts of the country. They won a majority of the seats and 50 per cent of the vote in Scotland in 1955. They had a significant presence in all the big industrial cities, and for a long time dominated the politics of Birmingham and Liverpool. But all that went. Conservative support collapsed in Scotland (in 1997 they failed to win a single seat) and also in northern cities. Thatcher bequeathed a party which had become predominantly an English party, its vote disproportionately concentrated in the South and South-East and no longer a mass membership party. The 160,000 members that remain are disproportionately elderly, white and middle class, unrepresentative either of Conservative voters or of the wider electorate, and are not being replaced by the recruitment of sufficient younger voters.

Since Thatcher was ousted members have often been out of step with the party leadership, particularly on Europe. Under John Major two thirds of the parliamentary party were pro-Europe, one third was anti-Europe. In the constituencies it was the other way round. Iain Duncan Smith defeated Ken Clarke for the leadership in 2001 because of Clarke's pro-European views. Boris Johnson always calculated that so long as he could get to

the membership stage of the leadership ballot his anti-EU credentials honed over many years would carry him to victory. The membership has also had an increasing hand in deciding the shape of the parliamentary party by selecting anti-EU candidates.

This was one front in the civil war which has raged in the party over Europe going back six decades, but which became particularly virulent in the 1990s at the time of the passage of the Maastricht Treaty, and again under David Cameron and Theresa May. The election of 2019 was the final act in reshaping the Conservative party as an English nationalist Brexit party. The pro-European strand which used to dominate the party lost the civil war, and many of them stepped down as MPs. Some have joined other parties. The job was completed by the reshuffle Johnson announced after the election, in particular the ousting of Sajid Javid as Chancellor. Hardly any one of any significance is left in Cabinet who voted Remain in 2016, and the numbers of pro-European Conservatives in the parliamentary party is much smaller.

This great schism, which had on one side John Major, Michael Heseltine, Ken Clarke, Amber Rudd and Philip Hammond, and on the other Norman Tebbit, Iain Duncan Smith, John Redwood, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Priti Patel had finally become unbridgeable. John Major when he was Prime Minister withdrew the whip from nine of the Maastricht rebels because they were making his task of governing impossible. Theresa May never did the same for the hardline anti-EU faction in the Conservative party, the ERG, who refused

to pass her withdrawal agreement, mainly because of her dread of splitting the party. Boris Johnson had no such scruples. Two months after becoming Leader he expelled 21 MPs, including two former chancellors for voting against his Government. Johnson signalled that he was happy for a formal split to take place, and that only those in favour of a hard Brexit were welcome in the party and to serve in his Cabinet.

Europe is the third great major schism in the history of the modern Conservative party over Britain's place in the world. The first was in 1846 when Robert Peel repealed the Corn Laws with the support of opposition MPs. Two thirds of his own MPs voted against him. The Conservative party lost the battle on free trade and did not form a majority government for almost thirty years. A second great schism took place at the start of the twentieth century over free trade and tariff reform. The Conservatives became the party of Tariff Reform, seeking to transform the far-flung British Empire into a cohesive economic bloc to rival the continental empires and customs unions of Germany and the United States. Conservative MPs who did not support reform were purged by their constituencies. Winston Churchill crossed the floor and joined the Liberals. By 1910 there were very few supporters of free trade and liberal imperialism left in the Conservative Party.

In the 1960s with the end of Empire approaching the Conservative party pivoted to become the party of Europe. Harold Macmillan saw the pooling of sovereignty in Europe and the economic and political cooperation it made

possible as the new framework which would give Britain influence, security and prosperity. But the decision was always contested, and the opposition never entirely went away even after Britain joined the Community in 1973, and after the 1975 Referendum confirmed that decision with a 2:1 majority. Under Thatcher the leadership became divided over the desirability of further integration. Thatcher herself was an architect of one of the most far-reaching acts of integration, the single market, but she baulked at the further stages of integration which were planned, especially the idea of a social Europe.

This ignited the civil war which Johnson has now brought to an end and which has transformed the Conservative party. As Iain Duncan Smith, a former Leader of the party has argued, the Tory party is now the Brexit party. There is no room for Remainers in its ranks. Long vilified by the Conservative press as traitors and wreckers, it was time for them to depart. *Daily Telegraph* columnists have been repeatedly calling for a purge, but many MPs left without waiting for it. Johnson won the Referendum and then the leadership by siding firmly with the Brexiteers in the party, and has reshaped the Cabinet and the parliamentary party accordingly. At the 2019 election the party shed part of its base among moderate Conservative Remain voters, but replaced them with Labour working class Leave voters.

Johnson and many of those around him claim to be great defenders of the Union, but his strategy has been all about England where 85 per cent of the UK population live. In practice he treats the Union as dispensable.

The Conservative recovery in Remain-voting Scotland under Ruth Davidson has gone into reverse and Davidson herself has departed. A recent opinion poll found that 70 per cent of Scots thought Nicola Sturgeon was handling the Covid emergency well, but only 40 per cent of Scots thought that of Johnson. The withdrawal agreement Johnson signed with the EU was achieved by betraying the Conservatives' DUP allies in Northern Ireland. In 1912 the Conservatives changed their name to the Conservative and Unionist Party. Under Johnson they have become the Conservative and Brexit party, a party of English nationalism. After securing a large majority based on English constituencies in 2019 Johnson no longer needed DUP support.

The two strands of Johnson's agenda on which he was elected seem to point in different directions. The first is the pledge to make Britain *Global Britain* once more, freed from the shackles of the EU, the next stage of the Thatcherite revolution. The second is *Britain First*, the pledge to level up and rebalance the economy, shrinking the inequalities which emerged so starkly as a consequence of the *Global Britain* policies pursued by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s. It seeks to consolidate Conservative support in the seats won in Labour's Red Wall.

The *Global Britain* agenda implies radical divergence from the EU. Johnson's view is that the UK must not be a passive rule taker, so cannot belong to either the single market or the customs union. It must have the freedom to pursue trade deals with non-EU states, signalling

the end of frictionless trade with the EU, creating a difficult period of adjustment and possibly no trade deal at all. There will be winners and losers and in the short term the economy will be smaller than it would otherwise have been. But in the longer run he expects the economy will be larger and more dynamic because looser regulation and lower taxes particularly in new emerging sectors will stimulate higher rates of economic growth.

No trade agreement means no deal and an economic shock. But its severity may well be concealed by the greater economic dislocation caused by Covid. The effect is still likely to be the disruption of many supply chains and a radical restructuring of the British economy. Those sectors of the UK economy which are highly dependent on trade with the EU will go under, shrink or be forced to diversify into other markets. The Government then expects new sectors such as AI to emerge. Such an economic shock is what supporters of a No-Deal Brexit have always wanted, believing that as in 1979 what the British economy requires is the breakup of the economic model which has become entrenched. Although the Government may ultimately balk at inflicting still further economic damage after Covid, their strategy for *Global Britain* seems to require it. Brexit is not Brexit unless there is radical change in the EU/UK relationship. *Global Britain* is conceived by Johnson as the antithesis of EU membership.

Because of the Covid emergency the vision for a more competitive and open *Global Britain* is being launched in the worst possible circumstances. It also clashes with the

Government's vision for *Britain First*, which aims to level up opportunities and resources for all citizens, particularly in those towns and regions outside the big cities which have suffered cumulative disadvantage in the last forty years. These are unlikely to be the cutting edge of *Global Britain*. What they want is not more globalisation but less. They want economic security, infrastructure investment, better public services, and much less immigration. *Global Britain* embraces free trade, a minimal state, and a capitalism which is more dynamic, open, cosmopolitan and inegalitarian. Johnson it seems is even willing to give British citizenship to three million residents of Hong Kong in pursuit of this. *Britain First* by contrast embraces protectionism, an interventionist state, tight borders and a capitalism which is more risk-averse, closed, communitarian and egalitarian.

The Johnson Government cannot deliver both free trade *and* protection, lower taxation *and* better public services, higher economic growth *and* a big reduction in immigration. Showing itself more protectionist in some areas and more free trade in others it will look for compromises which work politically. There will be a lot of pork barrel politics in this new era. New bus services and reopened train lines will mushroom in northern constituencies which voted Conservative, along with new initiatives on skills and new subsidies for regional investment, bypassing existing Treasury rules. But the government will also know that its Blue Wall supporters in the South and in the shires are expecting cuts in income tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax, and it

will be under pressure to deliver those as well.

The decisions it makes in the next few years will reflect the trade-off between its *Global Britain* priorities and its *Britain First* priorities, and how those play with the different elements of its parliamentary and electoral coalition. Boris Johnson's main characteristic as a political leader is wanting to have his cake and to eat it at the same time, and he will try to avoid as long as possible a choice between these two priorities. But ultimately when he needs to, the lure of *Global Britain* is likely to prove the stronger.