# Boris Johnson and the Future of British Conservatism

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Who is Boris Johnson? This is a question commentators and political analysts frequently asked themselves over the course of the 2019 Conservative Party leadership election. There is Boris the London Mayor (joker); Boris the MP (worker); Boris the Foreign Secretary (shirker); and now Boris the Prime Minister. During the campaign another question was often asked: can Boris be beaten? And if so, by whom? As the results indicated throughout the campaign, none of the other Tory candidates were able to defeat him. Ultimately, Johnson overwhelmingly triumphed against his closest leadership contender, Jeremy Hunt, securing 92, 153 (66.4%) of the membership ballot and a clear majority in the final vote of Conservative MPs. Johnson’s support from the Conservative Party is clear. But what does this mean for the future of conservatism in British politics?

As one of our richest and oldest political and intellectual traditions, conservatism has been renewed and reshaped many times since the liberal democratic system emerged. Norton and Aughey describe conservatism as ‘a habit of mind which naturally disposes members of the party to perceive what is necessary in changing circumstances’. Traditional conservatism, One Nation conservatism, and liberal conservatism are but three such traditions which have played a significant role in the government of the UK. For Gamble, liberal conservatism is driven by free ‘market liberalism as a dominant public philosophy’. During the recent Conservative Party leadership election, candidates were afforded opportunities to articulate their own understanding of conservatism in the context of contemporary political debates, particularly surrounding Brexit, the economy, the future of social policy, and the future of the UK’s global role. It is interesting to note in their responses that the majority of candidates displayed significant ideological unity in their arguments, often embracing the central pillars of free market liberalism.

The free market liberal conservative tendency is reflected in the composition of the party membership. A recent YouGov poll asked Conservative Party members to categorise their conception of conservatism along broadly defined descriptions. When asked ‘which category do they believe best applies to them’, members described themselves as Thatcherite (56 per cent); Free Market Conservative (43 per cent); Traditionalist (31per cent); One Nation (30 per cent); Liberal Conservative (25 per cent); Moderniser (20 per cent); Cameron (13 per cent); None (6 per cent); Unsure (3 per cent). Most Conservative Party members tend towards free market Thatcherism rather than the moderniser wing that candidates such as Rory Stewart tried to appeal to.



Figure 1: How Conservative Party members define themselves

The 2019 Conservative leadership election

Rory Stewart’s candidature in the earlier stages of the leadership election looked towards a more consensual form of conservatism that echoed the aspirations (if not the successes) of the Cameron period of modernisation. Stewart framed his bid for the leadership as the ‘anti-Boris’ candidate by urging a more socially conscious form of conservatism that continued to embrace some of the basic pillars of social democracy, such as the importance of the welfare state and the principle of the state as a significant actor involved in economic management. When interviewed by *ConservativeHome*, Stewart spoke fondly of the National Health Service. ‘The enthusiasm with which the country seized on the introduction of the NHS after the war shows how deep-rooted a belief in a universal health care system, free at the point of access,’ he said. Whilst the other candidates did not subvert this analysis, Stewart was more enthusiastic to display social policy as part of his ideological agenda. Michael Gove leant more towards the Cameronite form of modernised conservatism in his economic and social vision. For Gove, a key part of his political agenda was to reinvigorate communities that had not seen economic or social improvements over recent years, whilst embracing the free market and individualism.

Throughout the campaign Jeremy Hunt, however, sought to capture the entrepreneurial appeal of conservatism. Hunt made much of his own business background, saying: ‘I will back the entrepreneurs and business people that fund our public services because I’m one of them’. For Hunt, prosperity is generated through wealth creation and small enterprise. By placing such an emphasis on this strategy, Hunt displayed a preference for job creation over the interventionist approaches preferred by Stewart.

In contrast, Boris Johnson emphasised greater controls over immigration. The leadership front runner consciously sought to respond to one of the key arguments used to justify the vote for the UK to leave the European Union. Moreover, Johnson also pitched himself as a strong unionist, arguing that he wanted to ‘ensure that the UK gets proper credit for UK policy achievements, not just the devolved governments and assembles’ and that he wanted to ‘put a dedicated point person in Number 10 to ensure that all policy promotes the Union’. Johnson appeared to be responding to growing discontent towards Westminster and possible calls for future debates over devolution and independence, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Johnson the populist?

So, can Johnson be described as a ‘populist’? He appeals to those looking for a traditional form of popular conservatism, however does this mean he is a populist? Tim Bale, writing for *The Conversation*, insightfully argued that ‘we can only guess as to how many of Johnson’s supporters were former Ukip sympathisers switching to the Tories; but it certainly seems possible. And, who knows, given that one doesn’t have to renounce one’s membership of the Conservative Party to become a registered supporter of the Brexit Party, perhaps some of them hold a candle for Nigel Farage as well as Johnson’. Given the populist undercurrents of the Brexit Party, it is possible that a significant portion of those voting for Johnson as leader had populist sympathies. This does not necessarily mean Johnson himself can be described as a populist, however he certainly can be described as popular.

The arguments during the campaign gave an insight into the candidates’ ideological positions. Given what we know about the Tory party membership, it is no surprise that the candidate arguing for the most economically liberal agenda (tied to a hard Brexit position) emerged as the winner. Indeed, as Johnson’s successful election indicates, the majority of the membership associate themselves with socially and economically liberal positions. However, it is worth briefly considering the sacrifices some Conservative Party members are willing to make to secure ‘Brexit’. Some 59 per cent would prioritise leaving the EU even if it meant Northern Ireland breaking away from the rest of the UK. This raises questions about the commitment of some members towards the Union as currently constituted. Even so, Johnson wasted no time in committing his leadership to the Union once he had secured victory over Jeremy Hunt.

Renewing conservatism for the 2020s

Johnson’s leadership victory affords him an opportunity to renew conservatism in the context of Brexit and economic reforms. As an issue that has dominated British political debates since June 2016, it is inevitable Brexit would be foremost on the minds of the selectorate. Polls suggest that the public would punish the new Prime Minister if Johnson went for a general election before Brexit is delivered. However, it remains unclear how leaving the European Union will address the problem of the resurgent Liberal Democrats as a Remain party. Meanwhile, as highlighted by the young conservative group Blue Beyond, there are significant housing problems facing young people. Blue Beyond’s Luke Black has said that ‘even moderately affluent millennials are unable to get on the property ladder or rent a property that doesn’t cost half of their monthly salary.

With Brexit and Johnson’s elevation to the Premiership, conservatism in the UK is facing moment of ideological shift. Johnson has pledged to defeat Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party. But this would require more than just personality and self-belief. In the 2017 General Election, the Conservative Party appeared complacent about defeating socialism whilst forgetting Thatcher’s warning that ‘you may have to fight a battle more than once to win it’. Complacency on the right – and the assumption that capitalism was an undefeatable force – afforded more radical left leaning ideas to develop into a position where they now pose a significant electoral challenge to the Conservatives. In order to defeat Corbyn at the ballot box, the Boris-led Conservatives will need to re-sell capitalism afresh to an electorate who have forgotten why it is worth preserving. Indeed, Corbyn’s Labour successfully painted the Conservatives under May as detached and elitist. Consequently, the Conservatives will need to subvert this and justify conservatism as the most beneficial economic and social system for the 2020s.

Looking to the future, it is worth considering how Johnson will reform economic, social, and international policy post-Brexit. During the leadership election Johnson made no secret of his affection for US President Donald Trump. Indeed, during the campaign, Johnson argued that Trump ‘has many, many good qualities. This is a guy who, when all is said and done, has got the US economy motoring along at about 3.6 per cent growth’. Johnson also complained that ‘we Conservatives, I think, for too long have failed to talk up the agenda of free market economics, and we’ve failed to be positive about it’. These arguments seem designed to facilitate a trade deal with the United States shortly after Brexit. In terms of broader international policy, it is likely the Johnson administration will seek to forge closer economic relations with the Commonwealth and the broader Anglosphere. The objective of this closer relationship would be to facilitate a more economically liberal relationship with these states as a means of ‘reinvigorating’ free trade internationally after Brexit.

Conclusion

Boris Johnson finds himself in a position to redefine many of the assumptions that have underscored British politics since the end of the New Labour period. As Conservative Party leader, he has an opportunity to forge a new form of conservatism distinct from Cameronism without appearing too ‘populist’ (or Trumpian) in his policy agenda. Johnson’s selection of a number of prominent free trade Brexiters in his first cabinet suggests that he is keen to develop closer relationships with the United States, the Commonwealth, and the Anglosphere. Such a shift toward more economically liberal ideas would fit into broader typologies of conservatism outlined by both Norton and Aughey and Gamble.

Alongside this policy shift, Johnson will need to reform conservatism as a concept that reflects the aspirations of the electorate more broadly. Given that conservatism views the role of the state as one of a minimum provider, this is likely to revolve around removing perceived obstacles to wealth creation, the provision of skills training for those who need re-skilling, more enthusiasm for private sector development in technological innovations, and a readiness to reduce taxation for all. These ideas may appeal to Conservative voters, however to sell them to the wider electorate requires an acceptance of the need to do so. The complacency that capitalism and freedom are the default positions has partly enabled a resurgence of classic statist socialism in the Labour Party. To defeat this, the Conservative Party needs to begin justifying capitalism all over again.

References

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