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One Nation Conservatism from Disraeli to Johnson

Boris Johnson and Beyond: The Revival of One Nation Conservatism?

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Introduction

- ¹ As other contributors to this volume have pointed out, the term “One Nation” is a persistent, yet problematic one in the history of the Conservative Party. Like other recent Conservative Prime Ministers, Boris Johnson has sought to engage and align with this tradition, and on ascending to the premiership in July 2019, he indicated on numerous occasions that he would govern in a One Nation manner. Such sentiments were further developed and more coherently re-affirmed in his first annual conference speech as Conservative Leader in October 2019:

We are the party of the NHS and I claim that title because it is our one nation conservatism that has delivered and will deliver the economic growth that makes those investments possible and it is we Conservatives who will solve the problem of social care and end the injustice that means people have to sell their home to pay for their old age.¹

- ² With an emphasis on positively supporting and delivering core social policies in particular, Johnson’s “One Nation” narrative consequently went on to play a prominent part in the Conservatives gaining a raft of previously unassailable seats within Labour’s “Red Wall” at the 2019 general election.²
- ³ While there were arguably a range of more complex short and longer-term factors to explain these significant parliamentary gains, Johnson was quick to forcefully re-affirm such “One Nation” sentiments in the immediate aftermath of his impressive general election victory in December 2019:

We must recognise the incredible reality that we now speak as a One Nation Conservative party literally for everyone from Woking to Workington; from Kensington, I'm proud to say, to Clwyd South; from Surrey Heath to Sedgefield; from Wimbledon to Wolverhampton.³

- 4 In doing so, he carefully and deliberately name-checked several of the new geographical areas that had been ushered into the Conservative fold, in many cases for the first time. Yet Johnson's effusive and deliberately repeated use of this "One Nation" language and vocabulary in his prime ministerial role immediately raises two problems which this article seeks to address. The first, given its contested nature, is what is precisely meant in this context by "One Nation", and therefore what did Johnson mean by it when he used the term. Here we draw on a previous article which we believe provides an effective way of addressing this issue. The second, given his controversial nature, is what was Johnson's ideological position as Prime Minister – in particular what did he seek to do in practical policy terms and what justifications did he provide for his actions. In seeking to make such a categorisation, we would argue that Johnson is something of a difficult figure to pin down. Indeed, much debate has already occurred as to what type of Conservatism he specifically represents, in particular whether he aligns with the "One Nation" tradition or a more populist approach, or indeed whether there is any consistency or coherence in his political positioning at all.⁴
- 5 Johnson first came to public attention as a journalist – one who was a right-wing populist known repeatedly for making controversial remarks. However, despite being an MP from 2001, it was as London Mayor (2008-16) that he made his first major political impact. In this role he cut a more progressive, liberal and cosmopolitan figure leading a very diverse and more typically Labour city. Elected as an MP again from 2015, in 2016 he sided with the Leave campaign during the EU referendum campaign, becoming its most high-profile advocate, despite previously having spoken in favour of remaining within the EU (sparking allegations of political opportunism).⁵ This background is therefore somewhat quixotic and inconsistent in political terms. As Prime Minister, Johnson was nevertheless able to bring about a major political realignment, initially linked to his role as the figurehead for Brexit. This Eurosceptic image created heightened prospects for the Conservatives winning seats in the aforementioned "Red Wall" of declining Northern and Midland industrial towns which had hitherto only returned Labour MPs, yet the majority of which had voted for Brexit by large majorities. This electoral trend had been evident on a smaller scale at the 2017 general election, with notable swings in such areas, yet stopping short of the gaining of substantial numbers of seats.⁶ However, in 2019 the Conservatives made a dramatic electoral breakthrough, achieving a net gain of 48 parliamentary seats (30 of which were classified by Kangasooriam et al. as being part of the "Red Wall"),⁷ and won a majority among working-class voters for the first time since the universal franchise was created in 1918.⁸
- 6 Having presided over such a transformed scenario in relation to long-standing class-based voting patterns, Johnson boldly claimed that he was going to "level up" in these areas, and public spending and taxation also increased substantially as a result of the pandemic. This circumstantial set of events and developments therefore seemed to align and coalesce with a contemporary government vision for a bigger role for the state, which broadly adhered to conventional "One Nation" traditions of Conservatism. Debate and speculation has, however, lingered as to whether Johnson genuinely believed in such an approach to government, or whether his "One Nation" credentials

were rather flimsy and that, as with the Brexit issue, he was again allegedly behaving in an opportunistic manner.

- 7 Johnson could have been Prime Minister for much longer given the size of his majority, but through a series of scandals and mass resignations he was forced to resign in the summer of 2022.⁹ This allows us to examine the premiership of Johnson as a whole and, in particular, to assess how much of his rhetoric and policy narrative is likely to remain after his departure. The subsequent leadership of Liz Truss proved disastrous, becoming the shortest Premiership in British political history. Her replacement by Rishi Sunak has appeared to provide some much-needed stability. The extent to which he too can be seen as a One Nation Conservative will be explored. Hence, the article begins with an examination of what is meant by One Nation Conservatism, drawing on relevant published literature including our own. The article then goes on to examine Johnson's record as Prime Minister in order to ascertain what kind of One Nation Conservative he is, if any. In the final section we examine the extent to which Johnson has created a legacy which will outlast his premiership.

The Meaning and Context of One Nation Conservatism

- 8 In a previous article we argued that the term One Nation is a problematic one.¹⁰ The first issue is that a definition is needed which is neither too narrow as to exclude some who may reasonably be considered as One Nation Conservatives while not being too broad as to be meaningless. A second issue is that One Nation exists both as a rhetorical device and a policy position. A more adequate attempt to capture the diverse nature of One Nation Conservatism therefore has to account for these various facets.
- 9 We argue that One Nation Conservatism is better understood as a spectrum ranging from rhetoric to policy. A softer version of One Nation Conservatism would reside at the rhetorical end of the spectrum, a stronger form would certainly include rhetoric but would also include policy. In this sense we can accommodate the differences which existed between different statesmen who are normally seen as part of the One Nation tradition. Benjamin Disraeli's was largely a rhetoric of One Nation, though there were some relatively "progressive" policy positions too as he sought to introduce elements of social reform. Stanley Baldwin was also essentially a One Nation rhetorician – with his speeches designed to cultivate a sense of national unity, depicting himself as the "father of the nation" who aspired to trump class division; an approach that Major also later sought to evoke, albeit much less effectively. The One Nation of the progressive Conservatives after 1945 had a stronger emphasis on policy, with Macmillan the dominant figure of this period across several senior ministerial roles, spearheading a strong social and welfare reformist agenda. This categorisation also allows us to dismiss politicians who have erroneously claimed the mantra of One Nation as even Thatcher on occasions sought to do, despite on others claiming the One Nation Conservatives were really stood for "no nation" and introduced policies which provoked social conflict and disintegration. Indeed, critics of Thatcherism both within and outside the Conservative Party would highlight that the 1980s was a period of social unrest, urban riots and industrial conflict – hardly the hallmarks of a unifying One Nation approach.
- 10 Using this categorisation we were also able to identify where more recent Leaders stand in terms of One Nation Conservatism. David Cameron certainly used One Nation rhetoric in terms of the "Big Society" agenda he launched while in opposition from

2009-10, but once in office, under the banner of “austerity” he led a further reduction in the capacity of the central state and showed a clear preference for marketised, and in some cases, de-centralised voluntary solutions. May in contrast, we argued previously, showed a genuine shift towards One Nation in both rhetorical and policy terms, though the latter was limited by the short-lived premiership and the fact that this was entirely overshadowed by Brexit. Johnson, as we will go on to demonstrate, marked an even more decisive shift towards One Nation in both rhetoric and policy, though again we must doubt the extent of the policy shift for two reasons: firstly, that his premiership also proved to be short-lived (resulting in questionable and unfulfilled delivery); and, secondly, that the policy shifts we identify were necessitated by contextual factors rather than free choice on the part of Johnson.

Johnson as a One Nation Conservative in Office

“Our new one nation government”¹¹

Boris Johnson, 2019

- 11 Johnson was a key player in the highly divisive Brexit campaign and made a number of controversial remarks, more characteristic of his time as a journalist rather than as London Mayor. His claims to being a One Nation Conservative when he became Prime Minister could therefore be taken with considerable scepticism. However, as we will see, Johnson can also lay claim to have offered the most One Nation style of Conservative leadership since at least Edward Heath (leader 1965-75), and possibly earlier.
- 12 Firstly, in his desire to deliver a Brexit deal – something which the previous Parliament had failed to do – Johnson positioned himself as the advocate for what the “people” had democratically voted for, and that it was the elites in Parliament and the Supreme Court which were stopping him from doing so. “Getting Brexit Done” was an incredibly successful slogan in the 2019 campaign – it was the only slogan which clearly resonated with people and also sought to limit the range of issues which featured in the campaign. Yet in his post-election speech outside 10 Downing Street, Johnson stressed that his government would respect the feelings of those who had voted Remain:

And then I want to speak to those who did not vote for us or for me and who wanted and perhaps still want to remain in the EU and I want you to know that we in this one nation government will never ignore your good and positive feelings – of warmth and sympathy towards the other nations of Europe.¹²
- 13 In rhetorical terms at least, Johnson was pledging to instil unity after a period of intense division, broadly in line with unifying “One Nation” sentiments. In terms of prioritising practical policy matters, having failed to secure the passing of a withdrawal agreement since the time of the 2016 referendum, Parliament approved the “oven-ready deal” which Johnson said that he had secured. However, the extent to which this was compatible with a unifying “One Nation” approach is questionable as the arrangements concerning trade in Northern Ireland were changed, creating division within the United Kingdom and angering the Unionists who found that their previously close and influential relationship with the minority Theresa May government had now ended – Johnson not needing their votes post the 2019 election. The “harder” form of Brexit which the deal constituted was also at odds with what another part of the UK wanted, namely Scotland. This also raises a further issue about the nature of Conservatism which Hickson has explored elsewhere¹³ – that conservatism could be

understood as either a disposition in favour of the status quo and aversion to radical change which is likely to have unintended and unforeseeable consequences, but also as a thicker conception which begins with a commitment to set of principles much like other ideologies. This thicker definition would be consistent with Brexit since one such principle would be an absolute conception of sovereignty. However, from the former definition of conservatism, Brexit could well be problematic as it may weaken the Union both in terms of Northern Ireland and Scotland, creating considerable social and constitutional disharmony in the longer-term.

¹⁴ As previously alluded to, the 2019 General Election drastically changed and re-aligned the electoral map of Britain.¹⁴ Although the Conservative vote share increased by only 1.2 per cent, Johnson gained 48 seats (up to 365) and Labour lost 60, its worst result since 1935 in terms of overall seats won (202). Johnson's parliamentary majority of 80 was the largest the Conservative Party had obtained since 1987 and, given that Scotland now largely elected Scottish Nationalist Party MPs, it was the largest that the Conservatives were likely to obtain. This included many declining industrial towns but not the larger, more cosmopolitan university cities. Age became the most important factor for explaining voting, with Conservatives picking up support through the age range, a trend endorsed by academic observations that "the new battle lines now seem to be more about age than class".¹⁵ A values gap had also gradually become apparent between the Labour leadership and the traditional voters in those areas, which was seen most starkly in the 2016 Brexit referendum with such voters sometimes referred to as being "left behind".¹⁶

¹⁵ Such demographic and electoral trends were certainly apparent (and seemingly accelerated) under Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party between 2015 and 2020 but can be seen as a longer-term process starting with New Labour which had favoured a globalised, cosmopolitan and socially-liberal agenda. By contrast, Labour's older voters had largely voted Brexit and favoured a more closed economic and social order with reduced migration and provided greater levels of welfare protection. Johnson, in recognising that many of these voters had voted Conservative for the first time in 2019 and may well have done so without enthusiasm, sought to further evoke the language of One Nation in order to maintain these newly-formed electoral connections:

On Monday MPs will arrive at Westminster to form a new parliament and I am proud to say that members of our new one nation government – a people's government – will set out from constituencies that have never returned a Conservative MP for 100 years.¹⁷

¹⁶ However, if Johnson was hoping that with the delivery of Brexit he could then move on to a more positive and less divisive domestic policy agenda he was mistaken, particularly because at virtually the same time as Britain's formal departure from the EU was confirmed at the end of January 2020, the first cases of the new Covid-19 pandemic were reported in the UK. This led to repeated lockdowns and other restrictions over the course of 2020 and into 2021. The economic effects were to create higher levels of unemployment, which was held down only by the expensive furlough scheme which together with additional measures designed to boost economic activity (such as the "eat out to help out" campaign), added considerably to public expenditure which reached its highest level since the early 1950s as the state was required to sustain economic activity. This reliance on the central state was greeted with hostility by economic liberals but could be seen as a further instance of the revival of a more

One Nation form of Conservatism, indicating a departure from the New Right's Thatcherite legacy in the process.¹⁸

- 17 On numerous occasions Johnson sought to create a more positive agenda including his idea of “levelling up” the economy. Again, this can be seen as a stark contrast to the economic liberal ideas which had dominated the Conservative Party since the mid-1970s. The economic liberalism that re-emerged with Margaret Thatcher in the mid-1970s saw the state as the problem rather than the solution to Britain's economic ills which had made the UK the “sick man of Europe”. The state was perceived as being too large, inefficient and uncompetitive, and Thatcherites argued that the answer lay with the apparent dynamism of the free market.¹⁹ Levels of taxation, spending, borrowing and regulation would be reduced, uncompetitive nationalised industries would be privatised, what would remain of the central state would be subjected to audits, cuts and greater levels of competition in order to raise standards and give “consumers” more choice. Inefficient and subsidised industries would be allowed to decline. People would be expected to move to where the new jobs were – largely in London and the South-East, while regional policies designed to support poorer regions would be ended, although this was perhaps modified slightly in the wake of the 1981 urban riots. The whole agenda was concisely summed up in stark terms by Cabinet minister Norman Tebbit with his memorable phrase, “get on your bike and look for work”. The new approach to the economy led to considerable inequality in the 1980s and subsequently, not just between individuals but also between regions of the UK. Such were the policy outcomes of the economic liberal ideas of Margaret Thatcher.
- 18 Therefore, to call for a new form of state-led regional policy as Johnson was to do was not just a reflection on the need to develop a new policy regime which would bring tangible benefits to the “left behind” areas in the North and Midlands that had voted Conservative in 2019, but also an ideological shift from the heyday of economic liberalism. In language similar to Theresa May's focus on social injustice between 2016 and 2019 (yet which was increasingly distracted in practical terms by Brexit), Johnson recognised the fundamental inequalities between wealthier and poorer areas:

We need to say from the beginning that even before the pandemic began the UK had and has a more unbalanced economy than almost all our immediate biggest competitors in Europe and more unbalanced than pretty much every major developed country and when I say unbalanced I mean that for too many people geography turns out to be destiny.²⁰
- 19 However, critics would point out that “levelling up” and the stated intention of “building back better” were mere slogans devoid of substance. Policy outcomes take much longer to achieve and the extent to which levelling up has occurred in reality is open to considerable discussion. In practical terms, it may be many years before any such investment results in visible physical improvements, which could significantly hamper any further electoral rewards in such areas for the Conservatives. Indeed, at the time of the termination to Johnson's premiership in the summer of 2022, recognisable policy outcomes from levelling up were thinly spread and hard to identify. While this policy agenda entails the necessity of state intervention and significant public expenditure, the practical delivery of “levelling up” has been an ongoing challenge since 2019, amidst claims of limited financial resources, competition between different areas (a form of “pork-barrel politics”), and decisions and outcomes ultimately favouring Conservative-run areas.²¹ It has consequently been alleged (from a

critical perspective) that the “levelling up” agenda has been “driven by electoral calculation rather than a real engagement with tackling deep inequalities”.²²

- 20 There have also been emerging tensions evident between the “low-tax and small state” instincts of Conservative MPs representing traditionally safe Conservative seats in the southern England “Home Counties”, and the more interventionist and fiscally expansionist tendencies of newly-elected Conservative MPs within the “Red Wall” constituencies. This geographical dilemma is an immediately pressing problem for Johnson’s successor as Conservative Prime Minister to inherit, namely in terms of defining the shape, scope and reach of the contemporary British state.²³

Johnson’s legacy

- 21 The nature and achievements of Johnson’s departure will ultimately influence the way in which historians will come to define his premiership. The seemingly endless series of scandals which rocked his premiership and the fact that he became the first sitting Prime Minister to be fined by police remain an essential feature of his record in office and revealed more generally the chaotic state of affairs in Downing Street on his watch. While his loyal supporters would argue that he faced unprecedented pandemic conditions that distracted from his original agenda, there were certainly those who argued from the outset that his character failings in both his private and professional lives meant he was unfit to be Prime Minister, regardless of the specific situations and challenges he faced. Johnson was, from the start, opposed by those on the more moderate wing of the party who were largely on the Remain side in the Brexit referendum. However, he was also viewed with suspicion by at least some of those on the Right of his party who never viewed him as one of their own, suspecting he had only supported Leave to opportunistically raise his own standing within the party having never previously been associated with that particular cause. A few diehards continued to support Johnson even after the numerous scandals and members expressed a wish that he had been allowed onto the leadership ballot so they could vote for him. However, by the end he lacked credibility and had to go.
- 22 The subsequent leadership contest led to a shortlist of two candidates who went before the membership of the whole party. Liz Truss, who initially struggled to gain support among the MPs emerged as the right-wing candidate and proudly claimed Margaret Thatcher as her political hero. This positioning appears to have gone down well with the party membership who largely remain sympathetic to the Thatcherite cause. It also allowed her to contrast herself with the record of her opponent – Rishi Sunak, who had clearly been plotting for the leadership for some time and won each round of the contest among the MPs but came unstuck as soon as the campaign for members’ votes began, and was firmly associated with the high tax and spend policies of the Johnson era (which in policy terms remains largely out of sync with the core Conservative grassroots membership). Her victory was clear but narrower than some had suggested (57.4 per cent to Sunak’s 42.6 per cent) but her senior Cabinet appointments strengthened the position of the Right within the Party as she gave posts to those who had supported her campaign strongly from its early stages, while excluding virtually all supporters of her main rival Sunak.²⁴
- 23 Truss’s honeymoon period was incredibly short-lived, and she almost immediately came unstuck over the budget which her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng introduced.

Among a series of measures was a proposal to borrow more in order to cut taxes on higher earners. The objective was justified in strong economic liberal terms – that the reduced tax burden would foster entrepreneurialism and achieve higher rates of economic growth. However, the proposal to borrow in order to fund tax cuts rather than for capital investment lost the support of the finance markets. In the ensuing chaos, Truss was forced to resign.

- 24 Truss' failure revealed her inadequacies as Leader but also the ideological divides which exist in British politics. Her economic liberal message went down well with party members but not so much with MPs, despite the presence of some economic liberal elements within the parliamentary party. But her strategy would not have gone down well with voters in the 'Red Wall' who still loathed Thatcherism and had voted Conservative not in order to get tax cuts for the wealthy, but increased spending as their constituencies were "levelled up". This is the ideological minefield through which the contemporary Tory party must navigate – a clear values gap between party members and some of its more traditional voters on the one hand, and first-time voters in traditional Labour areas who the party needs to retain if it is to win again. Truss clearly showed no understanding of these strategic dilemmas, whereas Johnson and his inner-circle did.
- 25 The resignation of Truss sparked the possibility of Johnson's return to the premiership, as implausible as that was after the nature and recency of his departure. However, in the end Sunak emerged as the only candidate with the required support of MPs and thus another run-off among party members was avoided. Sunak primarily sought to restore confidence. Following Kwarteng's departure, Jeremy Hunt was appointed Chancellor by Truss, and having been retained by Sunak he promptly introduced a new series of fiscal changes which reversed most of his predecessor's measures.
- 26 Having restored some semblance of stability in government, Sunak's policy is now seemingly to play the long game. Economic difficulties have mounted, not least with inflation once again in excess of 10 per cent and a mounting cost of living crisis in which many cannot afford decent food or to warm their homes. Moreover, industrial unrest has reached levels not seen since the "Winter of Discontent" in 1978-79. Faced by such circumstances and persistent opinion poll leads for the Labour Party, Sunak's only option is to delay the General Election for as long as possible.
- 27 Ideologically, Sunak can be seen as a break with the economic liberal tradition. Indeed, it was his association with high spending and taxation (notably during the pandemic) which stopped members voting for him in the contest against Truss, despite being seen by many as a more credible and polished candidate. In these circumstances there is scope for him to play a One Nation tune by saying that taxes should fall mainly on the top income earners, including non-domiciles which had previously included his wife. He could also lead on windfall taxes for energy companies and banks which are making excessive profits. So far, however, his government has been reluctant to champion such a stance.

Conclusion

- 28 We have argued in this article that the Johnson premiership marked a decisive shift towards One Nation Conservatism – moving away from the economic liberal policies of Thatcher and her successors and, also, away from the fiscal conservatism of the

Cameron era. He consolidated the rhetorical shift which we identified had emerged under May (2016-19), often invoking a similar discourse but also the initiation of One Nation policies in more practical terms, having initially had much greater political freedom to operate than his immediate predecessor. This was partly through choice, with Johnson seeing himself as an heir to the One Nation tradition but also out of necessity (and even opportunism) given the demands of the new electoral situation after the 2019 General Election, the considerable economic and social effects of the pandemic, and the desire to “level up”. He could therefore have been a reforming Prime Minister bringing about a serious ideological shift within the party yet the final delivery in “One Nation” policy terms hasn’t been wholly achieved, partly due to the nature of his premature departure from office. It can be speculated that Johnson could have remained in office for a full term and may have won a second term in office (albeit with a reduced majority). However, his somewhat casual style of leadership, the perception of incompetence at the heart of government and the series of scandals which led to his downfall ensured that this was not the case. This will now be his primary legacy.

- 29 The subsequent leadership contest over the summer of 2022 indicated that the Conservative Party membership and MPs have little appetite for a longer-term ideological recalibration that Johnson appeared to offer. Levelling up was barely mentioned by either leadership candidate. Tax cuts were once again seen as the answer to both regional inequality and rising fuel prices, though Kwarteng and Truss’s disastrous management of the economy has at least temporarily suppressed economic liberal urges. The Sunak government is likely to cling on to office for as long as possible, unable to move decisively against One Nation Conservatism or move further down the One Nation road.

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ABSTRACTS

The election of Boris Johnson with a substantial parliamentary majority in December 2019 featured the Conservative Party gaining a large number of previously safe Labour seats located in poorer, post-industrial areas (the so-called "Red Wall"). This specific electoral context, together with the stated aim of "levelling up" and the increased role for the central state necessitated by the Covid pandemic, created the opportunity for an ideological shift within the Conservative Party from Thatcherism to a revived form of One Nation Conservatism. However, the subsequent leadership contest of 2022 and Liz Truss's disastrous attempt to revive economic liberalism has revealed the extent to which this was not achieved. The extent to which Johnson can be defined as a One Nation Conservative or be said to have left behind a One Nation legacy are evaluated in this article.

L'élection de Boris Johnson avec une majorité parlementaire substantielle en décembre 2019 a vu le Parti conservateur gagner un grand nombre de sièges auparavant acquis aux travaillistes, situés dans des zones pauvres et post-industrielles (le fameux « mur de briques rouges »). Ce contexte électoral spécifique, ainsi que l'objectif déclaré de « nivellement par le haut » et le rôle accru de l'État central rendu nécessaire par la pandémie de la Covid, ont créé l'opportunité d'un changement idéologique au sein du Parti conservateur, passant du thatchérisme à une forme revivifiée du conservatisme One Nation. Cependant, la course à la tête du parti en 2022 et la tentative désastreuse de Liz Truss de faire revivre le libéralisme économique ont montré à quel point ce changement n'a pas eu lieu. Cet article tente de comprendre la façon dont Johnson peut

être considéré comme un conservateur One Nation ou comme celui ayant laissé un héritage One Nation.

INDEX

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