

UK: Johnson government leadership challengers claim confidence vote within reach

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For over six months since the eruption last November of the “partygate” scandal, Conservative Party Prime Minister Boris Johnson has faced talk of an imminent leadership challenge.

Last week’s report by senior civil servant Sue Gray only gave him a slap on the wrist for the illegal drinks parties held in Whitehall, including in his Downing Street residence, during lockdown.

With Johnson declaring it is now time to “move on”, talk of a leadership challenge continues. A Tory leader can be removed only if 15 percent (currently 54) of party MPs submit a letter declaring no confidence to the chairman of its backbench MPs, Sir Graham Brady. If Johnson then loses a confidence vote by 50 percent plus one of votes cast, 180 MPs, he must step down.

There is speculation that the 54 MPs target is now within reach and that a leadership vote could be announced as early as next week. Many of the same sources say Johnson would survive a vote anyway, even if damaged.

A substantial section of Tory MPs certainly want him out. Their main political concern is that he is not up to the task of imposing savage austerity, deepening the assault on democratic rights and waging war against Russia over Ukraine, all compounded by his having become an electoral liability. Up to 80 Tory MPs in marginal seats could lose them in any upcoming general election.

The partygate crisis stemmed from leaks from Johnson’s former chief adviser Dominic Cummings, who he sacked in November 2020.

But the problem Johnson’s opponents face is that none of those being put forward as replacements are in any better position. Chancellor Rishi Sunak, only weeks ago favourite to replace Johnson, appears to be a political busted flush due to the revelations of his vast wealth and

his wife avoiding British taxes for years. He was also fined along with Johnson over partygate. Others such as the new favourite Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and longtime leading Brexiter Michael Gove are similarly problematic.

This prompted Cummings to declare this week to the *Unherd* website, “The Tory party itself is quite rotten now and the sign of that is that they can’t think of anyone better than Boris, who’s clearly just completely shot.

“They are collectively saying, ‘if we get rid of him, we might get somebody worse’... And they actually could get somebody worse: Liz Truss would be even worse than Boris. She’s about as close to properly crackers as anybody I’ve met in parliament.”

Cummings added that Sunak had “blown himself up”, while “Whatever you might think of Michael Gove’s abilities, he is not a loved character.”

This is as good a guess as any as to the present state of play. With the ruling party in disarray, the population is being forced to endure the media’s insistence that all attention must be focused on the Byzantine inner workings of the Tory party, with just one individual, Brady, holding the key to everything.

The central function of this media feeding frenzy is to ensure that no independent working-class opposition to Johnson finds expression and the Tories collectively continue to dictate events. The *Guardian*, representative of what passes for liberal opinion in Britain, focuses its efforts on political mythmaking—seeking to convince its sceptical readers that if only Johnson were removed then the Tory Party would be miraculously transformed by its supposedly progressive “One Nation” wing.

On Tuesday the newspaper led with the headline, “PM’s sudden lurch to right fuels anger of Tory rebels,” commenting, “Boris Johnson’s lurch to the right after

Partygate is fuelling even more anger among rebel Tory MPs, with momentum now building for a leadership challenge next week.”

It listed “a number of right-wing and nationalistic policies” launched in recent weeks, including “the return of imperial measures, plans to override the Northern Ireland protocol, a hint about expanding grammar schools, a review of fracking and repeated promises to tear up more EU regulation.”

Johnson calculates that this is the red meat necessary to throw at the Tory membership base, but the *Guardian* points to the displeasure of right-wing warmonger Tobias Ellwood. The enlightened Ellwood didn’t think nostalgia for pints, gallons, feet and inches was the sort of “one-nation Conservative thinking that is required to appeal beyond our base.”

The *Guardian* also noted, “Another Conservative MP said he represented a seat in the ‘heart of middle England’ and about half of the core Conservative voters there had lost faith in the prime minister.”

This is political nonsense. Whatever disagreements exist between the old David Cameron-led pro-European Union wing of the party and the hardline Brexiteers, up to now represented by Johnson, the Tories are a hardened right-wing, “One Class” party of the British bourgeoisie. Every Tory MP represents a ruling elite which is enacting policies of brutal austerity against the working class, to be enforced by an evisceration of democratic rights.

Just in the six months of the partygate scandal, the government, backed by every Tory MP, has voted through a raft of reactionary legislation, with more in the pipeline including a Public Order Bill handing virtually limitless stop and search powers to the police.

This war against the working class at home is the necessary corollary of the Johnson government’s central role in NATO’s proxy war against Russia, for which the *Guardian* is the biggest cheerleader. On this central issue Ellwood, chair of the defence select committee and a former captain in the Royal Green Jackets, is indistinguishable from Truss when it comes to calls to step up military conflict with Russia.

The *Guardian* hailed him as the putative leader of the Tory progressives on the same day he published an op-ed piece in the *Sun* newspaper, “The West has to ensure Ukraine defeats Russia—every Nato member must up defence spending now.”

Ellwood warned, “To date we are only doing enough to ensure they don’t lose—but not enough to guarantee they can win. Putin may have misjudged Ukraine’s resolve to

hold ground, but he was spot on in believing Nato would have no appetite to get directly involved.”

None of the leading warmongers in the Tory Party, or any of the opposition parties, have any differences with British imperialism stepping up provocations that could lead to all-out war with Russia and China, threatening the future of humanity.

Millions of workers in the UK want to see Johnson gone. They hate him for having presided over a herd immunity policy that has led to 200,000 deaths from COVID-19 and millions more left to mourn and suffer from long-term health problems, and for his ruthless imposition of the austerity measures demanded by big business. But they want to see the entire Tory government swept from power, not his replacement by Truss or some other political criminal. Moreover, workers are confronted with the fact that the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer has no differences with the Tory agenda of herd immunity, austerity and war.

A movement is now beginning to develop that can achieve this goal. Despite every effort by Labour and the trade unions to try to suppress the class struggle, recent days have seen a vote for national strike action by tens of thousands of rail workers, an ongoing ballot for national action by 40,000 BT telecoms workers, multiple strikes by bus and refuse workers and wildcat action by oil rig workers calling for a “wages revolution”.

This movement must be given leadership by the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the treacherous trade union leaders, and armed with a socialist programme for a workers’ government. We urge workers to read the Socialist Equality Party’s assessment of the Johnson crisis, “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government!”, and to join and build the SEP.



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