

Boris Johnson scrapes through no-confidence vote and survives as UK Prime Minister—for now

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UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has narrowly survived a bruising vote of no confidence by his own MPs in the Conservative Party. The vote was triggered after the 54thMP (15 percent of the Conservative group in parliament) submitted a letter of no confidence to the backbench chair Sir Graham Brady.

In the ballot held Monday evening, 148 Tory MPs out of 359 (41 percent) voted no confidence in Johnson. This is seriously damaging, at the very upper end of what the rebels were expecting. Previous ballots in which a significant section of the party voted against the leader—37 percent against Theresa May in December 2018 and 41 percent against Margaret Thatcher in 1990—have forced their resignations within months.

But Johnson gave no sign of doing the same, telling the BBC afterwards it was an “extremely good, positive, conclusive result” and an opportunity for the Tory Party to “unite and deliver”. By the rules, the prime minister now has a grace period in which no further votes can be called in his leadership for a year, though Brady commented on the day, “it’s possible for rules to be changed.”

A likely prolonged period of guerrilla warfare has begun in Britain’s governing party, with internal skirmishes over upcoming by-elections, the crisis over the Northern Ireland Protocol and an ongoing investigation into whether Johnson knowingly misled parliament. Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi summed up the atmosphere by lamenting that the Tories had organised “a circular firing squad”.

Johnson scraped through after the failure of his opponents to mount a coherent challenge. The no confidence vote was prompted by growing but unorganised concern that Johnson is now inflaming an explosive political situation while alienating key sections

of the party’s support base.

The “partygate” scandal surrounding Johnson’s participation in government drinks parties during pandemic lockdowns, which has now dragged on for half a year, is at the centre of Johnson’s fate—epitomising for millions the Tory Party’s cruel indifference to mass deaths and illness, summed up by Johnson’s declaration, “Let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”

This has in turn become the focus of Tory fears that Johnson’s widespread unpopularity is now an obstacle to the government’s ability to push through savage austerity measures and escalating involvement in NATO’s proxy war against Russia without provoking popular opposition.

Steve Brine, Sir Bob Neil and Jeremy Wright’s statements announcing their intention to vote against Johnson were typical, warning “Rule makers cannot be law-breakers”, “events have undermined trust in not just the office of the Prime Minister, but in the political process itself,” and that the prime minister must go “both to safeguard future public compliance with Government instructions when it counts, and to allow the present Government to deliver the important legislation it has introduced”.

Recent polls predict damaging Tory losses in by-elections in Tiverton and Honiton to the Liberal Democrats and Wakefield to Labour. At a Service of Thanksgiving for the Queen at St Paul’s Cathedral on Friday, Johnson was loudly booed by a crowd of the Tories’ die-hard supporters waving Union Flags.

But such is the political crisis gripping the ruling class that the Tory rebellion has been unable to solve the problem of who would replace Johnson. Had a viable contender come forward, the vote might well have been swung. Of the candidates likely to run in a leadership election, only Jeremy Hunt, health secretary under David

Cameron and a non-starter for right-wing Tory MPs, announced he would be voting against the prime minister.

The most organised opposition to Johnson comes from the Tory right, who have used the partygate crisis to push the full-speed implementation of a raft of reactionary legislation and who see Johnson as an impediment to a Brexit-enabled low-to-no tax, zero-regulation free market paradise. Their preferred candidate is Foreign Secretary Liz (the human hand grenade) Truss. She has proved her anti-Russian credentials and is considered more of an economic hawk than Johnson. David Gauke, a former Tory MP and cabinet minister, wrote in the *New Statesman* that Truss is “A leadership candidate who can articulate authentically an agenda of lower taxes and deregulation”.

The foreign secretary has not openly come out against Johnson, however, so far positioning herself as the inheritor of his support group if he does fall. She tweeted early Monday, “The Prime Minister has my 100% backing in today’s vote and I strongly encourage colleagues to support him.” Other potential leadership challengers, including Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Health Secretary Sajid Javid, did similarly.

Whether or when Johnson is replaced, the party is setting an ever-more determined course of war, austerity, authoritarianism and mass infection. Johnson’s letter defending his position to Tory MPs highlighted his government’s “reopen[ing] the economy speedily” during the COVID pandemic, “becom[ing] the first European country to help the Ukrainians” in the NATO war on Russia, and “striking an economic and migration partnership with Rwanda” tearing up the right to asylum as his major successes.

At a private meeting of Tory MPs, he said, “We all know you can’t spend your way out of inflation, and tax your way to create growth” and that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky had told him on the phone that morning that he wanted a “strong UK”. He announced during the day, “The UK will gift the Ukrainian Armed Forces multiple-launch rocket systems so they can effectively repel the continuing Russian onslaught.”

Johnson’s wartime prime minister pitch was not enough to prevent a no confidence motion because its appeal is muted by the universal support for war among his potential challengers and because someone widely known as a liar is badly placed to combat the absence of any popular pro-war sentiment in the population.

For this reason, the whole rotten show is being kept on

the road by the efforts of the Labour Party to place the question of the hated Johnson government’s survival entirely in the hands of Tory MPs. Starmer told LBC radio Monday morning, “it’s in the national interest that he goes now.” Admitting having Johnson at the head of the Tory Party was widely considered an electoral boon for Labour, he went on, “But looking at the national interest, I think Tory MPs have got to step up, show leadership and get rid of him.”

Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting appealed to Tory MPs on Radio 4’s *Today* programme: “Get on with the job of government. Give the country the prime minister it deserves.”

As far as Labour makes any independent pitch, it is to portray itself as the genuine party of the national interest. On Sunday, the party’s culture secretary Lucy Powell published an article in the *Observer* using the Jubilee as an occasion to proclaim Labour the party of “patriotic principles” which “puts Britain first.” To prove Labour’s credentials, Powell explains, “If 10 years ago we had invested in our own capacity for 5G technology, say, we would not find ourselves at the mercy of Huawei and the Chinese Communist party today. If the Tories hadn’t effectively banned onshore wind in the UK, we would produce more additional energy than we import from Russia.”

To push this agenda, Labour as much as the Tories depends on the trade unions to suppress the class struggle and keep the working class out of the political arena. But the potential for changing this situation is emerging, as key sections of workers on the rail network, BT and elsewhere look to mount strikes against efforts to hold down wages amid a worsening cost-of-living crisis. This creates the basis for a movement that will get rid of the Tory government, whichever political criminal leads it.



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