

Johnson under renewed threat as prime minister after devastating by-election defeats

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Boris Johnson's crisis-ridden premiership became more so Friday after the ruling Conservatives suffered two worse than expected by-election defeats. The elections were the first held since the "partygate" scandal that has rocked Johnson's leadership since last November.

The defeats ignited calls for Johnson, currently in Rwanda at the June 20-25 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, to step down as party leader. It is less than three weeks since Johnson survived a vote of no confidence by his party, with 41 percent of Tory MPs casting their vote against him.

Conservative Party chair Oliver Dowden resigned Friday morning, issuing a letter at 5.00am stating, "We cannot carry on with business as usual." Former Tory leader (2003-2005) Michael Howard told the BBC, "the party and more importantly the country would be better off under new leadership."

Both elections were triggered by sex scandals. The vote in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, was forced followed the resignation of Imran Ahmad Khan, jailed in May for sexually assaulting a 15-year-old boy in 2008. Tiverton and Honiton was triggered after Neil Parish resigned in May after admitting twice watching pornography in Parliament's main chamber.

In Wakefield, the Tories lost the seat to Labour, with Simon Lightwood securing a 4,925-vote margin in a 12.7 percent swing. The result saw Labour regain one of the Brexit-voting "Red Wall" constituencies lost to Johnson in the 2019 general election the Tories fought on a policy of "Get Brexit Done".

Wakefield has historically been a safe Labour seat, held by the party from 1932.

Johnson will be far more concerned at the loss of the safe seat of Tiverton and Honiton in Devon, south-west England to the Liberal Democrats. The result was the

worst in by-election history, in terms of overcoming a large majority held by the incumbent party. It was the third time within a year that the Lib Dems have won a previously safe Tory seat.

Liberal Democrat candidate Richard Foord overturned a 24,239 vote majority to win a seat the Tories had held ever since its creation in 1997. The Tories' vote fell to 16,393, by nearly 22 percent. The Liberal Democrats won with the aid of tactical voting—increasing their vote by over 38 percent while Labour's dropped by nearly 16 percent. The almost 30 percent swing to the Liberal Democrats from the Tories is one of the largest ever. The result was so bad that Tory candidate Helen Hurford barricaded herself in a dance studio at Crediton sports centre, where the count was being held, refusing to speak to the media.

Politico noted, "The last time this seat was represented by a non-Conservative MP was [in 1835] two years before Queen Victoria ascended to the throne...".

Barring two seats, the Tories hold every seat in the largely rural southwest of England. Thursday's results will prompt further attacks on Johnson's leadership from MPs fearful of losing their seats in any upcoming election.

Johnson's pitch that he is best placed to secure a successful post-Brexit era didn't wash in Tiverton and Honiton, a constituency which voted to leave the European Union by 58 percent to 42. His presence was considered so toxic that when he visited the constituency on June 10 it was not published on any of Hurford's campaign social media sites/leaflets.

Pollster Joe Twyman has noted there are 291 Tory MPs with smaller majorities than Tiverton and Honiton, out of a total of 359 MPs.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, treasurer of the

backbench 1922 Committee and MP for the Cotswolds, with a 20,214 majority over the Lib Dems, declared, “I think factually if I were to run under a bus today it would be difficult to hold my seat, there’s no doubt about that.”

One unidentified Tory MP told PA that the by-election “precipitates electoral disaster, which can only be avoided by replacing Boris Johnson with the better leadership the Conservative Party needs and deserves.”

Johnson still has a commanding parliamentary majority of 75, and, having won the no confidence vote, under party rules cannot be removed in a leadership challenge for 12 months. But such is the crisis enveloping the government that changing the party’s rules to allow a challenge, first mooted by 1922 Committee chair Sir Graham Brady during the no confidence vote, is being discussed.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported, “Some Tory MPs now think that the rules should be changed to allow Mr Johnson to be removed from office if a majority can be reached... Tory MPs are preparing to vote in the 1922 Committee elections... expected to be completed before Parliament’s summer recess, which begins on July 21. The election could see some of Mr Johnson’s opponents on the Conservative back benches elected to key roles, making rule changes more likely.”

Asked as he boarded the plane to the east African state on Wednesday, 24 hours before polling day, if he would resign if the by-elections were lost, Johnson replied, “Are you crazy?”

Speaking Friday from a news conference in Kigali, he doubled down declaring, “in mid-term governments post-war lose by-elections.”

He then cynically referenced the devastating crisis hitting millions and fuelling intensified class conflict as a factor in his leadership woes. “I think as a Government I’ve got to listen to what people are saying—in particular to the difficulties people are facing over the cost of living, which I think for most people is the number one issue. We’re now facing pressures on the cost of living, we’re seeing spikes in fuel prices, energy costs, food costs—that’s hitting people.”

Such bromides cannot conceal the Johnson’s government’s agenda of militarism and war abroad and class war at home. As Johnson boarded his flight to Rwanda, where the Tories intend to illegally send hundreds and then thousands of asylum seekers,

Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab put before Parliament his Bill of Rights, which will replace and eviscerate the Human Rights Act. Further anti-strike legislation is being prepared.

The criminal Johnson and his government only remains in office, committing the UK to war with Russia and China and able carry out a devastating offensive against the working class, because there is no fundamental opposition to his agenda within political circles.

The Liberal Democrats, who only seven years ago were booted out of office after being the junior partners in a Tory-led coalition that imposed brutal austerity against workers, are just as frenzied in their war fervour.

The main force preventing the hated Johnson government being dealt with from below is the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Under conditions in which every sector of the working class is demanding a turn to industrial struggle, the unions have permitted only one major strike by 50,000 rail workers to proceed. Labour responded with horror to the first national strike on the rail for 35 years, with party leader Sir Keir Starmer threatening any Labour MP who went on a picket line (only 25 did) with disciplinary action.

Over 2.4 million other workers are involved in disputes, just considering those employed in council and schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (1.4 million); doctors and nurses (666,000); civil servants (188,000); Royal Mail (115,000) and BT telecoms (40,000). The Trades Union Congress and its affiliated unions operate as the industrial police force of the government.

Bringing down Johnson and the Tories depends on the independent political mobilisation of the working class, with rail and other workers rejecting all attempts to prevent the development of the class struggle and turn them into passive onlookers of the sordid infighting between right-wing scoundrels that will inevitably engulf the Tory Party.



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