

British MPs complete former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's removal from parliament

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Parliament voted by 354 to seven Monday night to accept the privileges committee report censuring former prime minister Boris Johnson over the Partygate scandal involving repeated social gatherings in Whitehall during COVID lockdowns.

The vote was rendered practically inconsequential by Johnson's pre-emptive resignation two weeks ago. But it was politically significant for marking an end, at least for now, to his long-plotted comeback against current Conservative government Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Most of Johnson's now dwindling support base in the House of Commons abstained to avoid the embarrassment of a lame rebellion.

Earlier talk of running in a by-election for one of the seats recently vacated by his allies Nadine Dorries and Nigel Adams has faded. The Johnson-supporting *Daily Express* wrote that his supporters "are now finally convinced it is impossible to replace Rishi Sunak," who has rushed to arrange replacements for Dorries, Adams and two other resigned Tory MPs before Johnson could put himself forward.

While Johnson still has substantial support in the most ardent Brexiteer circles, he has fallen foul of majority sentiment in a British ruling class feeling the pressure of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine and the international class struggle. A return is not impossible but would have to be orchestrated from the political wilderness, based on a revanchist nationalist programme pledging to make good on the betrayed promise of Brexit. Speculation has already begun on his setting up a new party, with former UK Independence Party/Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage offering his services.

The report into Johnson's conduct is damning. His No 10 Downing Street residence was described as an "island oasis of normality" during the pandemic,

ignoring the government's own rules as birthdays, leaving parties and "wine-time Fridays" continued while the rest of the country was in lockdown. This comes with the release of a new video showing a Christmas party at Conservative HQ on December 14, 2020.

The former prime minister was also found to have deliberately misled parliament and to have attempted to intimidate the investigation.

None of which has motivated the moves against Johnson in Parliament, except in so far as the revelations risk inflaming public anger as the government's inquiry into the handling of the pandemic begins. Charges of lying and showing an indifference to public suffering are made by a Parliament of professional liars which signed off on the UK's entire murderous response to COVID-19—summed up in Johnson's homicidal statement, "no more f***** lockdowns, let the bodies pile high".

What really did for Johnson is the feeling in Britain's ruling circles that the depth of the crisis confronting British imperialism—to which the Brexit movement he spearheaded has massively contributed—means they cannot afford the sort of undisciplined, buccaneering politics epitomised by Johnson and briefly continued by his successor Liz Truss.

They require a determined, brutal restructuring of the British economy to restore profitability and competitiveness through attacks on the working class that could not be left in the power of a man who once declared over Brexit, "F*** business"—a statement the UK's boardrooms and executive offices have never forgotten.

The *Times* newspaper was clearest, editorialising last Friday that Johnson's "fate matters far less than the

country's long-term attractiveness as a base for enterprise and investment. Rishi Sunak should focus on this."

Its authors note that "Britain's growth rate has lagged behind comparable economies since not just the Brexit vote of 2016 but the banking crash of 2007-09." Significantly, they argue that Liz Truss's "diagnosis of weak growth was correct", taking issue only with her "*unfunded* tax cuts [emphasis added]." That is, tax cuts not pre-paid by slashing wages, conditions and social spending.

Worrying that an ageing population is putting "upward pressure of welfare spending," they continue, "Mr Sunak has the opportunity to plot a course for Britain to succeed outside the EU, while still open to the global economy, by attracting inward investment. This will matter far more for the country, as well as Conservative fortunes, than ephemeral squalls over Mr Johnson's fate."

In the near billionaire former hedge fund banker Sunak, the ruling class have found the most unalloyed representative of their interests imaginable.

This economic programme is made especially urgent by the international arms race begun in earnest by the NATO-Russia war—support for which is common to Johnson, his opponents, and throughout Britain's main parties. The UK has always punched above its economic weight in its military commitment to the NATO alliance. After abandoning any influence within the European Union, this has been made even more central to its foreign policy and orientation to American imperialism. With France and above all Germany planning major rearmament drives, Britain's position is under threat.

The second key factor in Johnson's removal has been fear that his lamentable public image—surveys have shown the most common word associated with him is "liar"—would compromise the war effort by association. He has been one of Ukraine's most vocal backers, and a champion of more extensive NATO involvement in the war.

This concern was hinted at in a *Guardian* opinion piece by Jonathon Freedland, "To save their own skins, Trump and Johnson are destroying something precious: our faith in the law". He writes that they are "tearing away at something precious... it is not only democracy but civilisation itself that rests on our acceptance of the

rule of law."

Stripping back the propaganda, Freedland is worried that Johnson's actions tear away the façade of "justice" and "democracy" in capitalist society, and in defence of which NATO claims to be involved in the war in Ukraine. He pointedly accuses Trump of being part of "the Vladimir Putin fan club"—with Johnson's sole redeeming feature being that he is not.

With the Tories mired in political conflict and crisis, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer is being looked to with relief as a safer pair of hands who will inevitably be handed power in a general election expected to be held next year. Starmer, in turn, continues to do everything humanly possible to prove that he will behave as expected by big business—already walking back even the few minimal spending pledges he has made.

But Starmer is no more capable of averting a crisis for British capitalism than his Tory counterparts. It was the BBC's Political Editor Chris Mason who posed the essential political issue: "Just 40 weeks ago, Mr Johnson was prime minister, the figurehead of a government with a big majority. Catapulted first to the backbenches and now out of Parliament too, the demolition of Mr Johnson's career by his own peers has been brutally quick."

Such a dramatic fall from grace cannot be reduced to personal factors, single events or even the national situation in the UK. Britain is caught in a maelstrom common to all the imperialist powers as NATO's war effort in Ukraine falters, recessions threaten, global inflation and debt crises run out of control and all of the above drives a radicalisation of the working class. Johnson's downfall is the product of a profound discrediting of the capitalist system and its institutions.

With the escalation of the war in Ukraine and the international class struggle, the former prime minister's rapid collapse will be among the least dramatic of many amid an emerging movement of the working class. The task of socialists is to help workers resist all efforts to divide that movement over issues like Brexit or subordinate it to a Labour government.



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