

Funding the Future

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Governments that are within weeks of delivering all that they promised the electorate in their manifesto should not suffer major House of Commons defeats, and yet that is exactly the fate that has befallen Boris Johnson's government.

Covid-19 was not, of course, something that Johnson referred to in his manifesto: it was unknown at the time that he sought election only just over a year ago. There is, however, an uncanny resemblance between last night's rebellion by his own backbenchers and the rebellions that had brought to an end to the previous Parliament. In both cases populist, right-wing, backbench Tories rebelled on an issue where evidence suggested that their demands were unrealistic. In the process they sought to embarrass their own prime minister into submission. The fact that they now have a prime minister who is one of their own does not seem to have changed their attitude: for this group any old target will do so long as they can vilify it for short-term gain.

And that, of course, is populist politics in a nutshell. Ignore the evidence. Dismiss the experts. Create a grievance. Hype it in the media. Find someone to blame. Ramp up the rhetoric. Repeat as often as necessary. Glow in the aftermath of rebellion. Never accept responsibility. Move on.

There is just one problem with this type of politics. That is that we have a government beholden to it. Indeed, it was created within its cauldron. But, as is now apparent, that is now an inconvenient truth for the diehards. Those who were once part of the rebellion are now, just as easily, those to be rebelled against. The cause of populist opposition is indifferent as to its targets as long as they are readily available.

The likes of Gove and Johnson, who with a foolhardy lack of forethought believed that they could embrace this cause for the own gain, might now see how stupid they were. Their belief that the far right of the Conservative Party could be tamed with the delivery of Brexit can now be seen for the folly that is always was. There is just one downside. We have still got Brexit to deal with.

And are the far right happy? Clearly not. The chance that they will now vote against any arrangement that Johnson brings to Parliament with regard to the EU is very high. Being in favour of something goes against their ethos. Johnson and Gove failed to understand

the mentality of those who they thought they had embraced, but who actually used those two fools in much the same way as they will use or abuse anyone in pursuit of their folly.

It's hard to recall but it is only 18 months since Johnson expelled around 20 MPs from his party. It must be horribly apparent to him now that he chose the wrong group to expel. But it is too late for him to admit that. For the rest of us, his disastrous errors of judgement will extract a price far beyond anything that might have reasonably been anticipatable.

The staggering fact is that Johnson will inevitably go down in history as one of the worst prime ministers that the UK has ever had, and as a footnote, it will be recalled that he could not even take those who brought him into power with him on the journey to the fulfilment of his manifesto. As evidence of failure that takes some beating.