

Johnson may yet fight an ugly rearguard action

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Political speculation abounds on whether Johnson can survive. It is apparent that the consensus is that he cannot. But let me offer a word of caution. The assumption is being made that a man who has refused to comply with every convention in life that governs good behaviour will do the honourable thing and step down if and when the Conservative party decides that he is no longer to be its leader. I think that there may be some naïveté implicit in this assumption.

The first thing to note is that the 1922 committee cannot bring down a prime minister. All it can do is dismiss a leader of the Conservative party.

It has, of course, been the convention that the leader of the party is the prime minister when the Tories are in office, but nothing actually says that must be the case, and there have been periods when the leader of the Conservative party has not been prime minister. For example, John Major quit as Tory leader in the 1990s and put himself up for re-election, but remained prime minister throughout the period. It is entirely possible that Johnson will ignore the 1922 and, even, any new leader of the party in that case and say that he was elected prime minister in 2019, and that he intends to continue in that office, whatever they might do.

Trump has already demonstrated what a corrupt populist might do when determined to remain in power. It is very clear that Johnson is desperate to remain in office.

Candidly, it is easy to see why. What are his prospects when he has gone now? I can hardly imagine that the Telegraph will give him his old job back writing columns for £250,000 a year. Who too will want to hear his ramblings on the after dinner circuit when his joke is now over? He does, however, now have a very young family, and a wife with an apparent taste for expensive wallpaper. The man may be desperate.

In that case should we assume he will go just because Sue Gray finds against him, and the Tories abandon him? Or will he have to be forced out by a vote of no confidence in the House?

We are in uncharted territory here. What happens when a prime minister loses the support of his party during office is not known simply because it has never happened before in this way. Previous incumbents have resigned rather than face the ignominy of being forced out.

Nor do we know, if Johnson was forced to face a vote of no confidence in the House, whether or not the Queen would then have to require that a general election take place or could simply pass the premiership on to the next leader of the Conservative party.

This saga is not over yet is all that I am saying. Johnson may yet fight an ugly rearguard action.