

The poisoned chalice that Johnson created is not just r...

Published: January 14, 2026, 9:02 pm

There is a rare unanimity in the country this morning. A significant majority think that our prime minister is a liar and that as a result of his own law breaking of laws that his government passed he should resign. Opinion polls suggest that around two thirds of the country are in support of his going. As usual we must both despair and worry about the others.

The likelihood of Johnson going appears to be high. As I write this there must be a team in Downing Street wondering how Johnson will manage Questions to the Prime Minister today. I think we can have no doubt about the issue that both Keir Starmer and Ian Blackford will concentrate on.

I am quite sure that Johnson will go. The chance that he will be enjoying that terribly expensive interior of the Downing Street flat for much longer is very low.

I am less confident in suggesting when he might leave. I have very good reason for that doubt. Much as there are others who might wish to lead the Conservative Party (and we know that Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt are all in the fray, with others also likely to have a go) the chance that anyone would want to take over now as prime minister now is very low indeed.

We know that Boris Johnson has been a dire prime minister. It is quite easy to argue that he is the worst that we have ever had. However, the scale of the problems that he has created is not yet fully apparent, and will be increasingly so over the months to come, particularly from a Tory perspective.

It remains popular to describe omicron as mild, and quite possibly over, but the fact is that there are 20,000 people in hospital at this moment with Covid, and they represent one in six of all NHS in-patients at this moment. It is a sad fact that more people are going to die from this as a result, and that this may continue for a while. We can only keep our fingers crossed about the timing of the arrival of the next variant. In other words, Covid is not going away, and nothing the government is doing is going to prevent that.

Coupled with this, the economy is in a very difficult position when we were told to expect a booming recovery. Growth is being impacted by Covid, again. Inflation is real, albeit that much of it is for reasons superficially beyond the government's control. That said though, they could support policies to prevent this happening again, including substantial investment in renewable energy and a policy of close alignment with the EU on trade, meaning that most of the obstacles they are being seen at UK ports and within Ireland could be eliminated. Tax rises that were also appropriate for a boom could also be cut. Unless action is taken the likelihood that the current, apparently good, employment figures will be sustained is low. And, people with less in their pockets who are forced to cut their budgets will not be fuelling growth any time soon. None of this is good news for any new prime minister.

Put these factors together and who would want to take over as prime minister now, and accept responsibility for these consequences of the former administration? That would be particularly difficult for anyone from the current cabinet, as Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak are. They might try to deny their collective responsibility for these outcomes, but it would be hard to do so, and right now these two are the front runners in the leadership election campaign, albeit that in most such campaigns for time past being the front runner has been a decided liability. In that case I am not too sure that there is going to be a rush to choose an alternative leader amongst Tory MPs.

Many of those MPs might have another concern. The wiser amongst them (and I know it is asking a lot to assume that there are any) will realise that any new leader would face an enormous range of problems within the party that they would supposedly command. It is, for example, deeply factionalised. Despite Johnson having expelled approximately 20 MPs before the last election to supposedly eliminate from his ranks those who were pro-Remain this was insufficient to eliminate the divisions. The 100 or so MPs from the far right of the party have shown themselves to be unable to accept almost any form of compromise, including with Boris Johnson who was supposedly one of their own. The chance that they will be easier to manage with any other leader is small. And, their demands will remain as unreasonable. A new party leader is going to be in for a very bumpy ride. As John Major would have put it, the bastards are not going away, and they accounted for him.

Those bastards, to again use the vernacular, will also create another problem for any incoming Tory prime minister.

They oppose actions to tackle Covid.

They pretty much deny climate change, and most certainly oppose any action to manage it.

Their only economic instinct is to cut taxes and the size of government, when it is very clear that most people want to improve government services to manage the crises that we face.

Their claim to support law and order is shot to pieces.

The evidence of stress within the NHS, education, the justice system, social care, and so many other issues is apparent for all to see.

Creating a Tory manifesto for an election to come that can reconcile these conflicts looks to be nigh on impossible. In other words, the poisoned chalice that Johnson created is not just in his own legacy, but in the party that he created in his image. With him it was temporarily possible to believe that a Conservative government was plausible. Without him that is not the case. There is just a rabble. The chance that any new leader could lead their party to victory does, then, look to be low.

We can take some comfort from this. Getting rid of the Conservatives, with their hatred of society and all that it stands for, is always a goal. We can at this moment imagine that to be possible. For that I am grateful.

However, that is an insufficient achievement. That will be particularly true if Labour thinks that this empowers them to imagine forming a government on their own, which polling still suggests to be unlikely.

We do not just need to be rid of the Tories. If the profound harm that they have caused to the body politic in the UK is to be addressed then it is vital that whatever other government is to come is a profound reformer in the interests of all in the United Kingdom, whether they wish to be a part of that singular country, or of the own separate current constituent member.

Enjoy the moment when it seems likely that Boris Johnson's demise is inevitable. One has to take pleasure where one can in politics. However, be aware that this goal is insufficient: there are greater things to be achieved than getting rid of this appalling prime minister if we are to have any chance of facing the real issues that are going to challenge this country and the world over coming decades. That's the real agenda we must face.