

Boris's Britain

Portland





Contents

INTRODUCTION	03
JOHNSON WILL RELY ON CREATIVE THINKING AND SALESMANSHIP GEORGE PASCOE-WATSON	04
JOHNSON MUST TREAD A NARROW PATH IN HIS FIRST 100 DAYS JAMES O'SHAUGHNESSY	06
HOW SHOULD NO 10 RESPOND TO THEIR NEW ENIGMATIC PREMIER? NICK HARGRAVE	08
FROM CITY HALL TO DOWNING STREET - WHAT LESSONS FOR LABOUR? CHRIS HOGWOOD	10
GRAND VISIONS CLASH WITH NARROW MAJORITIES IN THIS PARLIAMENT LAURA TROTT	12
AT POLITICAL MOMENTS, OUR IMPARTIAL CIVIL SERVICE SHOWS ITS VALUE VICTORIA DEAN	14
BRUSSELS OUTLOOK: NEW FACES, SAME CHALLENGES GUILLAUME AMIGUES	16
STATE OF THE UNION(S) PAUL ROBERTSON	18

Introduction

The Conservative Party's leadership contest has reached its conclusion and Britain has a new Prime Minister in Boris Johnson.

As one of the most unpredictable politicians of modern times, businesses, organisations and the public are wondering what a Johnson administration means for them and their external environment.

In this publication, Portland's senior staff and advisers shed light on this question. It includes an examination of Johnson's Prime Ministerial style and priorities, along with our expectations for his first 100 days in office a period, which pointedly ends on the 31st October.

Our authors, all of whom have worked in and around the centre of politics, then assess how Johnson will run the Downing Street operation, and what his premiership will mean for the Labour Party, Parliament, the Civil Service and two Unions – the UK and the EU.

In order to navigate this uncertain environment, businesses need expert insight and understanding of the political dynamics and policymaking process.

Portland stand ready to help. Following this initial set of perspectives, if you would like to discuss the implications for your organisation, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sam Ingleby

Senior Partner and Head of Corporate

Tel: +44 20 7554 1801

Mobile: +44 7904 303 217

Email: sam.ingleby@portland-communications.com



By

GEORGE PASCOE-WATSON

Senior Partner and Chief Adviser, former Political Editor of The Sun

Johnson will rely on creative thinking and salesmanship

Boris Johnson will delegate power to his Cabinet and No 10 lieutenants, letting them govern while he presides as Britain's ambassadorial chairman.

The new Prime Minister will approach the job in precisely the opposite way to Theresa May.

He has described Mrs May to friends as a "yucca tree under whose branches everything dies".

Mr Johnson believes the outgoing Prime Minister had no personality, was afraid of those with something to say, and so chose to surround herself with technocrats.

“

Mr Johnson believes he can rely on his relationships, charm and sheer force of personality to build consensus.

”

The new PM will use his personality and charm to lead the country, selecting "characters" with the "get up and go to get on with it."

This means delegation of power to ministers in ways we've not seen for three years.

Individual departments will become much more important when it comes to legislation and regulatory activity.

When it comes to the imminent challenge posed by Brexit, Mr Johnson believes he can rely on his relationships, charm and sheer force of personality to build consensus.

He is a politician who is willing to drop a few bombshells, and Johnson will have to rely on creative solutions if Britain is to leave the EU with a deal.

But, as has been clear from his campaign, an early priority will be to ramp up No Deal preparations, showing the UK is "deadly serious" about crashing out.

Aside from Brexit, one of the first priorities of this - and any - Prime Minister is to assemble his team.

Mr Johnson's advisers say his top four ministers will be, unusually, Chancellor, Chief Whip, Party Chairman and Northern Ireland Secretary.

This tells us an enormous amount.

Focus will be on the nation's finances, his wafer-thin Commons majority, the need for a united Conservative Party, and getting rid of the backstop from the Withdrawal Agreement.

It will be a much "tighter" Cabinet with ministers expected to execute policy and judgment without constantly having to refer upwards.

This was the trait that paralysed Mrs May's administration.

Many expect the PM to freeze out Remainers and those who campaigned for Jeremy Hunt. Not at all.

He has told friends he plans to "suffocate them with love" as he seeks to build new party unity.

As for his approach to domestic policy, it's important to remember that Mr Johnson is a keen environmentalist, a believer in One Nation Conservatism and not the dry right-winger that many believe him to be.

His priorities are infrastructure, skills, cyber security, technology and connecting northern cities to each other and to the prosperous South.

He wants to create more city mayors like Andy Street in Birmingham and Andy Burnham in Manchester.

The new Prime Minister sees himself as Boris the Builder - allowing Heathrow expansion, HS2, and going for more infrastructure projects to make Britain the most technological advanced country possible.

He will rule as he did for eight years in London, less concerned with detail, than his role as Britain's number one salesman on the world stage.

Johnson must tread a narrow path in his first 100 days

Like so many things in British politics today, the idea of a 'first 100 days' is borrowed from the US. Invented by Franklin D. Roosevelt and used by subsequent presidents to inject a sense of urgency into new premierships, it has been part of the British political lexicon since a youthful Tony Blair looked across the pond for inspiration.

For Prime Minister Johnson the number could not be more significant. From the day his premiership started through to Brexit day on 31st October is exactly 100 days. So how will he spend his first three-and-a-bit months, if he gets that far?

His initial task was to bring together a functioning government. Given the walkout of some Cabinet and other ministers, assembling a 'government of all the talents' was always going to be a stretch. But he's gone much further than expected, brutally so, and packing the Cabinet with resolute Brexiteers suggests he is warming up for a general election. It's a team geared towards a Brexit-based contest not a long spell of administration. While the ideological bent of the new Cabinet might put some off, we can all applaud an increased number of women and people from ethnic minorities, including two of the great offices of state.

His challenges now are ones of political strategy, as well as party management. They fall into three categories: domestic, economic, and Brexit.

The next few weeks will involve devising and delivering a multi-layered Brexit strategy that is built on the foundation of serious planning for No Deal.

Everyone who wants Brexit to happen understands that Theresa May's main strategic error was failing to prepare for No Deal properly. This oversight ended her premiership and crippled the Tories' vote at the Euros. PM Johnson will not make the same mistake.

Delivering his promise to leave by 31st October is not in his hands alone, but promising to do so - as he did again on the steps of No.10 - is essential both to his brand and the Tory Party's prospects at a general election. If Parliament tries to stop him fulfilling his pledge then he will go down swinging - do or die.

PM Johnson wants to avoid this scenario, and so alongside the no deal planning will be a serious effort - above and below the radar - to put together both a new deal and a new coalition that might support it.

If this sounds like an impossible task, then remember that one of Johnson's main political attributes is an ability to make a broad variety of people think he supports their particular perspective to the hilt.

Being ready for no deal involves having a sympathetic and imaginative Chancellor, something Theresa May could never rely on. We can be reasonably confident that Chancellor Javid is prepared to use the dividend of 10 years of austerity to prepare the economy for long-term challenges, making some big plays on housing, infrastructure, skills, R&D and productivity in his first Budget.

Domestic policy is the big lacuna, and few know what to expect apart from a slew of



By

JAMES O'SHAUGHNESSY

Member of Portland's Advisory Council, former Director of Policy for David Cameron and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department of Health and Social Care

high level promises, but this is where his biggest non-Brexit decision must be made. There are two schools of political theory in the Party. They are exemplified by Liz Truss on one hand and Michael Gove on the other. The Truss worldview - seemingly dominant in the Cabinet - sees the Conservatives vigorously championing economic liberalisation, in homage to Thatcher, and trying to persuade freedom-loving urban millennials to embrace the Party.

The Gove-ite view is quite different. It sees the Party's future voters as being more concerned with security than freedom, living in towns not cities, and looking for more spending on public services rather than tax cuts.

How PM Johnson chooses between these worldviews will determine how he fares in the next general election. Or at least it will if the country can get beyond Brexit, because if PM Johnson is forced to the polls without delivering on his central promise then the narrow path he is currently treading may be swallowed by a much bigger tide.

“

One of Johnson's main political attributes is an ability to make a broad variety of people think he supports their particular perspective to the hilt.

”



By

NICK HARGRAVE

Director and former Special Adviser to
David Cameron and Theresa May

How should N° 10 respond to their new enigmatic premier?

When it comes to the transfer of power, the British political system is lightning in its speed. You immediately move from the start-up mentality of campaigning to the awesome responsibility of governing. Here at least, there is no transition period.

Nothing can quite prepare any incoming Downing Street team for this experience.

Boris Johnson's team are likely to have to work harder than most. Their principal has strengths to his name; not least that he is a born communicator with an instinctive feel for the public mood. But those who have worked with him most closely will attest that he prefers a detail-light approach, alongside a tendency to avoid difficult conversations.

In an institution like Number 10 this is a recipe for inertia at best and chaos at worst.

Given the deadline they have set themselves of taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union by October 31, team Johnson do

“

Team Johnson do not have the luxury of time. The operation will have to work properly straight away.

”

not have the luxury of time. The operation will have to work properly straight away. Those first few days and weeks in Downing Street will be critical.

Having worked as a special adviser in Number 10 for his two immediate predecessors, I would recommend a few core priorities in the immediate term for team Johnson:

- Special advisers should prioritise the decisions they need to take. Civil servants in the building will be looking for steers on everything under the sun. But the political team's immediate responsibility is to find a way through the Brexit paralysis. To do that, they should take two early decisions in private and plot a way forward from there. First, what is their Brexit outcome – leaving the EU without a deal or performing political surgery on the current Withdrawal Agreement? Second, what is their preferred mechanism to get to their outcome – given that the numbers in Parliament may well not fall their way?
- Given, the circumstances, it is wise to delegate immediate decisions on domestic policy out to the Cabinet. Johnson's team will not have the headspace or the hours in the day to co-ordinate a position on a domestic agenda at the start. So outsource the bulk, while hogging a handful of direction-setting announcements that do not require legislation. This will likely lead to a bit of chaos and back-biting. The left-hand may not always know what the right is doing. But in the short-term this is inherently preferable to an un-focussed position on Brexit. With one eye ahead to a General Election, the focus of your domestic

policy unit in Number 10 should be on developing a strategic and thoughtful position for that.

- Put some rocket boosters under the Government press operation. Just as Alastair Campbell refreshed Government communications with the infamous 'grid' in 1997, it is time once again to update the way in which No 10 does its comms. Despite incremental progress in, the Whitehall press machine still runs on a rigid system of morning broadcast rounds, Prime Ministerial op-eds and a bit of supporting social media as an afterthought. It doesn't really reflect the way in which the communications landscape has changed in the past decade; from top-down disciplined packages to a constant conversation where authenticity and speed are prized.
- Don't forget about party headquarters given there could be a general election just around the corner. Most decision trees on the next few months lead to a clarifying moment with the British people. A second referendum is not impossible, but a general election is more likely. Winning general elections takes a lot of patient effort and rigorous preparation. It is therefore important that a Campaign Director is installed at Conservative Campaign HQ, closely integrated with No 10.

Working in Downing Street is a professional experience like no other – and is immensely rewarding for all the harsh contentions on other parts of your life. Given the stakes of what is ahead though, it is critical to take some early decisions to succeed on your own terms. Do these and you might just prove the pundits wrong.

From City Hall to Downing Street – what lessons for Labour?

A look at Boris Johnson's eight years as Mayor of London show some early warnings for the Labour Party ahead of the next general election.

The first is simply that the Labour Party has a terrible habit of underestimating Boris Johnson as a politician. The exception to this was in 2008 when Ken Livingstone saw through the bluster and identified that he was going to be his toughest opponent yet. Ken's former chief of staff (who also went on to run Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign) quickly identified underestimating Johnson as a strategic error in a lengthy piece on campaigning against Johnson published just ahead of his selection victory. The piece clearly argues that for Labour to win, it cannot simply use negative attack lines against the new Prime Minister – it must set out its own positive dividing lines. This is something the Party may struggle to do. Part of Labour's issue is that collectively it can too often react to the image Johnson projects rather than the substance of what he is saying, or indeed what he is doing.

The current Labour leadership likes to play to its base. One can therefore expect criticism of his background, his education, his bluster. However, this would be an error when facing Johnson as it would simply let him off the hook. The new PM has cultivated these attack lines for his opponents, daring them to attack him for his appearance rather than his actions, gambling that attacks on these lines only galvanise his support.

When Labour does focus on his actions, it can often miss the target – in part because it is too focused on attacking the failures it links to his personality. Through this election process, London commentators

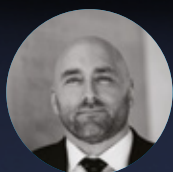
have been quick to bring up the 'Boris bus' (and the cost to the taxpayer), the failed bid to develop the Thames Estuary Airport (and the cost to the taxpayer) and everyone's favourite, the Garden Bridge (and the cost to the taxpayer).

There is one key error here. For every voter who is disgusted by the largesse, there will be another who applauds him for giving ideas a go and thinking big. We are bound to see some more examples of 'grands projets' in the early months of a Johnson administration and we are likely to see similar divided reactions. But for Johnson, divided reactions are OK – he knows how to use them.

The focus on 'Boris the Man', as opposed to 'Boris the Mayor', suits Johnson well as he is an expert in the former. But he is by no means an expert in policy. This was quite evident through the under-viewed Mayor's Question Time, where the London Assembly scrutinise the Mayor's activities. There is a good, recent, article by Tom Copley, a Labour Assembly Member, which looks back at the lessons learned scrutinising the Mayor for his grasp of policy, and not allowing his brand to distract you. There are some wise words for Jeremy Corbyn contained within it – but whether he applies them or sticks with the current grandstanding at PMQs remains to be seen.

The final negative lesson for Labour is that, while Johnson is rarely interested in mastering the detail of a brief, he belatedly has learnt how to surround himself with people that enable him to do what he does best.

It is well-documented that Boris did not really plan for a transition into City Hall. The previous blueprint, set by Ken Livingstone, was a hands-on Mayor focused



By

CHRIS HOGWOOD

Partner and Head of Portland Local, previously worked in London local government

on using the levers of power to shape the capital. Johnson had neither that long sweep of policy knowledge or a particularly strong vision for how to use London government to shape the capital. His early set of advisors did not quite make the grade (losing their posts for, among other things, lying on their CVs, racist comments or fiddling their expenses to cover up an extramarital affair).

It was only after the late, great, Sir Simon Milton was persuaded to focus more on London – becoming both Chief of Staff as well as Deputy Mayor for Planning – that City Hall began to show any form of direction. Following his untimely passing, there were rapid moves to bring in additional, experience ballast to avoid the chaos of the Mayor's former appointments.

The biggest appointment was Sir Edward Lister, moving from 30 years leading Wandsworth Council to take over Sir Simon's duties. The talented Rick Blakeway became Deputy Mayor for Housing, and then Daniel Moylan, a Councillor from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), who had begun to exert his influence over Transport for London as its Deputy Chairman began to front several key projects.

Given two of these three are now part of Boris Johnson's No 10 team – with Sir Edward playing a Chief of Staff role and

Daniel thought to be being brought on to play a role in Brexit – it is worth focusing on them.

When Sir Edward joined City Hall, he didn't really have a significant profile. But his role in running Boris' mayoralty was huge. In effect, he took 90-95% of decisions in City Hall with only the top issues being referred up to Boris for decision on either tone or strategic direction. He is a man used to making things work. Quite whether he will be able to exert his famous 'Steady Eddie' grip over the court of Johnson in Downing Street remains to be seen.

Daniel Moylan is a very different character, but no less capable. A common thread throughout his political career is the purity of an argument – whether it is removing street clutter, arguing for the Thames Estuary Airport, or pushing for Brexit – Daniel always exhibits a grip of facts and an intellectual flourish to intimidate opponents. He has never been shy of being provocative. Those keen to stop a 'no deal' Brexit would do well to study how he operates.

“

The focus on 'Boris the Man', as opposed to 'Boris the Mayor' suits Johnson well, as he is an expert in the former.

”

Grand visions clash with narrow majorities in this Parliament

The Parliamentary arithmetic Theresa May has bequeathed Boris Johnson is not so much a restraint as a straitjacket. His room for manoeuvre on domestic policy is very narrow and on Brexit it is difficult to see how the maths begins to add up. Motherhood and apple pie can get through the current House of Commons, but not much else. Phillip Hammond's 2018 Autumn Budget was an example of how this manifests itself – the most fiscally conservative of Chancellors had to spend an extra £30bn by 2023-24 and eliminate any controversy to pass his Finance Bill. To recap on the figures – the Conservatives with the DUP as their confidence and supply partners currently have a tiny effective working majority of three (out of a total number of 650). This majority is likely



By

LAURA TROTT

Partner and former head of
strategic communications at No. 10



“

Johnson cannot be confident of getting any piece of legislation through without agreement, or at least broad acquiescence, from other parties.

”

to be reduced to one after a by-election in Brecon & Radnorshire. To give this some context, after the Conservative election victory in 2015 we had a working majority of 17; as the head of strategic communications at the time, I began weekly meetings with the Parliamentary team because we had to constantly calibrate how the Parliamentary maths would add up on individual Bills. This was with 19 more Conservative seats than Johnson currently has to play with. The upshot of this is that Johnson cannot be confident of getting any piece of legislation through without agreement, or at least broad acquiescence, from other parties.

There is much you can do as Prime Minister without legislation, one can only look at the recent flurry of legacy announcements from May. We should expect more of this in the early days of the Johnson Government. But there are some Parliamentary sticking points that cannot be avoided.

Johnson and his Chancellor will need to pass a Budget. Hammond has shown that this is possible in straitened Parliamentary circumstances, but only with very consensual and expansive economics. Sweeping changes to the tax system, however well merited, are unlikely to get through.

Eventually Johnson will also have to pass a Queens' Speech to introduce new legislation. The Queen's Speech has a very special place in the heart of the British Parliamentary system – it gives you the mandate to introduce new legislation. The

Parliamentary session runs until all the Bills in the preceding Queen's Speech have been introduced or ditched. Putting together a legislative agenda which will pass the House with the full support of the DUP, and with which all Conservative MPs will agree, is a tall ask and will involve extensive engagement and compromise.

Putting together a Queen's Speech in normal circumstances is difficult – the briefing pack is hundreds of pages long and riddled with potential problems – but in this environment there is even more pressure. Johnson's team will have to devote untold hours to try to ensure nothing in there inadvertently brings down the Government. So, if we see a Queen's Speech before another election, expect it to be uncontroversial and extensively trailed beforehand to test the material.

What does this all mean for business? Domestic policy which has broad support across parties is likely to be fast tracked. Trickier or controversial decisions which require legislation are unlikely to be introduced, and if they are, they won't get through the House. Engaging those in Government with an awareness of the Parliamentary restraints they are under is critical to success. And expect Johnson to try to address the Parliamentary bind he is in sooner rather than later; as May has found to her cost, a non-existent Conservative majority makes achieving much in Government difficult. Johnson will not want this to be his fate.

At political moments, our impartial civil service shows its value

Civil servants across government departments will have spent the last few weeks watching the leadership contest with huge interest. But not in the same way as you and me.

Literally overnight, civil servants will be expected to brief and support new ministers and build relationships of trust very quickly. Ambassadors overseas will need to explain the tone and policies of the new PM to foreign governments across the globe. Everyone will be watching closely to see what's different, what's new and whether the PM has a brilliant Brexit plan at the ready.

The switch from the inside - from one ministerial team to another - is an odd experience. Plenty has been written about what it is like inside No. 10, where one PM is marched out and the team who remain have about 45 minutes to clear the decks and get ready for their successors. That experience is repeated across every government department, and each ministerial team.

New boss. New letter head. New practices. New policies. New direction. Everything must be re-learned, from how they take their tea, to how much background briefing they need, to how they manage their parliamentary time with their ministerial portfolio.

What will be particularly intriguing this time for the civil service is that the biggest policy issue of all remains unresolved. And the chief hurdles won't change simply because a new PM is in place. If anything, the red lines look likely to be even redder under Johnson and his team. Parliament appears as divided if not more. The EU still claims it won't

budge. And no new brilliant solution to the backstop has emerged.

The one area on which they can expect a rapid shift is the No Deal preparations - where Johnson's team have made it clear they would ramp up that work quickly. For months now, hundreds, thousands even, of civil servants have been getting the UK ready. Former colleagues of mine have spent months working out of crisis centres across Whitehall, building contingency plans on everything from stock-piling the right medicines, to planning for much of Kent to be turned into a lorry park and even emergency measures for getting UK nationals back to the UK. In extremis, a small group were even considering what to do in the (highly unlikely) event of civil unrest.

That's the practical side, the easier bit. Civil servants tend to be brilliant in a crisis.

What will be trickier is advising the new PM and his team on how to handle the Brexit negotiations themselves. It's no secret that the previous two Brexit Secretaries, Davis and Raab, were disappointed with the advice they received from some civil servants inside DExEU. They felt the civil service was stuffed full of Remainers who didn't believe in Brexit and who were trying to prevent it from happening.

In my experience, civil servants are brilliant at being impartial, and at providing robust advice. Speaking truth unto power is what it's all about. Accepting the decisions your minister makes, and then getting on with delivering them regardless of whether he or she took your advice. Getting the trust

“

Everything must be re-learnt, from how they take their tea, to how much background briefing they need, to how they manage their parliamentary time with their ministerial portfolio.

”

and the relationships right at the outset will be incredibly important for both ministers and their officials. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, PM Johnson and his team will need the civil service. For advice, for analysis, for institutional knowledge, for delivering, for just keeping the wheels turning.

The tone of a Johnson government’s relationship with the civil service will be set by the PM himself. The choice is his.

And for those outside government – in businesses and organisations across the UK – who engage with civil servants: cut them some slack while they get used to their new ministerial teams and remember that they will be there long after this government, and the next, and probably the one after too. Good relationships with civil servants, by those inside and outside government, are always a smart investment.



By

VICTORIA DEAN

Partner and former British High Commissioner and head of Europe at the Foreign Office



By

GUILLAUME AMIGUES

Senior Consultant and former adviser to the President of Paris region

Brussels outlook: new faces, same challenges

2019 will bring change in Brussels too. But new leadership across the EU institutions will not translate into a new Brexit position, despite what London might hope.

The most prominent new face in Brussels will be Ursula von der Leyen, the next President of the European Commission. The former German Defence Minister was no one's top choice for the job. Instead, she emerged after many rounds of backroom negotiations as the compromise candidate that was acceptable to both Germany (a close Merkel ally) and France (francophone, and a committed Europhile), cementing Franco-German influence over the bloc.

Von der Leyen is happy with the Withdrawal Agreement in its current form and has no intention of ditching the "precious" Irish backstop. She will not, however, take up her post until 1st November. Her team will be instrumental to the next phase of discussions – be that the detailed trade

“

if he is to have a shot at diplomatic success in Brussels, Boris Johnson will have to move swiftly beyond rhetoric and grapple with the frustrating detail of Brexit.

”

talks, or a further extension, or indeed no deal arrangements – but for now, Juncker and Barnier will remain Britain’s negotiation partners across the Channel.

The European elections in May returned the most fragmented Parliament in the institution’s history, with large groups of Eurosceptic MEPs, including 29 from the Brexit Party. But Eurosceptics are divided in several sub-groups and find it famously difficult to work together. In contrast, the powerful centre-right, centre-left and liberal groups are skilled at the art of EU compromise. The confirmation of von der Leyen’s nomination as Commission President is a case in point: the candidate promised just enough to each group to secure a small majority of MEPs. This broadly pro-European bloc will continue to dictate the agenda for the next Parliament.

What does this mean for Brexit? MEPs have limited influence over the negotiations but must eventually ratify any Withdrawal Agreement. Under the influence of its Brexit coordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, the Parliament has been pushing Barnier towards a hard stance on issues such as the protection of citizens’ rights. Their red lines are unlikely to soften in the coming months.

However, the real power in the Brexit negotiations belongs to the European Council. The Commission negotiate on behalf of the 27 heads of states and governments, following guidelines set by them just days after the 2016 referendum. The Council has changed since then, with

the emergence of Macron’s Renew Europe, the fading of Italian influence and the new assertiveness of socialist Spain. Donald Tusk, who has so riled Britain with his direct style, will be replaced by current Belgian PM Charles Michel in December. But when it comes to Brexit, the core principles of the Council’s approach have remained remarkably consistent: retain control of the process through the Commission, preserve unity among the 27, and affirm the red lines contained in the 2016 negotiating mandate. EU leaders have repeatedly stated that they would not re-negotiate the Withdrawal Agreement. Realistically though, if the new PM comes with serious, constructive proposals, it would be difficult for EU leaders not to give him a hearing at the very least. Time is scarce: with less than 100 days to October 31st, an immediate charm offensive around Europe would be a wise investment. Expect to see PM Johnson in Brussels this summer, as well as in Dublin, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and Warsaw. Both tone and substance will matter equally: to secure changes, the British PM will be expected to spell out clearly and precisely how any alternative would solve the Irish conundrum while respecting the EU’s red lines.

Bombastic pronunciations on No Deal and the bulldog spirit might have propelled him into Number 10 but if he is to have a shot at diplomatic success in Brussels, Boris Johnson will have to move swiftly beyond rhetoric and grapple with the frustrating detail of Brexit.

State of the Union(s)

As Boris Johnson takes to the Downing Street stage, the curtain is up on the final act of the Brexit spectacle. But it is the fate of our other Union, at home, that may come to define his premiership.

The divisive result of the EU referendum, where 62% in Scotland voted to remain, has revitalised the prospects of a second referendum on Scottish independence.

The issue is acute. The SNP has been effectively exploiting the discordant results north and south of the border in the EU referendum. The characterisation that Nicola Sturgeon offers is that this is about more than just membership of the European Union – it's about contrasting values and the kind of country we want to be.

The SNP has felt emboldened enough to introduce legislation to the Scottish Parliament to provide for a referendum as early as next year. But legally, of course, no referendum can be held without the consent of Westminster.

The question Johnson must answer goes beyond finding an effective short-term approach to the Scottish First Minister's demands. It is a strategic one: how do you redefine what unionism means in the context of Brexit?

Shortly before her departure, Theresa May got the ball rolling. A 'devolution review' is in full swing, and will likely result in a far more coherent, cross-Whitehall approach to communicating the distinct benefits accruing to Scotland from UK Government policy. It's a distinctly traditional approach and doesn't amount to much more than window dressing but is one that Johnson will likely follow – at least, in the short-term.

But Prime Minister Johnson is a far more creative thinker than his predecessor – and more willing to take risks. To effectively settle the issue more permanently, while avoiding granting Indy Ref 2, this process needs to yield more of a step change.

If the UK is to survive as a broad church of values, its policy making needs to be flexible enough to reflect that. What might this look like?

It has been claimed that Johnson once asked Sturgeon if fiscal autonomy for Scotland would be enough to "buy off" the SNP.

The expression masks what is a legitimate approach to the constitutional question – and one untested by a Conservative Prime Minister. Fiscal autonomy would see the full devolution of a vast swathe of fiscal powers, including VAT and Corporation Tax. And it doesn't just work for Scotland – but also for the regions of England who are mobilising for greater local autonomy.

It's not without risk. It increases the likelihood of regulatory and policy divergence and poses difficult technical questions about the integrity of a UK 'Single Market'.

But power devolved is power retained, and being the Prime Minister who presides over the most radical redistribution of power in the United Kingdom in its 300 year history may be a slightly more appealing prospect than being the Prime Minister who fought and, potentially, lost Scotland.

As with Brexit, party politics will matter most in how this will all unfold.

The Scottish Conservatives are a strong faction in a fragile majority for the parent party at Westminster. They were sceptical





By

PAUL ROBERTSON

Senior Consultant at Portland and former SNP Head
of Research & Policy at Westminster

of a Johnson premiership – recognising, perhaps, the polling that suggests Johnson would send support for independence skyrocketing from low 40s to 53%. Johnson – whilst not known for rewarding those who refuse him an endorsement – needs the support of Ruth Davidson’s MPs.

The SNP, too, wield considerable parliamentary power at Westminster and they are a potential route to power for Jeremy Corbyn.

The parliamentary arithmetic of these two blocs will be front of mind as Johnson seeks a way forward. But whether the strategy is conflict or appeasement, we are on a constitutional collision course. It is not one that Johnson can afford to miscalculate.

A failure to redefine unionism in a compelling way could, at best, cost him his parliamentary majority and government. At worst, he could be the last Prime Minister to preside over a United Kingdom.

“

The question Prime Minister Johnson must answer... is a strategic one: how do you redefine what unionism means in the context of Brexit?

”



Portland

STRATEGY. CONTENT. DELIVERY.

LONDON • WASHINGTON, DC • NAIROBI • DOHA • SINGAPORE

brexit@portland-communications.com / www.portland-communications.com
@PortlandComms

