EXPLAINING JOHNSONISM

‘Let them eat cake’: Conservatism in the age of Boris Johnson

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Boris Johnson is often represented as an anomaly in Conservative history: an ‘unconservative’ figure who has transformed his party into something new. Yet Johnsonism has clear roots in the Conservative tradition, and Johnson himself is as much a product as the architect of changes in the party. His flair for rhetorical ambiguity has enabled him to hold together a divergent electoral coalition, but the return of political economy to the mainstream of public policy may challenge that approach in future.

In December 2019, Boris Johnson led his party to its most spectacular electoral success for a third of a century. Nearly 14 million people voted Conservative – the second highest number of votes ever polled by a British party – bringing to an end a decade of hung parliaments and precarious majorities. Johnson’s party

had smashed through Labour's 'Red Wall', broken the parliamentary resistance to his Brexit deal and rewritten the geography of British politics. Armed with an eighty-seat majority, a pliable cabinet and a parliamentary party purged of rebels and 'big beasts', Johnson was the most powerful Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher; able to anticipate a decade or more in which to remake British politics in his image.

But had those voters come to praise the Conservative Party or to bury it? For its critics, the party that had stormed the polls in 2019 was not the Conservative Party at all. It had morphed into something new: an 'English nationalist party', a 'Vote Leave government', or a 'populist Johnsonian cult'.[1] Its actions, thought one writer, were 'not simply un-conservative', but 'an explicit repudiation of everything that it means to be a Conservative'.[2] A party that was once cautious of change had embraced a revolutionary transformation. A party that once prized scepticism now urged its supporters to 'believe in Brexit'. The party of the constitution had suspended Parliament, while the party of law and order was legislating to break its own legal commitments. The 'natural party of government' now excoriated 'the establishment', while the party of traditional moral values was led by a voluptuary, an adulterer and 'the most accomplished liar in public life'.[3] Who now believed, with Sir Arthur Bryant, that 'the Conservative acts always with caution'? Or, like Anthony Quinton, that 'Conservatives have an attachment to established customs and institutions', and a hostility to 'sudden, precipitate and revolutionary change'?[4]

Yet the charge that Johnson marked a rupture in Conservative politics raises a number of problems; not least that it has been heard so often before. Ever since Disraeli denounced the Conservatism of Sir Robert Peel as 'an organized hypocrisy', the death of some allegedly more authentic form of Conservatism has been announced with wearying regularity. As early as 1903, Johnson's hero, Winston Churchill, proclaimed the death of the 'old Conservative Party' and the rise of 'a new Party', modelled on 'the Republican Party of the United States'. Eight years later, Herbert Samuel declared that the Conservative Party was 'no longer conservative' at all, because it had embraced 'such revolutionary proposals' as 'the referendum' and 'Women's Suffrage'. Keith Joseph would conclude in 1974 that he had never truly been a Conservative at all, while Ian Gilmour regarded Thatcher as a liberal cuckoo in the Conservative nest. Nothing places Johnson more squarely in the Conservative tradition than the allegation that he has subverted his party's true principles.

As a two-term Mayor of London, Foreign Secretary and election-winning prime minister, Johnson cannot simply be an anomaly. He edited the leading Conservative weekly, *The Spectator*, for six years and made his reputation as a columnist for the party's in-house newsletter, *The Daily Telegraph*. He has been the darling of the Party Conference for two decades, and was elected to the leadership by an overwhelming vote of the party membership. Whatever doubts Conservatives may have harboured

about his lifestyle, morals or political methods, they have consistently rewarded him with the most glittering prizes in public life.

Like all Conservative leaders, Johnson draws selectively on the Conservative past, constructing a constellation of ideas and positions in response to contemporary political pressures. His Conservatism is not that of Harold Macmillan, David Cameron or even Margaret Thatcher, but nor is it what his beloved classical authors would have called a '*lusus naturae*': a 'sport of nature', or a random mutation in the Conservative gene. It draws on longer changes in the party, that make Johnson as much a symptom as a source of the new Conservatism. The result, however, remains an inchoate phenomenon, pulled in different directions by a divergent electoral coalition. Johnson's great skill lies rather in holding together divergent materials than in giving them new direction. In consequence, his leadership marks a suspension, rather than a resolution, of his party's contradictions, in a manner that stores up formidable challenges for the future.

Cakes and ale: Johnson in historical perspective

Unlike David Cameron or Theresa May, Johnson is not sentimental about the Conservative tradition. He has consistently surrounded himself with figures from outside the party, like Dominic Cummings and Munira Mirza, and he openly repudiates much of the May-Cameron legacy.[5] It is hard to find a precedent for a government that has so successfully reinvented itself mid-term, or so effectively disclaimed responsibility for its own conduct of policy. His thinly-disguised manifesto, *The Churchill Factor*, luxuriates in the 'suspicion and doubt' with which 'Respectable Tories' viewed Winston Churchill, and 'the venom with which they spat his name'. When he writes of those Conservatives who mocked Churchill as 'an adventurer … a fat baby, and a disaster for the country', or of Churchill's 'contempt for any notion of … loyalty to the Tory Party', we are invited to draw the obvious parallel.[6]

Yet Johnson was formed by the Conservative tradition, and it is not difficult to find precedents for his politics: whether the 'cakes and ale' Toryism of the late-nineteenth century – a 'beer and bible' Toryism that preferred 'England free' to 'England sober', and championed the 'pleasures of the people' against do-gooders and busybodies – or the 'muscular Unionism' of Lord Randolph Churchill and Lord Salisbury. Johnson is not the first Conservative to pit himself against Parliament, or to accuse MPs of subverting 'the will of the people'. Before 1914, the Conservative Party under Bonar Law spoke openly of 'breaking the parliamentary machine', asserting 'the Supremacy of the People' against the 'paid puppets' of the House of Commons. Johnson may have threatened to ignore the Benn Act in 2019, but he has not, like Bonar Law, endorsed a paramilitary army, dedicated to the violent overthrow of an Act of Parliament.[7]

When Johnson promises 'freedom day', or hails the 'freedom-loving' instincts of the British people, he recalls the Toryism of the early 1950s, with its promise to 'Set the People Free'. The 'War on Woke' invokes Thatcher's assault on the 'loony left', or later battles against 'political correctness', while claims that Labour would 'raise the white flag' to Russia tap into a long history of smearing the patriotism of the left. Stylistically, Johnson's shambolic, extravagantly eccentric act recalls the artful doddering of Harold Macmillan: another showman with a taste for the theatrical. Yet whereas Macmillan's performance was subverted by a new wave of satire, Johnson insulates himself against humour by functioning as his own best satirist.

The Conservative to whom Johnson is most often compared is Benjamin Disraeli. Like Johnson, Disraeli possessed a raffish wit, a flair for showmanship and a loose relationship with the truth. He was also hard to pin down intellectually, publishing a self-parodying pamphlet called *What Is He?*. Like Johnson, he had an intuitive grasp of political theatre, expressed in a politics of sensational phrase-making and grand rhetorical gestures that were often only loosely anchored in policy. 'Man', he once wrote, 'is born to adore and to obey'; the function of leadership was to give him something 'to worship'.

As the first great Tory populist, Disraeli's rhetoric could have a strikingly modern flavour. He cast politics as a struggle between 'the people of England' – represented by the Conservative Party – and liberal 'cosmopolitans', in thrall to 'the philosophy and politics of the Continent'. He promised to champion 'the people of this country' against the forces of a 'triumphant liberalism'; an elite that used its cultural power to 'make war on the manners and customs of the people'. He appealed unashamedly to the pursuit of national 'greatness', insisting that it was that instinct for greatness by which 'men are distinguished from animals'. Britain, he predicted, would one day have to decide whether it wished to be a small, 'comfortable' country, 'modelled and moulded upon Continental principles', or 'a great country – an imperial country', able to 'command the respect of the world'.[8]

Even 'levelling up' can claim a modest Disraelian ancestry. Like Johnson, Disraeli spoke passionately about 'elevating the condition of the people'. He promised an 'equality that elevates and creates', not an 'equality that levels and destroys'; an oddly inchoate 'equality' in which both the 'King' and his 'meanest subject' could share. Like Johnson, he was stronger on the vision than the policy detail, which was mostly left to others.

The comparison should not, of course, be overstated. Johnson does not, like Disraeli, regard it as the first task of Conservatism 'to maintain the institutions of the country'; on the contrary, he or his advisors have tried to close Parliament, threatened to move the House of Lords to York, sought to limit the power of the Courts, boycotted the BBC, threatened a 'hard rain' for the civil service, and, in the

judgement of the Scottish courts, misled the monarch. Johnson's notorious enthusiasm for 'cake' does not extend to what Walter Bagehot called 'the cake of custom': that sediment of ideas, norms and institutions laid down over many generations.

Nor does moral or social conservatism form part of Johnson's repertoire. He does not, like Coleridge, regret the coarsening of public life, or aspire, like Margaret Thatcher, to reassert 'Victorian values'. He has not inherited a suspicion of executive power, or the Burkeian desire to protect the 'little platoons' of civil society from the encroachments of centralised authority. And it is hard to envisage any previous Conservative leader from whom the words 'fuck business' would have tripped so lightly from the lips. Crucially, Johnson exhibits little of the caution about change that once marked the Conservative tradition. Whatever else Brexit may be, it is not a defence of the status quo; rather, it offers an exhilarating (or terrifying) ride into the unknown. Tories have, in the past, taken 'leaps in the dark', but they have rarely embraced change with such millenarian zeal.

Conservatism and political change

If Johnson, like all Tory leaders, draws selectively on the Conservative tradition, what needs to be explained is not how he seized control of the party and dragged it in a new direction, but how a particular constellation of Conservative ideas became ascendant for which Johnson was a suitable vehicle. In his 2012 book on *The Conservative Party Since 1945*, Tim Bale identified three main 'drivers of party change': external shocks (particularly electoral setbacks); party leadership; and a change in its dominant faction.[9] The Conservative Party in 2019 witnessed an unusual synergy of the three: a catastrophic performance in the European elections in May, when it polled less than 9 per cent of the vote; a new leader, who differed radically in style from his predecessors; and a party whose centre of gravity had shifted from the 'modernisers' of the Cameron period to its fiercest Eurosceptics. All three of these drivers had longer-term roots, which facilitated Johnson's rise to power.

Some of those changes were sociological. Long before 2019, the Conservative Party had lost its anchoring in key institutions: whether the Church of England, the monarchy or the professions. Changes in the global economy had eroded the authority of 'British business' as a coherent lobbying interest; a change reflected in the party's shifting donor base, as wealthy individuals and the global super-rich displaced businesses and employers. Secularisation – an underrated force in political science – unplugged the party from such ideas as 'original sin' and 'imperfectability', which once underpinned both its moral conservatism and its suspicion of utopian projects. Though it retains a dwindling band of theologians, the party is no longer rooted in a historic institution that confronted it with a higher set of values than electoral success.

Other changes were geopolitical, with consequences for right-wing parties across the world. The end of the Cold War bred an ideological triumphalism concerning the success of the free market, together with a complacency about the institutions that had been built to support it. It also stripped the party of the socialist threat that, for almost a century, had formed its most powerful unifying idea. Deprived of that gravitational field, Conservatism lost much of its shape and coherence. In search of new dragons to slay, the party took up arms against a sea of cultural troubles, ranging from 'political correctness', 'Critical Race Theory' and 'Woke ideology' to the EU, the National Trust and the BBC.

The closing of the Cold War also accelerated the decline of class politics, in a manner that would facilitate the rise of populism. For the populist, politics is not a negotiation between different sections of the community; it is a contest to impose 'the will of the people' on 'the enemies of the people': whether 'elites', foreign governments or some other anti-popular force.[10] Populism imagines the people as a homogenous bloc, speaking with a single voice: an idea that is easier to sustain if they are not also imagined as inhabiting antagonistic social classes. Unlike portions of the left, Conservatives could not simply imagine 'the working class' as 'the people'; so for as long as class-thinking remained dominant, 'the people' had to be understood as a matrix of social groups, each with their own legitimate interests. The decline of that way of thinking did not make populism inevitable: in the short term, it promoted the 'big tent' politics of New Labour, which cast itself – in an explicit repudiation of class politics – as 'the political arm of the British people'. But the financial crisis, the expenses scandal and the rising salience of immigration opened the gates to a cruder binary, that pitted 'the people' against an 'elite' that sought to oppress them.

In this respect, the question of whether Johnson is a 'One Nation Conservative' or a 'populist' sets up a false opposition. The rhetoric of 'One Nation' was often strikingly populist in character: as we have seen, Disraeli claimed to speak for 'the people of England' against a 'cosmopolitan' elite in thrall to the Continent. Yet such rhetoric was layered onto a set of assumptions about class, that took for granted the existence of at least 'two nations' – 'the rich and the poor' – between whom a *modus vivendi* had to be actively constructed. So long as those assumptions retained their power, the populist potential of 'One Nation' could be contained. Once they fell away, it was ripe for transformation along more authoritarian lines.

This has been accompanied by a change in the party's electoral base, that has weakened its anchoring in the 'four nations' of the United Kingdom. Its decline in Scotland and Wales, and uncoupling from Ulster Unionism, has left it a more narrowly English party than ever before, with little understanding of non-English voters and little incentive to seek their support. David Cameron won an overall majority in 2015, despite securing just 12 of the 117 seats outside England. Johnson

won a landslide in 2019 with just 20 non-English seats. That has changed the character of the party's Unionism. Historically, the party had often embraced cultural nationalism, projecting itself as a champion of Scotland and Wales against the centralising instincts of Labour governments. Today, its Unionism is almost entirely Anglo-centric and focused on the interests of English voters. Cameron's tin-eared demand, on the morning of the 2014 referendum result, that the 'voices of England must be heard'; his willingness to fight the 2015 election on the dangers of SNP influence; Theresa May's reluctance to engage with the devolved governments after 2016; and Johnson's description of devolution as a 'disaster' might all have been avoided, had their governments been more attuned to electoral opinion outside England.

The party's taste for creative destruction also has a pedigree that predates the Johnson era. As Ben Jackson has argued, the experience of the Thatcher years 'convinced many Conservatives that economic shocks were politically fruitful tools for improving industrial performance'. In the collective memory of the party, the depression of the early 1980s was transformed from an unhappy by-product of monetarism, which few in government had anticipated, into a cleansing fire that had birthed a new economy in its ashes. That was subsequently reinforced by a wider cultural mood associated with the tech-boom, which prized a culture of 'moving fast and breaking things'. Unlike the Thatcher government, the modern party lacks an agreed vision of the economy it is trying to create; yet it retains its faith in the 'Thatcherite exertion of sheer will-power'. Creative destruction has become not only a means 'to implement radical reforms', but a substitute for a coherent vision of what those reforms might be.[11]

That drew on a second legacy of the Thatcher era, which transferred the party's historic scepticism from those who advocated change to the 'experts' who warned of its perils. The economic recovery of the mid-1980s came to be seen as triumph over the 364 academic economists who had denounced the 1981 budget. Long before the Brexit referendum, Thatcherites had concluded that 'Britain needs politicians who will stand up against the experts'.[12] When Michael Gove announced, in 2016, that 'the people of this country have had enough of experts', he was not only tapping into a wider, anti-establishment mood; he was drawing on a seam of Conservative thinking with its roots in the 1980s.

Empowering the prime minister

This is not to cast Johnson as the inevitable product of Conservative history. Without the electoral shock of May 2019, and the growing paralysis over Brexit, the party might never have overcome the reservations that had shattered his first bid for the leadership in 2016. Yet Conservatism had become more receptive to a leader

who was morally unorthodox, attuned to English nationalism, drawn to risk-taking and sceptical of national institutions.

Other changes increased the power that such a leader could wield. For decades, British politics had become increasingly presidential: general elections were ever more personalised, with televised leaders' debates cast as contests to find 'Britain's Next Prime Minister'. The rise of member-led parties accelerated that process. Leaders no longer drew their authority from the parliamentary party; instead, MPs were expected to obey 'the mandate' vested in the leader by party activists. That augmented the shift from cabinet government to something closer to a presidential administration. The idea that a prime minister was simply 'first among equals' had always been something of a myth; but it was striking to hear the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, inform the *Today* programme in 2021 that 'I work for the prime minister ... My job is to deliver for him ... Ultimately, we all work for the prime minister'.[13]

Shorter parliamentary careers diminished the number of 'big beasts' on the back-benches who could challenge a party leader, or who felt some ecological responsibility for the institutions within which they operated. Of the 365 Conservatives elected in 2019, more than half had never been in Opposition. More than a third of the Cabinet was first elected in 2015; and of the 22 MPs appointed to Cabinet by David Cameron, in his first all-Conservative Cabinet, only nine were still in the Commons four years later. The purging of the 'Cameroons', followed by the defenestration of the Mayites and the expulsion of alleged 'Remainers', gutted the Cabinet of experience and had a significant effect on the 'pipeline' for alternative leaders. When Johnson's own position came under pressure, early in 2022, his most plausible successors were a Chancellor and Foreign Secretary who had held those positions for two years and five months respectively. It is no accident that both major parties have turned, in recent years, to leaders who have made their reputation outside Parliament: a newspaper columnist and former Mayor of London; an anti-war campaigner; and a former Director of Public Prosecutions.

The Johnson factor

The extent to which these changes predated Johnson was evident in Theresa May's handling of Brexit. Temperamentally, Johnson and May could hardly have been more different; but her Brexit policy played to many of the same themes. Like Johnson, May framed Brexit as a contest between 'the will of the British people' and those who sought to subvert it. Like Johnson, she sought to lock Parliament out of decision-making, presenting herself as a champion of the British people against 'game-playing' MPs. It was May, not Johnson, who derided 'citizens of nowhere', talked up the prospects of 'No Deal', and turned a blind eye to headlines denouncing judges as 'Enemies of the People' and MPs as 'saboteurs'. The focus on the wishes

of English voters, and the determination to prioritise migration and sovereignty over business and the economy, were as much features of May's leadership as they were of Johnson's. Where May differed from her successor – notably in her reluctance to place a trade border in the Irish Sea, and her ultimate unwillingness to leave without a deal – it was she who proved to be at odds with her party.

From an immediate partisan viewpoint, Johnson's handling of Brexit was a triumph. Yet it set up new challenges for the party in future. The Conservative majority in 2019 was built, like the Leave vote, on highly discordant materials, elements of which wanted to shrink the state, end austerity, cut taxes and boost spending. They were held together by two magnetic fields that were peculiar to that election: hostility to Jeremy Corbyn; and the desire to 'Get Brexit Done'. With Corbyn gone and Britain outside the EU, holding that coalition together would prove a task of unusual delicacy, both for Johnson himself and for the party he now led.

That challenge has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. Soaring fuel bills, the return of inflation and new pressures on the public purse are opening up questions of taxation and expenditure on which the party is deeply divided, pitting those who want to reassert its reputation as a Thatcherite, tax-cutting party against those who want to end 'austerity' and invest in the party's new heartlands. The war in Ukraine has fuelled demands for additional public spending, both to rebuild Britain's armed forces and to cushion the economic consequences of the war. All this poses particular challenges for a party that has little recent experience of 'talking and thinking about economics'.[14]

On one level, Johnson is well-suited to hold together a divergent coalition, for he has proven an adept performer in a dizzying array of roles. As Mayor of London, he championed immigration, celebrated multiculturalism and called Donald Trump 'unfit to hold the office of President'. As a Brexit campaigner, he mocked the 'part-Kenyan' Obama and promised to 'take back control' of Britain's borders. As prime minister, he suspended Parliament and threatened to ignore legislation. Johnson's ability to hold those roles in creative tension – or, in his preferred metaphor, to 'have his cake and eat it' – has been a feature of his career, resting on a rhetorical style honed during his years as a journalist and public speaker.

For decades, conventional politicians had practised a form of 'message discipline', deploying soundbites and clichés to evade definition. Johnson's great insight was that the same effect could be achieved by rhetorical extravagance. Promises to 'lie down in front of the bulldozers' or 'ping off the guy ropes of self-doubt' were as devoid of meaning as the most dreary soundbite, but they gave an impression of authenticity and energy. The effect was enhanced by a self-parodying political style. Where other politicians might feign sincerity, Johnson actively performs *insincerity*. He consciously strips his words of meaning, by rhetorical exaggeration, comic turns

of phrase and the knowing look down the camera. No other politician breaks 'the fourth wall' as consistently as Johnson, inviting the public to be in on the joke of his own performance.

A similar approach informs his public speaking. Johnson's speeches are frequently chaotic: he pretends not to know where he is, forgets the punch-line of jokes and loses the thread of his argument. The impression is one of improvised disaster, though it appears to be carefully rehearsed.[15] Such performances enable him to sell a personality, without giving hostages to fortune on policy. Boris Johnson is the Tommy Cooper of political orators. Amidst the clowning around and prat-falling, we're not supposed to notice that he never does any magic.

This has enabled Johnson to cultivate an outrageous reputation, while sending conflicting signals on his beliefs. Johnson is a prolific writer and public speaker, who has published numerous volumes of articles. But aside from the insults ('tank-topped bum-boys', 'letter-boxes', 'picaninnies') and the gaffs ('clearing the dead bodies'; Obama's 'ancestral dislike' of the UK), few people could quote a single thing he has said or written. When challenged about his words, Johnson invariably feigns astonishment that anyone should have taken them seriously. He deploys ideas and arguments as rhetorical flares, sent up into the sky to awe and amaze. The effect is to distract from the emptiness around them, imbuing artful ambiguity with performative purpose.

The return of political economy

That approach has served Johnson well, enabling him to project different personalities to different sections of his party. As he approaches his sixtieth birthday, commentators still debate what kind of politician he 'really' is: a liberal, a one-nation Conservative, a populist, an opportunist, or 'Britain Trump'. Yet its magic may be less potent in the future. Economic questions are less susceptible to the kind of rhetorical mystification that he brought to the Brexit process, when he was able to agree an 'oven-ready' deal that he would try to renegotiate later; to put a trade border in the Irish Sea while denying having done so; and to sign a restrictive trade deal while claiming there would be 'no non-tariff barriers to trade'. Such rhetorical sleight-of-hand is more difficult when dealing with tax-rates, energy bills and household living costs.

Policy decisions are fundamentally about choice; but Johnson is a 'cakeist', who has never believed that choice is necessary. For Johnson, governments can cut taxes *and* boost spending. They can have a hard Brexit *and* frictionless trade. They can negotiate a border in the Irish Sea *and* renegotiate it later. But 'to govern is to choose', and the choices for the Conservative Party are growing more pressing.

British politics may be approaching the end of a thirty-year period defined by consistently low inflation. Such periods are peculiarly hospitable to 'cakeism',

because they soften the competition for resources: whether between employers and employees, taxpayers and the Exchequer, or different departments of government. In the boom years, spending could rise while taxes fell; and even austerity was cushioned, to some degree, by consistently low prices. Inflation, by contrast, sharpens political choices: to raise taxes or cut spending? To subsidise energy bills, or allow them to rip? Ministers will have to fight to defend the real value of departmental budgets, and decide which sections of the economy to support and which to abandon to their fate. The effect is to bring economic and distributional questions back into the political mainstream: questions to which the Conservative Party has given little serious thought in decades.

Covid disguised these tensions because, on economic questions, it temporarily suspended the necessity of choice. Confronted with an unprecedented health emergency, spending could surge, taxes fall and other questions be put on hold. But those questions will recur, and Johnson offers no star to steer by. His political compass points only at himself.

Strikingly, when the government *has* made choices, it has either been forced to retreat (as on planning reform) or exposed deep fissures in its electoral coalition (the Health and Social Care Levy). As inflation rises, energy bills surge, and pressure builds to address the backlog of treatment from the pandemic, those choices – and the strains they impose – will become more stark.

Johnson does have a slogan: 'levelling up', which he describes as the central 'mission' of his government. The challenges to which it speaks are real and substantial, but the slogan itself is a placeholder: a way of evading more difficult conversations about 'redistribution', 'equality' and 'structural disadvantage'. It embodies the 'cakeist' principle that everyone can rise, that no one need lose, and that no one pays. Johnson's much-trailed speech on the subject, in July 2021, contained the usual rhetorical diversions – the 'mattress of dough', 'the magic sauce', 'the ketchup of catch-up' – but on this occasion, they failed to distract attention from the policy void at its heart. A broadly sympathetic account concluded that the government's thinking about the subject was 'inchoate', 'lacking a clear ideological anchor' and beset by 'inherent contradictions'.[16] 'Levelling up' remains an aspiration in search of a policy – and one that does not force ministers to choose between competing political priorities.

Conclusion

Contrary to some of his critics, Boris Johnson did not hijack the Conservative Party and turn it into something else. Like all Conservative leaders, he has drawn eclectically from the Conservative tradition, in a manner that reflects longer changes in

the culture of his party: a party that has become more populist, more iconoclastic, more Anglocentric and more tolerant of risk. As a master of political ambiguity, he has been able to straddle the increasingly discordant elements that make up its electoral coalition; but his talent for rhetorical distraction may lose its purchase as economic questions become more pressing. In so far as his leadership is a symptom of his party's problems, it cannot also be a cure; though it may, like a fever, bring short-lived colour and the illusion of vigour.

Confronted with intractable economic and fiscal problems, it will be tempting simply to ramp up the culture wars, picking new fights with the courts, universities, public institutions and the BBC. Yet hard-pressed households may have a limited tolerance for the politics of distraction. In forging a new path, Johnson or his successors will continue to pick selectively from the Conservative repertoire. They will carry the party in new directions that will seem, to some, like a deviation from Conservative history, and to others, like a return to its best traditions. As it has done throughout its history, 'Conservatism' will both live and die. And what, we might ask, could be more 'cakeist' than that?

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Notes

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5 For the influence of the Revolutionary Communist Party, see the essay by Morgan Jones in this issue.

6 Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 2014, pp32-34.
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14 Stian Westlake, 'The Strange Death of Tory Economic Thinking': https://stianstian.medium.com/the-strange-death-of-tory-economic-thinking-2339433aed00, 11 April 2019.
15 For an example, see Jeremy Vine, 'My Boris Johnson Story': https://reaction.life/jeremy-vine-my-boris-story/, 17 June 2019.
16 Will Jennings, Lawrence McKay and Gerry Stoker, 'The Politics of Levelling Up', *Political Quarterly*, Vol 92 No 2, 2021, p307.