

# Boris Johnson Under Siege

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# A Pyrrhic Victory for the Prime Minister

Boris Johnson's Cabinet met on the morning of June 7, hours after the prime minister won a confidence vote among his own MPs. While the Cabinet members banged the table in a traditional gesture of support, Johnson's win was widely seen as a pyrrhic victory, which prepares the way for months of in-fighting and threats to Johnson's tenure.

The prime minister secured support from 211 colleagues, but 148 voted against the man who less than 3 years ago delivered a landslide Conservative victory. That means Johnson remains party leader and prime minister. But for how long?

His staunchest supporters say at least another year. And it is true that he cannot be challenged – barring some internal rule changing – by his own party for another 12 months. His critics will note that he shows little sign of going of his own accord or of receiving a delegation of senior colleagues telling him the time is up.

So the situation for the government and Conservative Party remains the most uncertain it has been during this parliament. Even his closest colleagues predict a bumpy time ahead.

For companies and leaders hoping for more political stability in Britain after years dominated by Brexit and frequent changes of leadership, the coming months are likely to be a disappointment.

## What next?

Even Labour insiders believe that the government *can* survive for two years, allowing Johnson to serve right up until the next election. But the crucial question is whether the Tory Party can recover in that period, especially in the likely event of another confidence vote in a year, and the continued drip of pressure on Johnson.

One reason the prime minister survived this latest vote is that there is no obvious successor lined up to take over. The opposition to him within his party comes from a range of quarters; no one alternative is seen as an obvious new leader. So, while 148 MPs want a new leader, they don't know who that is. Johnson, despite his current cratering popularity, is a proven election winner, having secured two terms as London's mayor, victory in the Brexit referendum, and a landslide general election win.

The coming months give Johnson a small window to try and fashion an unlikely comeback. His team have privately talked about a "revenge reshuffle" carried out in short order to reassert some authority, by sacking sceptics and promoting loyal colleagues into government roles. The likelihood of a summer reshuffle is high, but even that is fraught with danger as it will create more enemies, some of whom could be fresh from Cabinet with their own ambitions.

Furthermore, the disparate nature of opposition to Johnson's leadership means there is no silver bullet in terms of appeasing a wing of the party in the way that getting rid of the Poll Tax was important to the post-Thatcher party leader, or how finding a Brexit solution was vital for Theresa's May's successor.

Tax cuts will be welcomed by some, better planning laws for more housing by others. But controversial policies will simply not be viable as, despite having a 80-seat majority, the prime minister cannot rely on delivering Commons support.

Indeed, so much is now out of Johnson's control, not least the cost of living crisis that is currently raging. The pressure is on Johnson and his chancellor to get the economy moving, but there is no easy policy answer that would work without stoking inflation.

The orthodox view at the Treasury and Bank of England is that only a severe squeeze on incomes can bring inflation down. This government is unlikely to stomach that but cannot do anything to boost the economy while inflation stays high.

For the Labour Opposition, the situation is seen as a huge opportunity. A divided government, but a prime minister still in place for another year. And still to come this month, two likely by-election defeats for the Conservatives, one in a rock-solid Tory heartland with a current majority of 24,000.

Also still to come is a Parliamentary standards report into the prime minister's conduct, which has been under relentless scrutiny for months now. All will provide rich pickings for opponents who now sit not only opposite Johnson in the Commons, but also behind him on the Tory benches.

Surviving another year is likely to prove a serious challenge even for the unorthodox and resilient Johnson, as the forces ranged against him are unlikely to go away.

### **To continue the conversation:**

**Andrew Porter, Partner, London**

+44 207 404 5959

[aporter@brunswickgroup.com](mailto:aporter@brunswickgroup.com)

**Jess Frost, Partner, London**

+44 20 7404 5959

[jfrost@brunswickgroup.com](mailto:jfrost@brunswickgroup.com)