



Boris Johnson as Prime Minister

Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boris_Johnson_giving_a_COVID-19_press_conference.jpg

Updated
September
2022

Key terms

Brexit: withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, which became government policy after a referendum on the country's membership was held in June 2016. It was not finally delivered until January 2020, with a 'transition period' to run until the end of the year.

Minority government: a government which does not have an overall majority of MPs in the House of Commons.

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1. Introduction

Who is Boris Johnson?

Boris Johnson became Prime Minister in July 2019, after Theresa May's inability to deliver **Brexit** led to the collapse of her government. She had lost her parliamentary majority at the June 2017 general election and struggled not only with **minority government** status but also with a deeply divided Conservative Party. After failing three times to get her European withdrawal agreement through the House of Commons she was forced to announce her resignation, triggering a Conservative Party leadership election.

Johnson won the leadership contest largely because of his commitment to leaving the EU, with or without a deal with the other 27 member states, by 31 October 2019. This was the deadline for the UK's departure at the time, although the date was later to be pushed back to 31 January 2020. In the final round of the contest, he convincingly defeated his nearest rival, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Johnson had been one of the leaders of the 'Vote Leave' campaign three years earlier. A former journalist, Mayor of London and Foreign Secretary, he possessed varied experience. He was a 'larger than life', extrovert personality who exuded optimism and appeared best placed to lead the Conservatives to victory in a future general election. His appeal extended beyond traditional Conservative Party supporters –

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Key term

Coronavirus pandemic: Covid-19, a worldwide respiratory illness which first reached the UK in late January 2020 and was recognised by March as a public health emergency.

he was sometimes referred to as the 'Heineken Tory', a reference to the drink that was claimed to refresh the parts that other beers cannot reach.

Although Johnson's premiership lasted a little longer than three years, it was one of the most important of recent times. He completed the Brexit process after winning an 80-seat majority in the December 2019 general election. He handled the **coronavirus pandemic**, a once-in-a-century public health crisis. In his final months in power, the UK emerged as a leading ally of Ukraine following Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of its neighbour in February 2022.

Boris Johnson governed in a highly individual manner. He possessed a flair and charisma that distinguished him from his immediate predecessors and rivals. He disregarded many of the rules and conventions that usually constrain the Prime Minister. Ultimately, however, his personality and conduct aroused such mistrust that he lost the confidence of a swathe of his ministerial and parliamentary colleagues, and in July 2022 he was forced to resign.

What is this case study about?

In the UK Government component of the Pearson Edexcel Politics specification, section 3.3 requires students to study the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. You are expected to examine in depth the power and influence of two Prime Ministers, one from the period 1945–97 and one who has held office since 1997. This case study suggests ways in which you can use Boris Johnson as your more recent example. There are several aspects of his premiership that you can discuss:

- Johnson's transition from head of a minority government to a much more powerful Prime Minister, following his victory in the December 2019 general election;
- The delivery of his most important policy pledge, the commitment to take the UK out of the European Union, and then to secure a trade deal with the EU;
- His handling of the coronavirus pandemic as an example of crisis management;
- The causes of his downfall and what it reveals about the constraints on the PM's power.

2. Prime Minister and Cabinet

Factors governing Johnson's selection of Cabinet ministers

Most Prime Ministers are influenced by some or all of the following considerations when it comes to choosing members of their Cabinet:

- Establishing their own authority
- Rewarding loyal allies and conciliating potential rivals
- Including experienced, able individuals
- Maintaining diversity – for example including female and ethnic minority ministers
- Maintaining balance between different factions within the governing party.

In forming his Cabinet, Johnson was guided strongly by the first two criteria. The other factors played a part, with the exception of the last one. The delivery of Brexit was his overriding purpose. Some leading members of Theresa May's Cabinet, who had been outspoken opponents of a possible 'no-deal' outcome, had already made it clear that they did not want to continue in office. They included the outgoing Chancellor, Philip Hammond, and Justice Secretary, David Gauke. Nor did Johnson show much sign of wishing to conciliate defeated rivals. Jeremy Hunt was offered a less important Cabinet position, that of Defence Secretary, which he turned down.

The key posts were all held by ministers who were noted Eurosceptics and supporters of Johnson's candidacy for the leadership. Dominic Raab had resigned from May's government in opposition to her Brexit deal. He had run for the party leadership but endorsed Johnson after being eliminated. Raab was Foreign Secretary and First Secretary of State in 2019–21 before being moved to the post of Justice Secretary. Throughout the government he was effectively Deputy Prime Minister, acquiring the title as well as the responsibility in September 2021. Sajid Javid (Johnson's first Chancellor of the Exchequer) and Priti Patel (Home Secretary) were from modest immigrant family backgrounds, examples of a commitment to diversity. Javid's experience in the City before entering politics also provided relevant preparation for the critical role of running the Treasury. In February 2020 he was succeeded as Chancellor by Rishi Sunak, who also came from an ethnic minority background and had experience as an investment banker before entering politics.

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Key term

Ministerial code: an official document setting out expected standards of behaviour by ministers. A breach of the code would normally result in a minister's resignation.

Johnson proved extremely reluctant to lose ministers who came under pressure in Parliament or the media. In November 2020 he supported Priti Patel when an inquiry into allegations of bullying held that she had breached the **ministerial code**. In June 2021, when a photo appeared of Health Secretary Matt Hancock embracing his girlfriend in his office, thereby breaking his department's rules on physical contact during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Prime Minister did not initially see this as a resigning matter. Hancock was forced out 24 hours later as the scale of the public sense of outrage became clear, and media criticism proved unrelenting. These incidents suggest that Johnson was a Prime Minister who did not want to have the composition of his Cabinet dictated by external pressures.

The relationship between Prime Minister and Cabinet

It was clear from the outset that Johnson intended to control his Cabinet, in order to assert his authority and ensure that the government's commitment to Brexit was delivered without delay. All ministers had to accept the possibility of leaving the EU without a deal if this was considered necessary.

The machinery of government

A so-called 'Brexit war cabinet' was set up to oversee the UK's departure from the EU. Until the February 2020 Cabinet reshuffle it consisted of six ministers: Johnson himself, Javid, Raab, Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove, Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay and Attorney-General Geoffrey Cox. Johnson also created two new Cabinet committees to handle the Brexit process. The overall number of **Cabinet committees** was initially reduced to six, although two committees concerned with climate change were later created, and four 'implementation committees' were set up in response to the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 (these four were replaced in June 2020 by two committees, one concerned with strategy, the other with operational delivery). A further committee, whose task was to shore up the union between the component parts of the UK, was set up in February 2021 in response to the growth of support for Scottish independence. Other committees were set up to deal with particular issues, including climate change and the resettlement of refugees from Afghanistan after Britain evacuated the country in August 2021.

Key term

Cabinet committee: a group of ministers, appointed by the Prime Minister to take responsibility for a particular policy area, which reduces the decision-making workload of the full Cabinet. The Institute for Government has a good infographic [here](#).

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The latest government material available (dated October 2021) gave a total of 20 committees and sub-committees. Johnson initially preferred a slimmed-down set-up, in the belief that this would be more effective, but this approach did not last. His preference for creating separate committees for 'strategy' and 'operations' in several policy areas added to the number. As with many Prime Ministers, the chairing of committees was decided in a way that confirmed his own grip on power. Johnson chaired 11 of them, with others chaired by key allies.

These arrangements illustrate the power of the Prime Minister to reshape the machinery of central government. It is believed that the original ideas for restructuring came from Dominic Cummings, an abrasive, unconventional figure who had worked with Johnson on the 2016 'Vote Leave' campaign and served as his chief adviser in the first 16 months of the government. Cummings was an outsider with little respect for established Whitehall practices. He was given authority over all government **special advisers**, which he demonstrated in August 2019 by dismissing a Treasury adviser without the prior permission of the Chancellor. He became a destabilising force within Number 10, regarded by many officials and MPs as exercising undue influence over policy-making. He was openly contemptuous of Conservative backbenchers – famously, he never joined the party. He was eventually forced out in November 2020 after losing a battle with the newly appointed **Downing Street Press Secretary**, Allegra Stratton, over access to the Prime Minister. Thereafter he became an open opponent of Boris Johnson, accusing him of incompetence in evidence given to a parliamentary enquiry in May 2021.

One of Johnson's key failures was his inability to create a settled team in Number 10 with the ability to impose order on the government machine. For a time it seemed that there was to be a calmer, more disciplined environment with the appointment of Dan Rosenfield, a former Treasury official, as **Chief of Staff**. An article in *The Times* (17 July 2021) however suggested that Rosenfield had antagonised some Downing Street advisers by excluding their viewpoints and paying insufficient attention to the political dimension of policy-making. After barely a year in the post, in February 2022 he was succeeded by Steve Barclay, who unusually was also an MP and Cabinet Office Minister.

Key terms

Special advisers: advisers to a minister who provide party political input which regular civil servants are not allowed to offer. They may have policy expertise or skills in communicating with the media.

Downing Street Press Secretary: an official who manages the Prime Minister's relations with the news media.

Chief of Staff: the Prime Minister's most senior aide, who may be either a political appointee or a civil servant.

A dominant PM?

The emphasis that Johnson placed on stamping his own authority on the government was demonstrated in his February 2020 reshuffle. The most important change was the replacement of Javid as Chancellor by his deputy, Rishi Sunak, after the former rejected a plan to create a single team of Number 10 and 11 advisers. This was seen as a bid by the Prime Minister to reduce the Chancellor's independence. Sunak was regarded as a much less experienced figure who would be unlikely to challenge Johnson.

A second reshuffle in September 2021 saw the removal of some ministerial 'dead wood' and an attempt to refresh the appearance of the front bench, looking towards the next general election. Ministers who had earned a reputation for a lack of competence, notably Gavin Williamson at Education, were removed. His replacement, Nadhim Zahawi, had been viewed as a successful administrator as Vaccines Minister. The most senior office holders were unaffected, except for Dominic Raab, demoted from Foreign Secretary to Justice Secretary but with the honorific title of Deputy Prime Minister as compensation. His replacement, Liz Truss, became only the second woman to head the Foreign Office, and the first in a Conservative government. She was also popular with Conservative Party members. Michael Gove, regarded as one of the abler ministers, was moved to a beefed-up Housing Department to tackle the issue of planning policy, which had proved controversial among the party's grassroots. He also took responsibility for the so-called 'levelling up' agenda – an ill-defined commitment to investing in 'left behind' communities, seen as crucial for the government's prospects of re-election.

The Cabinet was initially side-lined as a result of the social distancing measures introduced during the coronavirus pandemic. Key decisions were reportedly taken by an inner core of four – Johnson, Sunak, Gove and Hancock (until his resignation in June 2021, when Javid returned to the Cabinet as his replacement). In the most serious phase of the pandemic, Cabinet meetings were replaced for a time by Zoom video links, which made it harder to have proper collective discussion.

The Cabinet effectively rubber-stamped the decisions of the two Covid-19 sub-committees for much of the crisis. Full Cabinet meetings, however, were called prior to the second and third national lockdowns, announced at the end of October 2020 and in January 2021. It was reported in February 2021 that a handful of ministers had been involved in discussion of the 'road map' for exiting this latest lockdown, which was to be implemented in a series of cautious stages between March and June (later postponed to July). This took the form of a video chat which lasted just an hour. The full Cabinet was invited to give approval to the plan on the following day.

Johnson's handling of the Cabinet at the height of his power is typical of practice in recent decades. Prime Ministers often bypass Cabinet and have key decisions taken at committee or small group level. However, when a controversial and potentially unpopular step has to be taken, a Prime Minister will want the backing of all colleagues and so will convene a Cabinet meeting.

The balance of power between Prime Minister and Cabinet shifted in the final months of the government, as Johnson's authority was undermined by a series of scandals and misjudgements. MPs' loyalty was tested in October 2021 when Johnson tried to get them to block the suspension of Owen Paterson, a former minister charged with undertaking paid lobbying. The Prime Minister's attempt to create a new body to police parliamentary standards had to be abandoned following an outcry. Paterson's subsequent resignation from the Commons triggered a by-election in his North Shropshire seat, where the Liberal Democrats overturned a Conservative majority of almost 23,000. The affair was part of a pattern in which government ministers were expected to support a questionable prime ministerial decision in public, only to see it reversed under pressure.

In December came the so-called 'Partygate' revelations, which saw Johnson fined for taking part in social events in Number 10 during the Covid-19 lockdowns. This was particularly damaging since the Prime Minister was revealed to have disregarded social distancing rules which his own government had introduced. He won a vote of confidence among Conservative MPs on 6 June 2022 by 211 to 148 votes, but the fact that 41 per cent did not support him was a significant blow

to his authority. In the same month, the Conservatives lost two by-elections – Wakefield in Yorkshire to Labour and Tiverton and Honiton in Devon to the Liberal Democrats. This prompted the resignation of party chairman Oliver Dowden, who pointedly stated that ‘someone must take responsibility’ for these disasters.

The final straw was Johnson’s evasive response when questioned about the appointment as deputy chief whip of Chris Pincher, an individual who faced allegations of sexual misconduct. After Sajid Javid resigned as Health Secretary on 5 July, citing his objections to the Prime Minister’s moral conduct, Chancellor Sunak quit over differences on economic policy. Johnson was forced to announce his own resignation two days later, after an unprecedented number of ministers either left the government or called on him to go. They included the new Chancellor, Nadhim Zahawi, and his own successor as Education Secretary, Michelle Donelan. Johnson left office in September after the Conservative Party had completed the process of selecting a new leader and Prime Minister.

Some media commentators drew parallels with the fall of Margaret Thatcher in November 1990. Both Prime Ministers lost support among their own MPs, who had come to see them as a potential electoral liability, and both stepped down after losing the confidence of the Cabinet. But the parallels are not exact. Thatcher departed in an orderly fashion after gauging the views of her Cabinet colleagues one by one. Johnson, by contrast, tried to cling on amid a wave of resignations, even sacking one minister, Michael Gove, who had privately advised him to go. Johnson’s resignation statement was defiant, blaming the herd instinct of MPs for his downfall, and in his last Prime Minister’s Questions, he left the door open to a comeback, declaring ‘mission largely accomplished – for now’.

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Examination tip

Johnson's handling of the Cabinet should be contrasted with a Prime Minister from the 1945–97 period. John Major, for example, took care to reward his two rivals for the Conservative Party leadership, Douglas Hurd and Michael Heseltine, with senior positions when he defeated them to become Prime Minister in 1990. As internal party divisions over the EU grew during his premiership, Major sought to preserve a balance between pro-Europeans (Heseltine, Kenneth Clarke) and Eurosceptics (Michael Howard, Michael Portillo) in the Cabinet, in the forlorn hope of maintaining party unity. The widespread perception of Major's weakness in the mid-1990s – as well as that of Theresa May more recently – may help to explain Johnson's determination to run a more tightly controlled government. Johnson's control of the Cabinet was closer to that exercised by Thatcher and Blair, who also enjoyed substantial parliamentary majorities. Although in his case it was demonstrated over a much shorter period.

Pause point

Research Johnson's two main Cabinet reshuffles (Feb 2020 and Sept 2021) in more depth, using online sources such as the [BBC](#), or the [Guardian website](#).

What does each reshuffle reveal about Johnson's relationship with his Cabinet colleagues?

More information on John Major can be found in the textbook, *Edexcel AS and A Level Politics* (Pearson, 2017), pp.196–8.

3. Power to control events and policy

We will look at two important issues which revealed Boris Johnson's strengths and weaknesses as Prime Minister: the handling of Brexit and the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Brexit and the transition from minority to majority government

The most important limitation on Johnson's power, which lasted until his victory in the December 2019 general election, was that he initially headed a minority government. In spite of his defiant insistence on leaving the EU by 31 October, in practice his room for manoeuvre was restricted by opposition MPs and Conservative rebels who were not prepared to see this happen without a deal being agreed. When Parliament met at the beginning of September 2019, 21 Conservative MPs had the **party whip** withdrawn after they supported an opposition motion to block a no-deal Brexit and in effect to wrest control of the negotiating process from the government. Johnson expressed his anger at what he termed an opposition-sponsored 'surrender bill', which would hand the initiative in the Brexit talks to the EU, keeping the UK within the bloc in defiance of the 2016 referendum result.

Key terms

Party whip: In this context, a document issued by the leadership of a political party to its MPs, instructing them how to vote on forthcoming parliamentary business. To have this withdrawn means effectively losing the right to sit as a member of that party. This means that an MP sits as an independent and is barred from standing as a candidate for his or her party at the next general election.

Case Study

Key term

Prorogue: to suspend the sitting of Parliament using royal prerogative power – something which is usually done between the end of one parliamentary session and the beginning of another.

Another source of frustration for Johnson came when he attempted to **prorogue** Parliament for a five-week period, a move which was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court in late September. The Prime Minister's opponents had argued that an extended prorogation was intended to limit their ability to scrutinise his Brexit policy, and they felt vindicated by the Court's judgement. Johnson was obliged to comply with the ruling and Parliament resumed immediately.

The Prime Minister's fundamental problem was that, unless he could hold and win a general election, his power to control events was severely limited. In finding a way out of this impasse, he faced a constitutional obstacle in the form of the 2011 Fixed Term Parliaments Act. This required two-thirds of MPs to vote to hold an early general election. Labour was strongly opposed to allowing an early contest, arguing that they would not do so until legislation blocking a no-deal had been secured. Johnson finally got around this obstruction at the end of October 2019 by introducing an 'early parliamentary election bill', which required only a simple majority to pass. Once the Scottish Nationalists and Liberal Democrats had agreed to this, Labour withdrew its opposition, so that the poll took place on 12 December.

Against widespread expectations of another hung parliament, the general election resulted in an 80-seat majority for the Conservatives. Most remarkably, the party won a swathe of seats in northern England and the Midlands, an area dubbed the 'red wall' since it had been Labour-voting for generations. The election is covered in greater depth in the [2019 UK general election case study](#).

To put the outcome in context, Johnson's success was on a smaller scale than Tony Blair's landslide victories in 1997 and 2001, but comfortably exceeded his 66-seat majority in 2005. It was the best result for a Conservative Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher's 102-seat majority in 1987.

The election victory greatly strengthened Johnson's position as Prime Minister, enabling him to pass his EU withdrawal agreement without difficulty. His election slogan, 'Get Brexit done', gave him a clear **mandate** for action. Five amendments to the bill, introduced by opposition members of the House of Lords, were reversed in the Commons, and the UK officially left the EU on 31 January 2020. The Labour Party was in disarray following its fourth consecutive general election defeat. Its defeated leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was obliged to step down, leading to a prolonged contest to succeed him. Labour had to

Key term

Mandate: the authority to govern, which a government derives from an election victory.

Case Study

Pause point

John Major's electoral fortunes offer an interesting contrast with those of Boris Johnson. In 1992 his majority was reduced to 21 seats, and five years later he was comprehensively defeated. Find out more about the decline of Major's authority. A useful starting point is this *Huffington Post* article: '20 years since John Major's 1992 election – a retrospective', available [here](#).

formulate a strategy to regain the seats it had lost in its historic heartlands in northern England and (in the 2015 election) Scotland. Corbyn's successor, Sir Keir Starmer, faced an uphill battle to win back public support.

An urgent issue was the need to negotiate a trade agreement with the EU by 31 December 2020, the date when the agreed transition period was due to end. This promised to be a complex process. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic presented a new obstacle to the progress of talks, and some commentators argued that it would be wise to extend the transition period. Politically, however, this was an impossibility for the leader who had staked his reputation on a clean break with the EU. He refused to apply for an extension, raising fears of disruption to trade, and of tariffs being imposed on UK exports, if a new relationship with the EU was not worked out in time.

The negotiations proved fraught for a number of reasons. There were disagreements over three key issues. The question of access to fish in British territorial waters proved to be the most difficult sticking point. Another argument concerned the so-called 'level playing field' in trade: the EU was concerned that the UK might abolish regulations on workers' rights and state aid to industry, in order to gain what it regarded as an unfair commercial advantage. There was also the problem of how future disputes between the UK and the EU might be resolved. Underlying all of these matters was a conflict between the UK government's desire to recover sovereignty – a key objective of the Brexit campaign that Johnson had fronted in 2016 – and the EU's wish to protect the integrity of the European single market.

Boris Johnson took a risk in taking personal charge of the final stages on the negotiations with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. But his gamble paid off with the eventual conclusion of a deal on Christmas Eve 2020, preserving tariff-free trade on most goods and establishing a basis for co-operation in areas such as crime-fighting and data-sharing. The fact that the deal was finalised so close to the deadline reduced the opportunities for MPs to scrutinise the details. This, together with the Labour Party's decision to support the agreement rather than be seen as wilfully obstructive, worked in Johnson's favour when a vote was taken on 30 December. The EU (Future Relationship) Bill passed the Commons by 521 to 73 votes.

Case Study

Key term

Good Friday Agreement: the April 1998 deal between the UK and the Irish Republic, which resolved conflict between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland and created a power-sharing government in Belfast.

Review question

Does what you have read so far suggest that Boris Johnson is prepared, to an exceptional degree, to ignore convention in pursuit of his goals? Evidence for this so far includes his unwillingness to sack Cabinet ministers for alleged breaches of the ministerial code, the prorogation of Parliament and his attitude towards the Northern Ireland protocol. Is this a fair judgement on his conduct as Prime Minister? Make a case for and against the claim.

Key term

Financial crisis of 2008: a near-collapse of the global banking system, which led to large-scale bail-outs of financial institutions in the UK and other countries, and was followed by a global recession.

This did not, however, resolve all the problems arising from Brexit. The most intractable one was linked to the fact that Northern Ireland now had a land border with an EU state, the Irish Republic. It was considered vital to avoid disruption to trade between the two, partly for economic reasons and partly to maintain peace and stability as guaranteed by the **Good Friday Agreement**. This meant avoiding the introduction of customs duties or checks on goods at the border. The UK and the EU negotiated the Northern Ireland protocol – an agreement that keeps the region within the EU’s common market for goods. As a result, rather than have checks on certain goods carried out at the land border, they would be performed when these entered Northern Ireland from mainland Britain. This angered members of the Unionist community, who argued that the protocol created a border in the Irish Sea and treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. In February 2022 the Northern Ireland power-sharing government collapsed when the Democratic Unionist members resigned in protest at the continuation of the protocol. The EU refused to renegotiate, insisting that the UK was in breach of an international agreement which it had signed. In response the UK government announced a willingness to disapply aspects of the protocol. By the time that Johnson announce his resignation, the issue had not been resolved.

Crisis management: the coronavirus pandemic

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which became a major national emergency in March 2020, presented an unprecedented challenge for a government in peacetime. The virus represented a lethal threat to human health and life, with 129,000 deaths in the UK by the second anniversary of Johnson’s appointment as Prime Minister. It also disrupted economic activity on a scale that dwarfed the **financial crisis of 2008**. It was estimated that the UK economy shrank by 11 per cent during 2020.

The pandemic was a searching test for the individual who had ultimate responsibility for national crisis management. Boris Johnson was also its most high-profile victim, being hospitalised for a week in early April 2020, including a period in intensive care. During this period the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, deputised for him but without all the powers of the Prime Minister.

Case Study

Key term

Economic aid package: a collection of measures, comprising government-backed loans and tax holidays for firms, and aid for the self-employed. The government also paid up to 80 per cent of the wages of workers who had been 'furloughed' – i.e. given temporary leave of absence from firms which were facing financial difficulties.

Johnson gained credit for his willingness to authorise an extensive **economic aid package**, announced by Chancellor Rishi Sunak and designed to cushion businesses and workers against the adverse financial impact of the virus. The Prime Minister's announcement of the March 2020 lockdown was broadly acceptable to a public understandably fearful of the disease. The slogan, 'Stay at home, support our NHS, save lives,' struck a chord. Johnson's approval ratings were high in the early stages of the crisis, reaching 68 per cent at the time he was admitted to hospital. His popularity declined, however, from mid-April. There was a widespread feeling that he had misjudged public opinion in late May, with his refusal to sack Dominic Cummings over an alleged breach of lockdown rules on an earlier visit to his family's home in Durham.

Many commentators argued that the Prime Minister's response was too hesitant. The first national lockdown was not announced until 23 March 2020, yet there had been warnings about the virus some weeks earlier. It was suggested that Johnson had been too complacent about the health risks. He missed five consecutive emergency meetings in the run-up to the crisis, initially seemed determined to continue normal social interaction with others, and was reluctant to impose restrictions on people's personal freedoms. There was also criticism of the government scheme for testing and tracing people who had been in contact with the virus, and of its slowness in acquiring personal protective equipment and hospital ventilators.

As the crisis evolved, Johnson faced a difficult dilemma. Many of his own MPs and commercial interests wanted to lift the restrictions as soon as possible in order to restart the economy. On the other hand, he feared a resurgence of the infection if he authorised a premature relaxation. This was mirrored in a reported divide within the Cabinet, between so-called 'doves' such as Gove and Hancock, who favoured a restrictive approach, and 'hawks' such as Sunak and Patel, who wanted to prioritise the needs of business. This was summarised in the media as the 'lives versus livelihoods' debate.

Government policy changed several times in response to this dilemma. From mid-May 2020 there was a phased return to near-normal levels of economic activity and social contact. By the autumn, with the virus now reviving, calls for a further national lockdown were heard. Instead, Johnson opted for a

graduated system of 'tiers', with different parts of the country subject to varying levels of restriction on social and business activity, according to the local incidence of infection. As this seemed ineffective, at the end of October the Prime Minister announced a month-long national lockdown. This was followed at the beginning of December with a return to the tier system, but with more areas subject to higher levels of restriction. Another U-turn was announced less than a week before Christmas. Johnson had earlier promised a five-day lifting of the restrictions across the country, to allow families to come together for the holiday period. This was now drastically curtailed after evidence emerged of a new and rapidly spreading variant of the virus. London and most of south-east England, where the new strain had been detected, were moved into an even more restrictive Tier 4, and in all parts of the country, households were allowed to mix only for one day, not five. Then, on 4 January 2021, Johnson announced a third national lockdown across England, arguing that this was the only way to avoid the resources of the NHS being overwhelmed. These new restrictions were gradually scaled back in the spring, with most rules relaxed by the second anniversary of the Johnson premiership in July.

Johnson's overall handling of the crisis was heavily criticised. For many critics it demonstrated a trait they had long observed, his preference for the 'big picture' over mastery of policy detail. At one point he was unable to recall his own government's rules on social mixing, and on another occasion, he appeared to speak for the whole of the UK when in reality, the devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland pursue their own policies on public health. Some English Metro Mayors, such as Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, were strongly critical of the level of economic support offered by central government.

Johnson was also accused of avoiding tough choices until forced into taking action. He seemed to lurch between the positions of the 'hawks' and 'doves' in Whitehall, on the matter of when and how far to implement restrictions. This reflected his own indecision: caught between his libertarian instincts and the scientific case for tighter measures to contain the spread of the virus. Johnson was caught in a bind from which the only viable exit would be the promised Covid-19 vaccine. As this was rolled out in the spring of 2021, with a rapidity that surprised many, Johnson's standing in the opinion polls recovered, only to decline between May and

July. This followed a series of negative stories, including Dominic Cummings' criticism of Johnson in his testimony to MPs and the resignation of Matt Hancock as Health Secretary. In the early summer, evidence of a new and more rapidly spreading 'Delta' variant of the virus led to alarm in some quarters over the pace at which social restrictions were repealed. Labour argued that it was reckless to lift so many protections with infections still rising.

So-called 'Plan B' restrictions, including 'Covid passes' to access indoor venues and a return to wearing face masks in public places, were announced in December 2021, in an attempt to stem the spread of a new Omicron variant. However, by this stage Johnson was facing increased opposition within the Conservative Party to such measures – almost 100 of his MPs rebelled in the parliamentary vote. With the virus declining in incidence, from 21 February 2022 all legal restrictions, including the requirement to isolate, were removed.

Pause point

Johnson's success in delivering Brexit offers a contrast with his more mixed record in handling the Coronavirus crisis. Both issues provide material for discussing the impact of external pressures on the position of the Prime Minister, as well as the personal skills of the office-holder. You must, of course, continue to monitor developments in both of these areas.

A possible comparison is with Tony Blair, who was commended for his role in negotiating the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which resolved the conflict in Northern Ireland, but whose reputation was seriously damaged by the Iraq War of 2003. Blair's premiership is covered in *Edexcel AS and A Level Politics* (Pearson, 2017), pp.199–202.

4. Summing up: How powerful was Boris Johnson as Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister's position can be assessed in relation to some key factors. Each of these can be a potential source of strength or weakness. Here are some provisional judgements on Johnson's performance as Prime Minister.

Leadership style and control of the Cabinet

Boris Johnson's personality had some strengths. He was an effective communicator and skilful self-promoter, instantly recognisable to the public and capable of appealing across conventional political dividing lines. At least until the onset of the pandemic he generated a sense of optimism, famously dismissing 'doubters, doomsters and gloomsters' who warned of negative fall-out from Brexit. Despite his outwardly shambolic appearance Johnson was a cunning political operator and undoubtedly the dominant figure in the government, with no plausible rival in his senior team. The only Cabinet minister whose reputation was enhanced during the pandemic was the Chancellor. Rishi Sunak gained credit for his competence in putting together an economic aid package in an unprecedented situation. However, he held back

from challenging the Prime Minister until July 2022, after the PM had been undermined by a series of missteps.

In some respects, the pandemic highlighted the centrality of the Prime Minister in the UK political system. Johnson's stand-in during his hospitalisation in April 2020, Dominic Raab, spoke repeatedly of carrying out the Prime Minister's instructions. There was an unwillingness on the part of ministers to take decisions whilst Johnson was absent.

Johnson was criticised for tolerating damaging feuding within the team of Number 10 advisers. From Dominic Cummings to Matt Hancock, he was reluctant to sack individuals when mistakes were made. He also lacked a detailed grasp of policy. He talked a great deal about 'levelling up', an aspiration to reduce levels of inequality between different parts of the country. But it took until February 2022 to produce a detailed statement on how this was to be achieved. On taking office he pledged to resolve the crisis in social care for the elderly. Yet it was not until September 2021 that his intentions were translated into a specific policy, with an announcement that from 2023, no one would pay more than £86,000 to fund their personal care.

The parliamentary situation and the impact of events

As we have seen, the December 2019 general election gave Johnson a sizeable majority, which made it unlikely that he would face serious parliamentary problems. The Conservative Party in the Commons was initially united around Brexit following the departure of a number of pro-Remain rebels at the election. Johnson's MPs pragmatically accepted the expansion of state intervention in response to the pandemic. The measures preserved their constituents' jobs and businesses and there was no valid alternative to the government's rescue package. In the longer term, however, a division opened up between Conservatives who favoured continued public spending and those who wanted to return to a more stringent approach. By the summer of 2021 there were reports – strongly denied, of course – of tensions over this issue within the Cabinet, between an expansionist Johnson and a more cautious Sunak.

For some time, Johnson managed to evade serious parliamentary scrutiny. This was observed early in his premiership, in the controversy over the prorogation of

Case Study

Parliament. Then, during the pandemic, MPs had few opportunities to question ministers, with proceedings moved largely to remote working and only a small number present in the chamber. This placed the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, at a disadvantage when it came to challenging Johnson at Prime Minister's Questions. The Commons was given just 24 hours to debate the trade agreement with the EU, and the government refused to prolong the life of the Brexit select committee beyond January 2021. Johnson was also reluctant to grant his backbench critics a vote on the government's planned cuts to the UK's overseas aid budget in July 2021. The decision temporarily to break a 2019 manifesto commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of gross national income on aid, as part of the government's deficit reduction strategy, attracted widespread parliamentary opposition. The government won by 333 votes to 298 – with critics insisting that Johnson had allowed the vote only after the whips had persuaded enough Conservative MPs not to rebel.

Key terms

European Research Group

a Eurosceptic group of Conservative MPs, formed in 1993, which gained influence after the 2016 referendum. It contributed to the defeat of Theresa May's attempt to push through a compromise Brexit agreement.

Three-line whip

a written instruction to members of a parliamentary party to attend a vote in the House of Commons, underlined three times to indicate its importance.

Yet although Johnson was in a stronger parliamentary position than his immediate predecessors, he lacked a natural constituency of supporters among Conservative MPs and faced a worrying outbreak of factionalism within the parliamentary party. Following the model of the **European Research Group**, a number of backbenchers formed groups centred on particular issues. The Northern Research Group, consisting of more than 50 MPs with seats in the north of England, was set up to press for increased investment in their region. Some 70 Conservative MPs formed the Covid Recovery Group to oppose the November 2020 lockdown, which they regarded as damaging to prospects of economic recovery. A significant number of Conservative MPs rebelled against Covid restrictions, defying a **three-line whip** in successive votes in December 2020, June 2021 and December 2021. Johnson was able to secure the passage of his measures thanks to the support or abstention of opposition parties. Despite its hostility to Johnson on other grounds, Labour consistently favoured policies designed to contain the spread of the virus.

Another source of tension was the series of embarrassing policy U-turns to which the government seemed prone. These included Johnson's initial opposition to the extension of free school meals to children from low-income families during the summer holidays in 2020. He abruptly reversed his position following a public campaign headed by England footballer

Marcus Rashford. A threatened backbench rebellion led to another change of policy, when Johnson reversed his earlier decision to allow the Chinese firm Huawei to be involved in building Britain's 5G mobile phone network. Sixty Conservative MPs had signalled that they regarded Huawei as a threat to UK security – a position which echoed that of the US government. As a result of this pressure, it was announced that the firm would be banned from the UK network.

The most serious problem for Johnson, however, was his own personality. Parliamentary support for him eroded as episodes such as 'partygate' indicated that he could not be trusted to tell the truth or to take responsibility for his own errors. This was underlined when, after the two by-election losses in June 2022, he declared that he would not 'undergo some sort of psychological transformation'. By this stage the Conservatives were consistently at least seven percentage points behind Labour in the opinion polls. It was not just a matter of Johnson's own conduct. From the first half of 2022 voters faced a serious cost of living crisis, as the price of food, domestic energy, fuel and other essentials rose, taking inflation over 10 per cent. The government seemed powerless to alleviate the pressures faced by households. Meanwhile, the tax burden was at the highest level since Clement Attlee's Labour government in the late 1940s – a situation that was hard to square with Conservative ideology. MPs recognised that as long as Johnson remained PM, their chances of winning a general election – due to be held by January 2025 at the latest – were at risk.

Link to Section 4.2:

The relationship between the Executive and Parliament

Review the evidence in this section. Is it fair to conclude that Boris Johnson has seriously weakened the accountability of government to Parliament? Compare his record in this area with that of another Prime Minister with whom you are familiar.

Case Study

Practice question

This question, in the style of a **Section A question** on **A level Paper 2**, requires an essay-style response, written in 45 minutes.

Evaluate the view that UK Prime Ministers have limited power to control events and policy.

In your answer you should draw on relevant knowledge and understanding of the study of Component 1: UK politics and core political ideas.

You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way.

[30 marks]

Please note: this practice question has been written by the author, and not by the senior examiner team for GCE Politics.

Guidance on answering the question

Although this case study has centred on Boris Johnson's premiership, remember that you must illustrate your answer with reference to at least one other Prime Minister, drawn from the period 1945–97. In practice most answers are likely to refer to more than the minimum of two Prime Ministers.

Paper 2 essays require candidates to link their answer to a topic studied as part of Component 1. A relevant topic for this question is Political Parties. Section 2.4 covers the various factors that affect party success, including the influence of the media. Boris Johnson has been the subject of constant debate in the news media, not least regarding the effectiveness of his response to the coronavirus pandemic, his handling of the Brexit issue and the impact of scandals from the autumn of 2021.