

The Times view on a damaged prime minister: Wounded Johnson

A thumping defeat in the North Shropshire by-election leaves the prime minister badly weakened. He may not have long to restore confidence in his leadership

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Earlier this week it became clear Boris Johnson had lost the confidence of many of his backbenchers, almost half of whom [rebelled against his policy on vaccine passports](#). Yesterday it became clear he had lost the confidence of a large swathe of Conservative voters too. The [North Shropshire by-election](#) was a contest that need never have happened if the prime minister had accepted the Commons Standards Committee's conclusions on Owen Paterson's lobbying, rather than trying to [rewrite the rules](#) to get the former MP for the constituency off the hook. It is certainly a by-election the Tories should never have lost. The party was defending a 22,949 majority in a heavily Leave voting seat that had been Conservative for 200 years. Instead it crashed to a 5,925 vote defeat to the Liberal Democrats in the biggest swing against an incumbent government since 1993. All governments lose by-elections, sometimes as on this occasion spectacularly, and it does not always prove terminal for either the government or the prime minister. Nonetheless this is the second such thumping defeat in quick succession in what was previously considered a rock solid seat, following the party's loss in [Chesham & Amersham](#) in June. On that occasion the government blamed local factors, including opposition to the HS2 railway line and to proposed planning

reforms. This time no such excuses were available. Instead Mr Johnson appeared to blame the media for focusing too much on “politics” rather than the government’s achievements.

There’s no question that a string of stories regarding the government’s conduct have been damaging both to Mr Johnson’s authority and the Conservative brand. The Paterson affair, revelations about Downing Street [Covid-busting parties](#) and the Electoral Commission’s findings over the funding to redecorate his [Downing Street flat](#) have all raised doubts about Mr Johnson’s honesty. In the wake of previous scandals, including Dominic Cummings’s trip to Barnard Castle and Matt Hancock’s breach of lockdown regulations, Mr Johnson gives the impression he considers himself above the rules that apply to lesser mortals. That has made him toxic to many voters.

Even so, Mr Johnson’s biggest problem is not sleaze but the government’s patchy record. Although he delivered on his promise to get Brexit done and has largely succeeded with the vaccine rollout, many other manifesto pledges have been broken. Taxes are being raised to levels not seen since the 1960s, the pension triple lock has been broken and in the north promised new high speed train lines have been abandoned. The government appears to lack solutions to some of the most urgent crises facing the country. A plan to fix social care turned out to be a plan to inject billions more into an unreformed NHS. Flagship reforms to planning rules have been scrapped. Levelling up remains a slogan in search of a policy. Overall there seems a lack of a firm grip on government and of a serious, competent person in charge. Backbenchers are being alienated by the sense this is a big state government antithetical to more traditional Conservative values.

That does not mean Mr Johnson is under imminent threat of removal. Assuming Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, and Lord Geidt, the adviser on standards, do not find that he misled them over the Downing Street parties or flat redecoration, he is likely to ride out the scandals. In the absence of any obvious successor who could unite an increasingly fractious party, the prime minister is wounded, but not fatally so. The party has asked for a reset and for more accommodation with the back

benches. That is not Mr Johnson's style. He will bulldoze on. The party will move against him only when they conclude he is no longer an electoral asset and they have a better candidate. We are not there yet. But it is getting closer.

Comment on line: This is all far too mild. In the midst of the worst peacetime crisis to confront the country for a century, we are led by the worst prime minister in that period.

Supported by a cabinet chosen on the basis of ideological fealty rather than anything approaching ability. The Labour front bench looks serious and organised; the Tories are an utter shambles.

Remove him and remove him now.