



Boris Johnson as Prime Minister

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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 – 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.

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.

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. Two years into his premiership, there is already plenty of material to study:

- 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.

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.

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 (Foreign Secretary, First Secretary of State and in effect Johnson's deputy) 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. 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.

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 is a Prime Minister who does 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.

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](#).

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

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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.

The latest government material available gives a total of 14 committees and a sub-committee concerned with nuclear deterrence and security. This is a slimmed down set-up compared to that of Johnson's immediate predecessors. The number of committees, sub-committees and implementation taskforces had peaked at 31 under David Cameron and was reduced to 21 under Theresa May. Johnson's approach reflected a belief that a simplified structure would be more efficient in delivering policy outcomes. As with many Prime Ministers, the chairing of committees was decided in a way that confirmed his own grip on power. Johnson chaired eight of them, with his key allies, Sunak and Gove, chairing a further three each.

These arrangements illustrate the power of the Prime Minister to reshape the machinery of central government. It is believed that the ideas for the restructuring came from Johnson's then chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, an abrasive, unconventional figure who had directed the 2016 'Vote Leave' campaign. 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 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. The appointment of Dan Rosenfield, a former Treasury official, as **Chief of Staff** from January 2021 signalled a shift towards a change of management style in Number 10. The new regime lacked Cummings' disruptive, reforming zeal and the

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.

atmosphere seemed to have become calmer and more disciplined. 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.

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.

Update

See the postscript for information about the September 2021 reshuffle.

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 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.

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Examination tip

Johnson's centralisation of power in Number 10 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 took care 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 is closer to that exercised by Thatcher and Blair, who also enjoyed substantial parliamentary majorities.

Pause point

Research Johnson's February 2020 Cabinet reshuffle in more depth, using online sources such as the [BBC](#), or the [Guardian website](#).

What does the 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 have revealed the strengths and weaknesses of Boris Johnson's position 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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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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 led to some disruption to the movement of foodstuffs early in 2021, and angered members of the Unionist community, who accused the government of creating a border in the Irish Sea and treating Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. Johnson announced a unilateral suspension of the rules, leading to accusations from the EU that the UK was in breach of an international agreement which it had signed. In response the UK government insisted that the EU needed to show more flexibility. By the second anniversary of Johnson’s appointment as Prime Minister 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.

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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

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.

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. 19 July was billed as 'Freedom Day' but ironically, two days earlier, the Prime Minister and Chancellor were obliged to self-isolate after being identified as close contacts with the new Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, who had tested positive for the virus.

Summing up: How powerful is Boris Johnson as Prime Minister?

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

Leadership style and control of the Cabinet

Boris Johnson's personality is, on the whole, a source of strength. He is 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 is 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 lacked the experience and the independent power base from which to challenge the Prime Minister, even had he wished to do so.

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. It can be a source of weakness for the government as a whole, however, if so much depends on the leadership of one individual. Policy failure will inevitably be laid at his door.

At the same time, Johnson has also been criticised for tolerating damaging feuding within the team of Number 10 advisers. From Dominic Cummings to Matt Hancock, he has been reluctant so far to sack individuals when mistakes have been made. Johnson seems to enjoy the exercise of power but lacks the ultimate ruthlessness of some of his predecessors. He also appears to lack a detailed grasp of policy. In his first two years he talked a great deal about 'levelling up', an aspiration to reduce levels of inequality between different parts of the country, without explaining how this is to be achieved. On taking office he pledged to resolve the crisis in social care for the elderly, yet two years on, no substantive action had been taken.

The parliamentary situation and the governing body

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 has been much more united since 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 has opened up between Conservatives who favour continued public spending and those who want 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.

Not only has Johnson so far had little serious opposition within the Commons, he has also been accused of evading parliamentary scrutiny. This was observed early in his premiership, in the controversy over the prorogation of 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

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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.

Although Johnson can get away with more than his immediate predecessors in Parliament, he lacks a natural constituency of supporters among Conservative MPs and faces a worrying outbreak of factionalism within the parliamentary party. Following the model of the **European Research Group**, a number of backbenchers have 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 total of 53 Conservative MPs voted against the decision to place most of England under high-level restrictions in early December. This was the largest number to defy a **three-line whip** since the general election, and among them were a number of senior figures and a dozen from the 2019 parliamentary intake. However, Johnson secured a majority, thanks to the Labour Party's decision to abstain on the vote. There was another rebellion in June 2021, when Johnson announced a delay to the removal of restrictions until the following month. This time 49 Conservative MPs voted against the Prime Minister's line but the government measures passed by a majority of 461 votes to 60.

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

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.

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.

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.

Key terms

Budget deficit: a situation in which government spending exceeds the amount it receives in tax, and so it borrows in order to cover the difference.

Austerity: a programme of cuts to public spending, especially on the welfare state, implemented by David Cameron's government from 2010 and designed to reduce the budget deficit.

The impact of external pressures

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic remain hard to quantify. Sunak originally predicted that the outbreak would lead to a recession of major proportions, although later there were more optimistic predictions that the economy would recover to its 2019 levels in 2021–22. This still means two lost years of low growth. There have been warnings that significant tax rises or welfare cuts will be needed in order to reduce the greatly increased **budget deficit**. Government borrowing in the financial year 2020–21 totalled a record £299 billion, with a further £200 billion likely in 2021–22. However, Johnson has stated that there will be no return to the **austerity** policies pursued by the coalition government a decade ago. Large-scale spending cuts would threaten the loss of the recently won 'red wall' seats at the next election. In late June 2020 he announced a 'new deal' to revive the economy. Using the slogan 'Build, build, build', Johnson outlined plans for investment in infrastructure which represented a breach with the Conservative Party's Thatcherite past. The Prime Minister's credibility depends largely on his ability to deliver these promises and retain popular support. Yet he must do so in an economic environment where there is little scope for extra spending.

Early indications at the May 2021 local elections were favourable for the Conservatives. Johnson was given much of the credit for a swathe of victories in council elections and for Labour's defeat in the Hartlepool by-election on the same day. This working-class seat in the North-East – a classic 'red wall' constituency – had consistently returned a Labour MP since 1964, and so a Conservative victory there was viewed as evidence of the opposition's continuing internal crisis. Much less welcome was the success of the Scottish Nationalist Party in the Scottish Parliament elections. Their demand for a second independence referendum will be hard for Johnson to ignore. It was also worrying for the government that the Chesham and Amersham by-election in June 2021 was won by the Liberal Democrats. This can be explained by local factors, such as opposition to the planned HS2 rail route in this part of Buckinghamshire, rather than heralding a broader collapse of support. Nonetheless, in the wake of the defeat, Johnson tried to reassure traditional Conservative voters in the south that their interests would not be sacrificed to his government's focus on the 'red wall' constituencies. Reconciling the two halves of the country may not prove easy. In July the Conservatives failed to take another northern seat, Batley and Spen, although the drastic reduction in the Labour majority is also worth noting.

Johnson's position remains strong in many respects. He is clearly a resilient and pragmatic individual, with a public appeal that reaches beyond traditional party loyalties. He possesses an enviable parliamentary majority, and the Labour Party has a long way to go before it can appear once again as a credible party of government. One report has warned that the party would need to gain a 60 per cent increase in its tally of seats to win in 2024.

On the other hand, Johnson would be ill-advised to ignore the undercurrents of criticism in his own ranks. Economic recovery is not yet assured and there are concerns over the long-term cost of Johnson's spending promises. The separatist ambitions of the SNP represent a further challenge, to which Johnson does not yet seem to have a coherent response, beyond offers of more spending in Scotland. His first two years in office demonstrate how swiftly the political fortunes of a Prime Minister can change.

Case Study

Postscript: the September 2021 reshuffle

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 – the still poorly defined commitment to investing in ‘left behind’ communities, seen as crucial for the government’s prospects of re-election.

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 and his handling of the Brexit issue.