Can Boris Find His Way Out the Door?

What everything has been waiting for with baited breath has come to fruition - Vote Leave campaigner Boris Johnson arrives for a press conference at Vote Leave headquarters in London Friday, June 24, 2016. British media say Prime Minister Boris Johnson has agreed to resign on Thursday, July 7 2022, ending an unprecedented political crisis over his future (According to the AP and other news organizations).

Public accountability is not an abstract notion. It is one of those things you think is merely a high-sounding principle until it comes and kicks you in the face. Ask any disgraced public figure, whose real life has been destroyed by misdeeds which no one cares about if someone who isn’t a public figure is involved.

But the thing about public accountability is that the men and women in the street also know, deep down, that it is real. That is why so many of the British public until recently was asking: why had it stopped working? As the Prime Minister had to answer to the electorate, parliament, the Queen - a whole range of people - why Boris stayed in office for so long?

Boris Johnson was the first Prime Minister in history to be fined by the police for breaking the law. When he attended the Queen’s jubilee celebrations he was loudly booed by the public. Time and again he would be caught lying to parliament, and yet he survived a vote of no confidence by his own MPs, but not by anything like a
convincing margin. His party also lost two recent by-elections, and the local elections in May, by embarrassing margins, until key ministers finally said: “enough is enough”.

The New Winston?

BoJo liked to compare himself to great leaders. He wanted his fans to think of him as a latter day Winston Churchill, heroically saving Blighty from the demonic EU – in fact, that is what they routinely would say when asked what good he has ever done, for anybody, at any time in his life.

He appeared however to be oblivious to the fact that he more resembles that other Great War leader, David Lloyd George. In 1918, it was stated that Lloyd George could be dictator for life if he wished. By 1922, having split his own Liberal Party and relied on Conservative support, he found himself removed by his new friends because he was no longer an asset – hence the name of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbenchers, the ones who organised the vote of no confidence in BoJo.

But the showman isn’t completely oblivious to the public mood. He knows he had to find a way out. He just can’t see what way will enable him to turn his own disasters on their head.

Mr. Johnson, I am about to do you, and your public, a service. Forget about parading around the world pretending to be a misunderstood Churchillian martyr.

Paying for the Privilege

Boris has heard of Steve Daley, but is unlikely to have consulted him on anything. As Johnson repeatedly both ignores and shafts his own advisers, which is why he has been through so many of them, he is not likely to go running to someone who is neither a politician nor a crook, as far as we know, to get him out of a hole.

However in his present circumstances Johnson could have no finer role model. Brand Johnson has been so damaged that he can’t rely on his dwindling band of acolytes to tell him what he wants to hear. Someone who knows how to profit from unpleasant truths is who he should be looking towards right now.

Steve Daley was a professional footballer prominent on the 1970s and 80s. He made his name with Wolverhampton Wanderers as a goalscoring midfielder, and a contributor to a domestic cup win and a European final, though it took him a number of years to be an automatic starter.

By 1979 Daley had played for the England B team, but never gained full international honours. Despite the fact he was a decent player, with top division pedigree, but not a big star. Then, out of the blue, he was told to go and speak to Manchester City, and found himself being signed by that club for a new British record transfer fee, as if he were Pele and John the Baptist rolled into one.

At this time Manchester City was paying unreasonably large transfer fees for players who never became as good as the internationals they were selling to fund these transfers. The size of the transfer fees was no accident: it was meant to show that City were a big club with serious ambition, who everyone else would have to take notice of.

But eventually it created a bunch of overhyped and overly expensive misfits, with inordinate weight of expectation on their shoulders, who turned the dream sour through no fault of their own. It took a change of management, and eventual change of chairman, for the club to recover from this disastrous era, after which it faced a serious threat of being wound up because it couldn’t pay its gas bill.

Allison had refused to sign Daley at the price demanded by Wolves. Then the chairman went over his head and agreed a much higher fee than the one Allison had refused to pay. So poor Steve Daley was lumbered with being the most expensive player in the country, and thus leader of this brilliant young team, when he knew himself he wasn’t that good, and those around him couldn’t afford to see it.

Whatever promise, and good form, Daley had shown before he signed soon evaporated. These guys couldn’t play together, the club went down and down and Daley lost all form and confidence. His nightmare ended when he was sold on to an American club for a fraction of the price, but although he regained his form there, his reputation in England was damaged beyond repair, and he was labelled from that day to this “the biggest waste of money in football history”.

Well-known ex-footballers are often in demand for coaching and managerial roles, and for endorsements and media work. Daley can’t do any of that, because whatever his talents and charm, he has the albatross of his Manchester
City days round his neck.

So Daley profits from his misfortune in a different way – as an after-dinner speaker who pokes fun at himself. He tells stories of that time in his life, and not his better days, not in order to justify himself or attract sympathy, but to turn his negative reputation around.

If Daley can do this, and be paid for doing it, the joke is also on all those who once believed he was more than he was. The story is that we all make mistakes, but at least Daley can admit it, even though his self-deprecation omits all the good things he did in the rest of his career.

Boris Johnson will never fulfil his other dream of roaming the world as a highly paid celebrity speaker and literary bon vivant. If he tries to pretend he is someone, with something important to say, he will be greeted with a response of, “What, you? After what you did in office, and got away with, which we don’t have to grin and bear anymore?” BoJo will have to bite on several large bullets before he can employ his comedic talents in laughing at himself.

**Tongue Out and Never In**

There are two ways Johnson can carve out a new career which doesn’t involve prison or opprobrium. The first is to accept he was totally unsuited to be Prime Minister, and present the gaffes which will then have become legendary as things he stumbled into through ignorance. He won’t get far with this approach to begin with, but say it often enough, funny enough, and he might just get away with it.

But the other direction might prove rather more profitable. BoJo the Clown has based his political appeal on being the opposite of what the system says a decent person should be. As Big Bad Boris, who did the whole thing as a parodied form of performance art, he would find another willing audience, and like Andrew Dice Clay provide a public face for the most disgusting things, by pretending criminal obscenity is all a joke.

Everyone complains about their politicians, who have been entrusted to make decisions on behalf of the population. In most cases however people know that if they themselves were made Prime Minister they wouldn’t do any better.

As their own way out they would claim exactly what Boris does – that an alien culture is persecuting them for being who they are, and they are on the side of real people, who do things those above them say are inferior. It won’t make them competent, but it will gather around them others who know that they will never be given opportunities, and want to think there is no reason for that.

Boris Alexander de Pfeffel Johnson, the Eton and Oxford educated independently wealthy “man of the people” who despises them all, has a foot in all the worst camps. Wherever you stand, he is as much part of the enemy as the good guys. Simply by playing on this, he can offend enough people, enough of the time, to make him a hero in the eyes of others, without them having to live with the consequences of his policies.

Where others will tell you what they did, and try and justify it, Johnson will provide a counterweight by saying he always knew he was a bastard who tried it on, and got away with it for so long. His whole career, in the media as well as in politics, can be presented as an attempt to turn everything on its head on behalf of those who can’t do it themselves, and resent knowing the fact.

He won’t be speaking at Harvard and writing for Foreign Policy. But he’ll be at the loud country clubs and low rent talk shows, turning everything he has done into a joke to deflect any criticism. Then his supporters will be presented as gullible fools, but by then they will know that, and so will others, so they might as well laugh it off.

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