

Course correction – **Boris Johnson: gaffeur, entertainer, Brexiteer, Premier**

The rise of Johnson, U.K.'s 20th Etonian PM, marks not just the 'celebrification' of politics, but also its poisonous triviality

Give it a few years, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the House of Commons, and Britain will be "the greatest place on earth". The new Conservative leader, overwhelmingly elected by party activists, is the consummate confidence man. With a pattern that makes the British media swoon, Mr. Johnson promises that he will **deliver Brexit by October 31**. Britain, of whose colonial past he is a bombastic champion, will be on top again.

Yet, everyone knows, including the backbenchers roaring and hawing with delight at his every word, that he can't deliver. There is no time for him to reach a new deal with the European Union (EU), even if it offers a new deal. The current Parliament will not pass the deal that is on offer. And if Mr. Johnson tries to leave without a deal, he will split his party and probably bring down his government.

There has been much frantic discussion in the British press about Mr. Johnson's appointed Cabinet members and advisers, stuffed full of Brexiteers and gurus from the 'Vote Leave' campaign. Yet, he doesn't get his way merely by surrounding himself with right-wing ideologues. To get the parliamentary numbers he needs to deliver Brexit, he would have to call a snap general election. And he spent much of his leadership campaign assuring fellow Tory MPs that they wouldn't have to face an election. Why? Because, since June 2017, it has been clear that Jeremy Corbyn could win a general election. Because, since the European elections, the new hard-right Brexit Party has almost cut the Conservative vote in half. The first poll since Mr. Johnson took the leadership put the Conservatives on 25% of the vote, exactly what it was before. If a new leader was supposed to result in a polling 'bounce' for the Tories, this must be very disappointing.

Farage offers a 'deal'

There is only one circumstance in which Mr. Johnson could risk an election. The leader of the Brexit Party, rightist enragé and former City trader Nigel Farage, has offered Mr. Johnson a "sensible deal". If he called an election before October 31 on the promise of quitting the EU on a 'no deal' basis, Mr. Farage might just stand down his Brexit Party candidates. But by cutting such a deal right now, Mr. Johnson would empower and legitimise a competitor, someone who has done enormous damage to the Conservative Party. Even if his colleagues were to permit such a deal, which is unlikely, he would be weakening his own position, confirming his party's terminal descent, and risking Jeremy Corbyn in Downing Street.

The most likely scenario is that Mr. Johnson will seek yet another Brexit delay to negotiate the terms of a new deal. And yet the only deal he could possibly get would be unacceptable to much of his party. He would need to build cross-party support, which would mean having discussions with Mr. Corbyn. That,

he cannot do: one of the breaking points of Theresam May's reign was when she entered into formal talks with Mr. Corbyn, a man whom she and many of her colleagues bait as a 'traitor' to the country. Mr. Johnson, among the first to condemn her for it, would be hoist by his own petard if he risked such negotiations.

So what, then, is the point of Mr. Johnson's charade? Why did Conservative MPs overwhelmingly choose him as the best leadership candidate? Why did party activists trust him? Why did the Conservative press, from the pro-Brexit *Daily Telegraph* to the pro-Europe *Evening Standard*, back him? Why are right-wing tabloids so delirious about their new leader? The short answer is that after two years of disarray, defeats and demoralisation, Mr. Johnson offers that seductive opiate: optimism.

Lacking answers to the constitutional crisis, underlying crisis of legitimacy for the political system, and stalemated economy, and well out of options, the Right is hankering for the 'hope-ium'. As the *Daily Mail's* front page beseeched, referencing a famous song by the old British comedy duo Morecambe and Wise, "Bring Us Sunshine".

Such a bathetic plea, just over a couple of years after the same paper hopefully exhorted Prime Minister May to "Crush The Saboteurs", shows how deep the depression goes. Indeed, Brexit was itself partly a placebo answer to a long-brewing melancholia on the British Right over the loss of empire: chauvinist self-assertion as national therapy.

Mr. Johnson is the right person to benefit from this because, like Donald Trump, he is a product of the entertainment industry. It is through his self-clowning appearances on the satirical show, 'Have I Got News For You', that he invented his public persona as a harmless gaffeur, stumbling through political life. That persona shrouded his politics in ambiguity. It won him the matey, gently mocking affection of correspondents, who uniformly call him 'Boris'. It enabled him to become London Mayor twice, despite achieving staggeringly little, and wasting money on vanity projects like water cannons. It saw him through scandals that might have crushed other politicians.

Erring and apologising

In his political columns, written for the Thatcherite faithful, he is a provocateur, who refers to black people as "piccaninnies" with "watermelon smiles", equates Papua New Guineans with cannibals, refers to gay men as "tank-topped bum boys", and suggests that the colonial powers should reconquer their former empires. If ever caught out in one of these statements, he plays up the clowning, knowingly adding one more entry to his "global itinerary of apology".

His stint as Foreign Secretary was less kind to him. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office being a residue of the empire, Mr. Johnson felt compelled to remind people of the fact. On a trip to Myanmar, for example, he thoughtlessly recited Rudyard Kipling's pro-colonial poem, 'The Road to Mandalay'. Many Britons, particularly older conservatives, would have enjoyed Mr. Johnson's display of chauvinism. More seriously, his laziness and refusal to understand his brief scuppered negotiations with Iran over the release of a detained British journalist, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. She is still in prison.

Yet these scandals didn't hinder his progress. Why? Because, like Mr. Trump, he made his base feel good. He was entertaining copy for editors, producers and his social media following. And in a leadership election in which no one had any answers, Mr. Johnson at least had star power.

In part, this is an old story about the Eton-educated rich dominating politics. Mr. Johnson is the 20th Etonian Prime Minister. Legend has it that W.H. Auden, when told by his schoolmaster that only the 'cream' attended his school, replied: "yes, I know what you mean: thick and rich". The preparation of the thick and rich for rule has been the vocation of the U.K.'s public schools for centuries. Yet, Mr. Johnson also embodies, not just the 'celebrification' of politics, but also its relentless and poisonous triviality. It is noticeable that new right-wing tendencies are thriving in cultures of flippancy, contrarianism and online irony.

The pervasive lack of seriousness in Britain's political culture, which has internalised the values of mass entertainment, has enabled the new celebrity-politician to evade consistency and accountability, and revive discredited ideologies.

To what effect? In this case, the main result of Mr. Johnson's ascent is to store up yet another meltdown at the top of government, and a bitter backlash among the base. This may be a terminal crisis for the Conservative Party. And it is not likely to end well for the country either.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- **gaffeur** (noun) – blunderer.
- **brexiteer** (noun) – who person who supports Brexit, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union.
- **premier** (noun) – head of government, prime minister, president.
- **etonian** (noun) – a past or present member of Eton College.
- **celebrification** (noun) – the introduction of celebrity as a factor in some field or discipline
- **triviality** (noun) – unimportance, insignificance, lack of seriousness.
- **House of Commons** (noun) – the lower house of the Parliament of the United Kingdom ("the House of Lords" is the upper house).
- **overwhelmingly** (adverb) – with a great majority.
- **consummate** (adjective) – perfect, exemplary, faultless.
- **patter** (noun) – manner of speaking, way of speaking, speech, language.
- **swoon** (verb) – pass out, lose consciousness, black out, collapse.
- **activist** (noun) – advocate, champion, supporter (of a political or societal change/cause).
- **bombastic** (adjective) – high-sounding, verbose, talkative/big-mouthed.
- **champion** (noun) – advocate, proponent, supporter.
- **backbencher** (noun) – rank and file (ordinary) members; the junior members of Parliament who occupy the back benches in the (UK) legislature house, sitting behind the holders of governmental office and their own party leaders.
- **bring down** (phrasal verb) – oust, remove, dismiss (from a position/power).
- **frantic** (adjective) – distressed, distraught, berserk/panic-stricken.
- **right-wing** (adjective) – conservative, rightist, alt-right.
- **ideologue** (noun) – an uncompromising follower/supporter/advocate of an ideology.

- **Brexit** (noun) – a term used for the (supposed) departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.
- **snap election/poll** (noun) – an unexpected & sudden (early) election/poll in a parliamentary system that is called before the due date by the ruling party for some political purpose.
- **bounce** (noun) – a sudden rise/increase for something.
- **Tory** (noun) – a member/supporter of a Conservative Party in the UK; right-winger, reactionary, rightist.
- **stand down** (phrasal verb) – withdraw, resign/quit, bow out.
- **empower** (verb) – authorize, allow, entitle.
- **descent** (noun) – degeneration, deterioration, decline.
- **bait** (verb) – taunt, annoy, goad, provoke deliberately.
- **traitor** (noun) – betrayer, back-stabber, double-dealer.
- **be hoist with one's own petard** (phrase) – try to do too much, try to be too smart, overdo it.
- **charade** (noun) – false display, show, pretence/travesty.
- **delirious** (adjective) – ecstatic, euphoric, elated/thrilled.
- **tabloid** (noun) – a newspaper with a compact page (1/2) size smaller than the normal newspaper.
- **seductive** (adjective) – attractive, appealing/inviting, provocative.
- **opiate** – drug, sedative, narcotic.
- **optimism** (noun) – hopefulness, confidence, positiveness.
- **underlying** (adjective) – fundamental, basic, primary.
- **stalemated** (adjective) – deadlocked, standstilled, checkmated.
- **hanker** (verb) – yearn, desire, wish.
- **hope-ium** (noun) – a clinging to unreasonable or unfounded hopes.
- **beseech** (verb) – beg, entreat, appeal to.
- **bathetic** (adjective) – anti-climactic, disappointing, disillusioning.
- **exhort** (verb) – urge, encourage, try to persuade.
- **saboteur** (noun) – a person who engages in sabotage (damage or destroy something deliberately).
- **placebo** (noun) – remedy; a medicine used for the psychological benefit to the patient (not for any physiological effect).
- **brewing** (adjective) – (of an unwelcome situation) developing, looming, impending.
- **melancholia** (noun) – sadness, sorrow, severe depression/distress.
- **chauvinist** (adjective) – excessively nationalistic, sectarian, isolationist.
- **clown** (verb) – act foolishly.
- **satirical** (adjective) – mocking, ironic, sarcastic/ridiculing.
- **persona** (noun) – character, identity, image.
- **stumble** (verb) – stagger, flounder, hesitate.
- **shroud** (verb) – cover, envelop, conceal/hide.
- **ambiguity** (noun) – inexactness, doubtfulness, obscurity/opacity.
- **matey** (noun) – man, my friend.
- **mocking** (adjective) – making fun of something.
- **vanity** (noun) – uselessness, pointlessness, idleness.
- **see through** (phrasal verb) – sustain, encourage, keep going, give strength to.

- **scandal** (noun) – impropriety, misconduct, wrongdoing.
- **provocateur** (noun) – one who engages in provocative behavior.
- **piccaninny** (noun) – pickaninny; a small black child.
- **cannibal** (noun) – man-eater, people-eater.
- **tank-top** (noun) – sleeveless shirt.
- **reconquer** (verb) – recover, get back, rescue.
- **itinerary** (noun) – a planned journey/route, way, path.
- **stint** (noun) – spell, period, time.
- **residue** (noun) – remaining parts, part leftovers, remnants.
- **chauvinism** (noun) – racialism, xenophobia, blind patriotism.
- **scupper** (verb) – destroy, damage, spoil/thwart.
- **hinder** (verb) – obstruct, impede, inhibit.
- **embody** (verb) – express, symbolize/epitomize, represent/incorporate.
- **thriving** (adjective) – growing, developing, progressing.
- **flippancy** (noun) – thoughtlessness, carefreeness, irresponsibility.
- **contrarianism** (noun) – a system in which a person that takes up a contrary position, especially a position that is opposed to that of the majority.
- **irony** (noun) – paradox, incongruity, peculiarity.
- **pervasive** (adjective) – prevalent, extensive, ubiquitous, omnipresent.
- **evade** (verb) – elude, avoid, dodge/sidestep.
- **accountability** (noun) – responsibility, liability, answerability.
- **revive** (verb) – bring back, resuscitate, reinstitute.
- **discredited** (adjective) – disgraced, dishonoured, disreputed.
- **ideology** (noun) – beliefs, ideas/opinions, principles.
- **ascent** (noun) – rise, growth.
- **meltdown** (noun) – collapse, complete failure, decline.
- **bitter** (noun) – savage, hostile, ferocious/resentful.
- **backlash** (noun) – a strong negative reaction; adverse response, counteraction.

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BJP's second shot at power in Karnataka comes amidst a web of confusion

Constitution is under strain in Karnataka, as an impatient Yediyurappa rushes to take oath

Giving a second opportunity to a person who could not prove his majority on the floor of the House earlier may seem unusual. And when one remembers that **B.S. Yediyurappa's last term lasted only three days**, it may even seem amusing. However, **Governor Vajubhai Vala's invitation to Mr. Yediyurappa** to form a government in Karnataka is understandable. A coalition regime has just been voted out. In a House that is only 14 months old, it was to be expected that the Governor would again

ask the leader of the largest party to explore the possibility of forming an alternative regime. Yet, questions abound on whether Mr. Yediyurappa should have been in such haste to stake his claim, given that there is profound uncertainty over the status of at least 13 of the legislators, and consequently, about the strength of the House. Consider the situation: one government has been voted out only because of the absence of 15 legislators who were given an unusual exemption by the Supreme Court from the constitutional bar on defying the party's whip; the Speaker is yet to accept their resignations, but has disqualified three dissident MLAs under the anti-defection law, and the strength of the State Assembly stands at 222, including a nominated member. No one can dispute that the fall of the Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) coalition was supposed to be caused by a set of tactical resignations, but the move was stalled when it became a question of possible disqualification. One would presume that the Governor would have wanted to be doubly sure about the ability of the appointee to form a durable government. The BJP has the support of 106 MLAs, while the majority mark is 112. This means that when the Governor formed his opinion that Mr. Yediyurappa is in a position to command a majority, he was either counting on the remaining 13 rebel legislators vacating their seats soon, or was assured of their support to the incoming regime.

The **Assembly election of May 2018 threw up a hung Assembly**, and resulted in the second- and third-placed parties forming a post-poll coalition. Now that the coalition has unravelled, the Speaker's decision becomes crucial to determining the strength of the House. The BJP, for its part, ought to have exercised restraint rather than rushing in to fill the power vacuum. After all, three seats are now vacant, and the figure may go up to 16. The new Chief Minister may win the trust vote, but to remain in power for the current Assembly's term the party would have to win eight more seats in the resulting by-elections. The party has to live down the image of having engineered the fall of the H.D. Kumaraswamy government by getting Congress and JD(S) MLAs to resign. However, its leaders ran into an unusual roadblock when the two parties and the Speaker took the view that they were quitting only with the intent of defecting to the BJP. Speaker K.R. Ramesh Kumar reminded them that they could be disqualified, rather than be allowed to resign. He asserted that he was empowered to examine whether their resignations were voluntary or induced. And sensing that some of them may become Ministers in the next regime even without being members of the House, he reminded them that under Article 164(1B) of the Constitution, a person who is disqualified for defection could not become a minister without being re-elected to the House.

Regardless of the amoral politics and skulduggery behind the toppling of the regime, the role of the Speaker has been no less questionable. As a means of blocking moves to bring down the government some tactical decisions are understandable, but the manner in which the Speaker has used the law poses a threat to the autonomy of legislators in a general sense. First, can a legislator intending to quit his seat be accused of defection at all, when the penalty for crossing over to another party is the loss of that very seat? Given the propensity of presiding officers in the country to avoid deciding matters within a time frame, it is perilous to allow them to delay the acceptance of resignations until a point when the members concerned are seen as "voluntarily giving up their party membership", which is the first ground on which a member can be disqualified for defection. This is precisely what has happened in the current case. Secondly, does the power to scrutinise a resignation letter for its voluntary nature extend to rejecting it even if it is in the correct format and is handed over in person?

Even the **disqualification of the three MLAs** does not appear to be in order. Two of them, Ramesh Jarkiholi and Mahesh Kumathalli, have been disqualified on a petition seeking action against them that was submitted in February. It was not acted on for months, but revived in the wake of the resignation controversy. Secondly, it is a moot question whether sufficient opportunity was given to them, as the matter was decided after they were absent on the day they were due to appear. Further, the Speaker appears to have assumed the power to fix a period during which a member will remain disqualified, and barred the three MLAs for the remainder of the current Assembly's term. No such power is conferred on the Speaker by the 10th Schedule to the Constitution. Under the law, the Speaker may only declare a person as having incurred disqualification. Unlike other forms of disqualification, the one under the anti-defection provisions is not accompanied by any ineligibility to contest. One who is disqualified may contest in the very by-election caused by one's own disqualification. All in all, the goings-on in Karnataka show that the Constitution can be twisted and misread to suit anyone's political interests. In an atmosphere in which political loyalties swing like a pendulum, constitutional functionaries appear to be inclined to give self-serving interpretations to the founding law and let the web of confusion be disentangled by the judiciary.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- **shot** (noun) – attempt, try, effort.
- **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
- **web** (noun) – set, series, network.
- **strain** (noun) – pressure, stress, demand/burden.
- **impatient** (adjective) – restless, longing, keen/eager.
- **abound** (verb) – be plentiful, be abundant, be numerous.
- **haste** (noun) – hurry, swiftness, rapidity, quickness.
- **stake a claim** (phrase) – assert, declare, proclaim; to say that you have a right to own or do something
- **profound** (adjective) – complex, serious, difficult.
- **uncertainty** (noun) – lack of certainty, indecision, irresolution.
- **house** (noun) – council, parliament, legislative assembly.
- **exemption** (noun) – exclusion, relief, exception.
- **defy** (verb) – resist, take a stand against, confront.
- **whip** (noun) – a written notice provided by the party (whip) to their members to vote (to support the act).
- **Anti-defection law** (noun) – The 10th Schedule to the Constitution, popularly referred to as the 'Anti-Defection Law,' was inserted by the 52nd Amendment in 1985. The grounds of disqualification are specified in Paragraph 2 of the 10th Schedule. A member would incur a disqualification under paragraph 2 (1) (a) when he "voluntarily gives up his membership of a party" and under 2 (1) (b) when he/she votes (or abstains from voting) contrary to the directive issued by the party.
- **dissident** (noun) – rebel/dissenter, objector, protester.
- **stall** (verb) – obstruct, stop, block.
- **presume** (verb) – suppose, expect, believe.
- **appointee** (noun) – one who is appointed to a job/position; representative, delegate, office holder.

- **count on** (phrasal verb) – rely on, depend on, bank on, trust.
- **throw up** (phrasal verb) – produce something.
- **unravel** (verb) – resolve, solve, uncover/unfold.
- **ought to** (modal verb) – must, should.
- **live down** (phrasal verb) – to make others forget that you did something very embarrassing in the past.
- **engineer** (verb) – organize/mastermind, orchestrate, choreograph.
- **roadblock** (noun) – barricade, barrier, blockade.
- **assert** (verb) – declare, state, claim.
- **empower** (verb) – authorize, allow, entitle.
- **defection** (noun) – desertion, absconding, decamping.
- **amoral** (adjective) – unprincipled, without standards/morals.
- **skulduggery** (noun) – trickery, double-dealing, underhandedness.
- **topple** (verb) – overthrow, oust, unseat.
- **bring down** (phrasal verb) – oust, remove, dismiss (from a position/power).
- **autonomy** (noun) – freedom, sovereignty, independence.
- **intend to** (verb) – mean, hope, aim.
- **propensity** (noun) – (natural) tendency, inclination, predisposition.
- **perilous** (adjective) – dangerous, risky, hazardous.
- **ground** (noun) – reason, factor/cause, basis.
- **scrutinise** (verb) – examine carefully, inspect; investigate.
- **in the wake of** (phrase) – aftermath, as a result of, as a consequence of.
- **moot** (adjective) – debatable, arguable, questionable.
- **confer on** (verb) – bestow on, present to, grant to.
- **incur** (verb) – suffer, experience, become subject to.
- **provision** (noun) – term, clause, requirement.
- **accompany** (verb) – coincide with, coexist with, go with.
- **goings on** (plural noun) – events, happenings, affairs.
- **misread** (verb) – get wrong, judge/interpret incorrectly.
- **functionary** (noun) – official, administrator, bureaucrat.
- **self-serving** (adjective) – self-seeking, selfish, egocentric.
- **interpretation** (noun) – meaning, understanding, reading/explanation.
- **disentangle** (verb) – disconnect, disengage, detach.

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