

# PM URGES UK TO LOOK BEYOND COVID

## JOHNSON TRIES TO FOCUS ON RECOVERY AS HE SETS OUT UPBEAT VISION FOR UK'S GREEN FUTURE

It might have contained the customary rhetorical flourishes and trademark optimism, but the important thing from the Prime Minister's speech to Conservative Party Conference may be what wasn't said.

Boris Johnson took a gamble in hoping that the national mood would mirror his own, sunny uplands view – where he focused on the future and used the stage to re-emphasise many of the manifesto commitments which saw the Tories return with a thumping majority at last year's election.

What the speech didn't cover in any significant detail was the second wave of COVID-19 or the feared mass redundancies that look to be coming down the tracks as support schemes like furlough come to an end, and the economy continues to take a battering. Normally a Leader's speech to conference would be preceded by a spattering of carefully planned policies designed to capture the country's attention and send the party faithful home happy.

But this was no normal conference and the only real announcement we heard was a reheating of plans to make the UK a world leader in green energy – a move the PM said will create "hundreds of thousands, if not millions of jobs" over the next decade. Some suggest that No. 10 decided not to push through any new policies because advisors feared they would get lost amidst the despairing news of a second COVID-19 spike. This may seem sensible as the backdrop to yesterday's speech was a mixture of forced and unforced errors that have left a number of Tory MPs threatening to rebel.

A stream of errors related to COVID-19 appeared to reach a new nadir when it was revealed only days ago that a technical glitch saw nearly 16,000 cases in England go unreported. This was preceded by widespread confusion over new, additional measures the Government has taken in England and the PM incorrectly saying in a television interview on Monday that people who self-isolate will receive £500 each week (rather than a one-off payment).

Whilst the PM's speech may not have taken back control of the COVID-19 narrative, he did on a number of occasions take time to hail the private sector's role over recent months – and warned against people "drawing the wrong conclusion" that the crisis has made the argument for permanently expanding the role of the State. Drawing on how the Atlee Government sketched out a bright new future following the destruction of World War II, the PM insisted he will have the opportunity to deliver on his post-pandemic promises to increase productivity, level-up the nation and improve public services.

The PM and his team have been very clear for some time about what they want their agenda to be – what is not so clear is whether they will actually have a chance to deliver it.

## BREXIT REMAINS A DILEMMA

Brexit barely featured in Johnson's speech and when it did, it was to set up an attack on Labour for supposedly trying to reverse it. This reveals the dilemma the Government faces. On the one hand it is trying to portray Brexit as something it has got done – as per its central campaign pledge last year – while on the other implying Brexit is in constant peril, so as to keep together its electoral coalition including Leave-inclined traditional Labour voters.

Ahead of a crunch EU summit in less than two weeks, the Government still appears to sit on the fence as to whether to invest some political capital in making the necessary compromises to unlock a UK-EU Free Trade Agreement, especially in areas like fishing and state aid rules. Without real movement on these issues, which in turn risks opening space on the Government's flank to hard Brexit purists, it is very hard to see how any deal can get done.

The Government claims it is relaxed about a no deal outcome, which it has rebranded as an Australia-style deal. However, the question is whether voters would see the resulting disruption as an acceptable cost of standing up for British sovereignty or the unwelcome return of an issue they wanted to see disappear from their TV screens, especially at a time when the Government's credibility is already under huge strain from the resurgence of COVID-19.

## KEY ANNOUNCEMENTS



**Green recovery:** All homes in the UK will be powered by offshore wind energy by 2030



**Generation Buy:** Young first-time buyers will be offered mortgages with 5% deposits



**Fair Borders Bill:** Legislation will be brought forward to reform the UK's "broken" asylum system



**JETS scheme for jobs:** A £238m Job Entry Targeted Support (JETS) scheme will help the unemployed find new work



**New Tory HQ:** The Conservatives will open a new campaign headquarters in Leeds

## ANALYSIS: THE CROWD PLEASER WITHOUT A CROWD

Boris Johnson and Party Conference are a perfect fit. Long before he was Prime Minister Johnson was the star turn. For nearly two decades he has dominated these gatherings of the party faithful. They are his people.

Johnson was always a disruptor. An eve of conference column here, an outspoken interview there, an injudicious word or two just when it mattered most. Journalists lapped it up. Party members loved it. It was kind of impish mischief meets rock star adulation at the seaside. For the actual Party Leader or Prime Minister of the time - David Cameron in the main - all this carry on induced a lot of extended eyebrow raising, rapid ageing among his team, and an unspoken week long frustration that went something like "Dear Lord, why me?".

I remember facilitating some of it. Take October 2012. Johnson was basking in the success of the London Olympics. Tipping off the most indiscreet TV producer I knew as to our supposedly low-key arrival at conference in Birmingham would mean only one thing. Hundreds of cameras and journalists to record our chaotic arrival at Birmingham New Street station. Afterwards, and safely ensconced in the back of a black cab, Johnson simultaneously looked horrified, mortified, and elated by the prospect of having upstaged his boss.

Boris Johnson pursued this same approach two years ago when having resigned as Foreign Secretary over Brexit, he thought nothing of bringing his own entourage to town, upstaging Theresa May with a speech on the fringe of conference, and bringing the house down in the process. Imagine then the frustration Boris Johnson must feel this week in being denied his crowd, his moment of utter adulation, of being centre stage as the Party Leader and Tory Prime Minister with the biggest electoral mandate since Margaret Thatcher - Conference's other great hero of modern times of course.

Johnson thus finds himself the crowd pleaser without the crowd. The guy whose misfortune it has been to get Brexit done, and win a stunning election victory in areas only his Heineken Tory brand could reach, and yet find himself with the pandemic in-tray from hell.

The truth is that Johnson is assailed from all sides. Yes, he has been dealt an impossibly difficult hand. But then he wanted the job. As every PM finds out, to a large extent the job shapes you, not vice versa. It is how you respond that counts. As Prime Minister you set the tone. You choose those around you. You make the decisions. You choose the direction. You decide when to stop, change, pivot, tack. In times of real crisis these decisions really matter.

Take this summer. Changes of course that might once have looked like pragmatic politics - on school meals, on GCSEs and A levels, and on getting back to the office - now look to some including on his own side - as miss-steps and U-turns.

Boris Johnson hates upsetting people and likes being unpopular even less. Buffeted by the virus, and the need to balance public health with economic stability, he has tried to steer a middle course. He's done instinctively what he has always done as a politician - try to please everyone. Critics would argue he's achieved the opposite. Some feel a lack of contrition hasn't helped. But Johnson doesn't do sorry unless he absolutely has to.

Johnson's Libertarian instinct screams don't intervene further, but his personal experience probably says otherwise. It's perhaps why he finds himself taking advice from both official SAGE (the doomsters as he'd once have called them), and unofficial SAGE (the doubters as he'd once have called them), so that he can hear both sides. The problem with that approach is that it can blur what people see and hear. And mixed messaging has so far proved the Government's biggest political challenge of the pandemic.

Tory members and many who voted Tory for the first time in December still believe in Johnson, and still desperately want him to succeed. After all he still has over 4 years until the next election; talk of plots is just that - talk; he has a massive majority; and he's

promised to do what people voted for - to level up modern Britain with a radical agenda based on building things.

But even some of Johnson's staunchest allies will tell you they are worried. His Cabinet and his backbenchers are split, not over Brexit, but over the response to Covid-19 part two. Labour has drawn level in the polls in a matter of months and will almost certainly pull away from the Tories over the winter. The Budget has been delayed, again. Ministers complain of a lack of strategy, of being ignored, and of strangling centralisation at the heart of No 10. And mischief makers write-up the new pretender to the Tory crown Rishi Sunak and in the process, they pull Johnson down.

It would be easy to write him off. But to do so would be naïve. Johnson is the great chameleon of British politics. Not for nothing is he the Teflon Tory. His political instincts, although haphazard in appearance, are actually laser sharp. Undoubtedly, he is in a hole, and some around him will be frustrated that he's still digging. Others of course will be actively encouraging it. Only two questions matter. Does Boris Johnson understand what's at stake? And does he know what to do about it? The answer to the first is yes. The answer to the second will determine an awful lot about our country and our Prime Minister in the years ahead.



**Will Walden** is Edelman's senior counsel for strategic communications across EMEA. A former political journalist he was Boris Johnson's spokesman, communications director, and chief advisor for many years.

## REACTION



**Ben Bradley MP**  
@BBradley\_Mans  
Conservative MP  
for Mansfield

As the PM said today's speech, a crisis can be the catalyst to doing things differently. Let's pick up on the talents and interests that [#children](#) have in [#school](#), and guide them where they want to go rather than trying to force them all in to the same box.

12:42 PM · 6 Oct 2020



**Charlotte Gill**  
@CharlotteCGill  
ConservativeHome  
Deputy Editor

Tbf it's nice to get this lip service to home ownership. It's going to be an astronomical job for the Government to solve, but great to see it mentioned so much in the speech, and an understanding that generation rent goes into 40+ age group too.

11:59 AM · 6 Oct 2020



**Laura Kuenssberg**  
@bbclaurak  
BBC Political  
Editor

Given how govt has struggled to contain Covid and still is, not sure how convincing the promises of fixing everything from social care (still no plan) to transport, to housing, to green energy, to education, even to planting trees, really are

12:21 PM · 6 Oct 2020



**Caroline Lucas**  
@CarolineLucas  
Green MP for  
Brighton Pavilion

Good to hear PM restate commitment to 40GW of offshore wind - always happy to welcome a convert!

08:38 AM · 6 Oct 2020



**Institute of Directors**  
@IoD\_Press  
Business leaders  
organisation

"The Prime Minister's long-term aims are very positive, particularly on green investment, but supporting job creation and investment in the nearer term will be key."

1:10 PM · 6 Oct 2020



**Beth Rigby**  
@BethRigby  
Sky News  
Political Editor

Alphabet soup of a speech from PM. Flitting around vast policy areas & making huge promises (fixing housing mkt/social care/green rev). Setting out vision for post-Covid Britain to a public focused on recession & health crisis. A rallying speech but falling on deaf ears?

12:29 PM · 6 Oct 2020

# ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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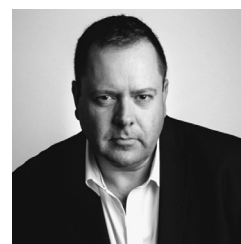
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## ANALYSIS FROM



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