

# EDELMAN 2022 LOOK AHEAD

## JOHNSON'S POLITICAL FUTURE UNDER THREAT FROM IMMEDIATE AND LONGER TERM CHALLENGES

### HANGING BY A THREAD

Let's be honest, there are moments aplenty when Boris Johnson's future has hung by a thread. The mistake his opponents have always made in these moments is to assume that their desire to see him gone equates to the public mood. As a marmite figure Johnson has lived by the seat of his pants before and survived – even thrived.

Even the sleazy back end of 2021 appeared somewhat forgotten amid Christmas and Omicron: wallpaper-gate, leaked recordings, the self-inflicted wound of the Owen Paterson affair, by-election defeat, lockdown parties, mass backbench rebellion over Covid plan B...and still the dial didn't seem to shift to terminal. Maybe the Prime Minister was right? Perhaps nobody cared?

Johnson left for Christmas dismissing all the noises off with a contemptuous wave. He was getting on with the business of 'the people's government'. The media, he told us, weren't focusing on what mattered – like the vaccine rollout – and people shouldn't believe what they read.

That missed or perhaps better, blithely ignored, two critical points. First, media focus on the bad stuff is not something unique to him. It's called the political news cycle and every PM faces it. The only way to change the narrative is to ensure it doesn't happen in the first place or manage it better from the off. At the end of last year No 10 and Johnson in particular failed spectacularly to do either.

Second, the classic Johnson claim that no-one in the real-world gives a stuff about this Westminster village nonsense. Often that's true. But not this time. Not when it has an impact on real people's lives (the growing squeeze, on his watch, of the cost of living) or strikes people as unfair (Downing Street parties) or appears to demonstrate incompetence (pick any numbers of recent miss-steps).

The signs, therefore, were there. And Boris Johnson probably knew it. Inside No 10 the PM is said to like things loose and fluid. No wonder, then, given he sets the tone and others follow, that things proved to be exactly that. Like it or not, the buck stops with him. This week Johnson's loose and fluid world collided spectacularly with the real world.

The Christmas party narrative (basically 'there were no parties... ok there were some, but I wasn't involved') allowed a perception to take hold that Johnson the rule breaker, who won precisely because he didn't toe the line, wasn't actually what voters had thought he was: one of us. A case of one rule for them, one for everyone else.

On Monday that narrative exploded in No 10's hands, with the leaking of a damning email about a lockdown booze up that put the PM at the heart of the scandal. By Tuesday evening, with Johnson silent, two polls confirmed the public mood. By big margins they said he should go. By and large people believed that everyone, our leaders included, were playing by the rules. So, when it was found that wasn't true, Britons indicated they may well vote with their feet.

By Wednesday's PMQs he was doing what he probably should have done from the off – he was apologising. Boris Johnson hates apologising. But then, this time at least he only had himself to blame.

Taken alone none of this recent chaos need be fatal. But when taken together it appears that the train Johnson often just about manages to board may already have left the station. The talk among colleagues in the tearoom, the talk among his own ministers, is reportedly brutal.

Of course, Johnson hasn't burnished a Houdini-like reputation for escapology for nothing. But it is very hard to see how he now extricates himself from this mess, even if Sue Gray's internal inquiry into all this finds enough shades of grey for him to grab onto.

After all, even if the PM survives for now, what then? Can the Tory party and the country really endure week after week of what we saw at the despatch box yesterday, with the papers talking about you in the past tense, deals being struck between leadership contenders, WhatsApp groups plotting your demise, and your ratings tanking still further?

Then there's governing. Johnson will have to juggle his badly damaged political brand with the day job: tax rises, the burgeoning cost of the pandemic, rising energy prices, the squeeze on people's pockets, the Brexit hangover, business scepticism, Scottish independence agitation, and critically the failure so far to articulate what levelling up means, let alone how it's delivered. That's some ask.

Johnson's two big advantages were that he had no obvious successor, and he could point to a massive popular mandate from the public. The problem now is that there clearly are likely successors – three of them in particular it seems are circling – and his public mandate looks fractured. Could he pull off one last great escape?

Well. Our Prime Minister is unique. He governs like no other. A loner, he is neither big on detail nor long on trust. In other words he's survived, and often flourished, because he believes in his own political instincts. If he is to survive his biggest test yet, then those instincts need to be flashing the words grip, delivery, and vision in big neon lights.

Part of the problem is that Johnson lacks a discernible ideology, meaning his appeal runs wide but not deep across the Tory backbench. There's no praetorian guard. He won by promising a lot of different things to a lot of different people. They all thought he was with them. They now realise he's not. That comes with a cost.

His MPs were already starting to complain that there doesn't appear to be a coherent strategic direction. After this week he may find convincing them that there is a Peppa Pig-free vision for Britain harder than ever.

And then there's change. Johnson is 57 and change – to those around him, to the way he governs, to his own tone – is not something that comes easily to him. Change, like apology, is viewed as something of a weakness in the Johnson lexicon. For all the talk of a big re-set, don't hold your breath.

Johnson is the pre-eminent political campaigner of his generation, and a proven winner. What he's not proved yet is whether he can lead? Many believe it's too late. Whether tomorrow, next week, or next year, they argue, sooner or later Johnson will be gone. Maybe. But then again only one thing is certain in the world of Johnson – that nothing is ever certain.



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## CAN LEVELLING UP REVIVE THE GOVERNMENT'S AILING POLITICAL FORTUNES?

Aside from Brexit, Johnsonian Conservatism is synonymous with 'levelling up'. Criticised by Whitehall officials as a 'slogan without a meaning', it nevertheless performed its political purpose and encapsulated the essence of what Boris Johnson promised voters in the town seats that made up the 'red wall' in 2019. Understandably, this agenda has been derailed by the pandemic which has absorbed Government focus and funding, but 2022 will need to be the year of delivery if the trust of these voters is to be retained.

Encompassing ideas as wide ranging as returning civic pride to communities and equality of opportunity, as well as physical regeneration, the agenda has been ill-defined in policy terms. The blueprint for this vision – the long-awaited Levelling Up White Paper – is still yet to be published but said to be imminent.

There is no doubt that serious thought has gone into the document from the new leadership in the Department, Michael Gove and Neil O'Brien, but also former Bank of England Chief Economist, Andy Haldane and members of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. Ministers have promised that not only will the paper give a clear definition of levelling up, but it will also suggest ways to measure it and a roadmap for progress.

However levelling up is defined – be it increasing civic pride or getting spades into the ground – 2022 must see tangible achievements across the Midlands and North even if the Prime Minister waits until 2024 for a general election. And having promised 'to build, build, build', there is much ground to make up particularly after the perceived 'betrayal of the north' with the publication of the dramatically scaled back Integrated Rail Plan. Two fundamental problems, however, will remain: both time and money are short if real change is to be implemented.

We should expect to see lower cost 'levelling up' policies such as local government reform and more small incremental measures, such as the High Streets Fund, which can be delivered quickly and that voters will notice. Even more state activity outside London will be branded 'levelling up'. But there will be fewer grand projects of the kind Boris Johnson seemed, at least rhetorically, to favour in the past. New nationally significant infrastructure schemes are likely to be limited to the energy sector where the need to decarbonise power generation by 2035 is acute.

Over the year, as the political opportunity for radical transformation of Britain's economic geography, afforded by an 80-seat majority appears to slip away, criticism from Conservative MPs will grow.

## NEW YEAR, NEW LABOUR

January: the time of melancholy, darkness and unmet resolutions. But not in Labour circles, where there is a mood of genuine optimism. The poll bounce on the back of Boris Johnson's awful autumn has obviously lifted the pressure for delivery that was building on Keir Starmer during 2021. But those at the heart of Starmer's machine know that the Conservative Party have done the heavy lifting for them here.

More importantly for Team Starmer is the view that they are sweeping away the internal barriers to success that have held Labour back for many years and are now getting to a place where they are match-fit for the next election.

Institutional reforms secured at last year's Conference are seen by insiders to have almost eliminated the risk of the party being taken over by a hard left, Jeremy Corbyn-style leader again and are pushing the party further and further from Corbyn's core supporters.

The November reshuffle which saw significant change across all the key portfolios has so far been well received. The critical relationship between Starmer and his shadow Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is felt to have brought a clearer, stronger, strategic narrative for the party. Newly appointed shadow cabinet members Wes Streeting at Health, Jonny Reynolds at Business, Lisa Nandy at Levelling Up (the old MHCLG brief) and Yvette Cooper at the Home Office appear to have hit the ground running with their media and stakeholder engagement.

Starmer's new year speech (though obscured by the latest iteration of party-gate) set a clear message for Labour in the year ahead. His "Contract with the British people" covered three themes: security, prosperity, respect. Its focus was on bread-and-butter issues that touch everyone's lives including tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, addressing the rising cost of living and improving GP access.

The focus on the cost of living over the Spring will be timely as people feel the pinch with the National Insurance rise, significant increases in energy prices and inflation at levels not seen for many years. Reeves has said Labour would reverse the NI rise and put a one-off windfall tax on North Sea oil and gas to "save most households around £200 or more".

But Labour know that adequately tackling the cost of living crisis is going to be difficult. And they know that business holds the key to a stronger economy. Reeves and Reynolds appear serious about engaging with business and have been at pains to demonstrate they understand what firms need to ensure the economy thrives (again).

Those around Starmer say that the next few months will see a few, sharply focussed policy interventions targeted at the voters Labour thinks it needs to win over. So as January winds blow through into the Spring, expect to see a more confident, more optimistic Labour opposition, with what the party leadership hope will be a sustained lead in the polls.



## WILL LIZ TRUSS KEEP BREXIT DONE?

As the two-year anniversary of Brexit approaches, the growing consensus among commentators and the wider public is that it is not going well. This is not just a case of irreconcilable Remainers moaning; Brexiteers are increasingly lamenting that the opportunities of Brexit are not being seized.

Most significant among them Lord Frost, who resigned his position as chief negotiator with the EU just before Christmas having grown increasingly disappointed with the Government's failure to use Brexit as a springboard towards a small-state, low-tax and light regulatory touch model. The problem is that this is only one vision for the UK's post-Brexit future and not one shared by all Leave voters, not least former Labour voters in the 'red wall' who gave the Conservatives their 2019 majority.

However, unlike Frost, Truss does not appear to have the same deep seated aversion to the Protocol in principle. Given her leadership ambitions, she will want to carry on her deal-making streak from her time as Trade Secretary. Given the impending cost of living crisis and also Truss' wider ambitions to build a network of democracies to counter the rise of Russia and China, she will want to avoid the dispute over the Protocol spiralling into a self-defeating full-blown UK-EU political conflict and trade war.

The high-level politics therefore point towards a negotiated outcome (or at least protracted negotiations). However, the skill and trust required on both sides to land a deal that keeps trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK flowing, while avoiding non-compliant goods leaking from the UK into the EU's single market, should not be underestimated.

The high-level politics therefore point towards a negotiated outcome (or at least protracted negotiations). However, the skill and trust required on both sides to land a deal that keeps trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK flowing, while avoiding non-compliant goods leaking from the UK into the EU's single market, should not be underestimated. After all this is the issue that has bedevilled Brexit from the very outset and by now it should be clear there is no magic solution that can obviate the underlying problem – at best a messy, flawed and unpopular compromise.

## WILL 2022 BE THE YEAR WE LEARN TO LIVE WITH COVID?

Under pressure from anti-lockdown Tory MPs, Boris Johnson took a gamble before Christmas in not imposing further restrictions in England as the Omicron variant surged. This gamble looks to have paid off due to the relative mildness of Omicron. Many people were able to enjoy a relatively normal festive season and while the NHS and other public services came under considerable strain, they did not topple over.

This experience will encourage those arguing that the UK needs to learn to live with Covid in the same way as other endemic diseases and indeed there is already speculation that certain anti-Covid measures such as free lateral flow tests will be rolled back soon. The Government have denied this, but either way, barring the emergence of yet another variant which is not only more transmissible but also more lethal, the policy trajectory is likely to shift from containment to management. Covid will continue to be an important consideration, not least because of its ongoing impact on the global economy, but domestically the emphasis will increasingly be on building up the NHS' resilience in order to avoid restrictions on day-to-day life.

## WILL THE UK DOWNGRADE ITS ENVIRONMENTAL ASPIRATIONS POST-COP26?

The Government has committed to "building on the outcomes" from COP26, with the UK's Presidency running until COP27 in November. The Government has outlined that it will continue to work with those most affected by climate change as a priority and focus its efforts on harnessing innovation in the five areas identified as vital to a zero-carbon future: energy transitions, clean transport, nature-based solutions, adaptation and resilience, and green finance.

In a related vein, we can expect the Government to continue to progress the ambitions and policies outlined in the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution and the Net Zero and Heat and Building Strategies. These strategies outlined a plethora of commitments, such as increasing offshore wind power, £120 million towards the development of nuclear projects and a financial package of support for the electrification of UK vehicles and their supply chains.

Further plans, strategies, reviews and regulations are expected to be published this year. For example, the Government is developing a 2030 Strategic Framework which is set to provide a coordinated approach to deliver against the climate and biodiversity commitments set out in the Integrated Review, such as achieving net zero by 2050 and reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. The Government will also make it mandatory for Britain's largest businesses to disclose their climate-related risks and opportunities, with regulations coming into force in April.

While the Government has committed to building on COP26, it is likely that "the environment" will drop down the priority list as other issues rise up the agenda, such as the Government's handling of COVID case numbers, defining its flagship levelling up agenda and alleviating MPs and voters' concerns around the increasing cost of living, and the contribution Net Zero makes towards this.

Part of Alok Sharma's remaining term as COP26 president will be spent working to ensure the UK's updated Nationally Determined Contribution – containing targets on emissions cuts – are as ambitious as they need to be to keep the 1.5°C temperature goal alive, ahead of COP27. However, the carrot of a climate summit hosted on UK soil no longer in front of the Government, how much energy will be dedicated to achieving this target to this remains to be seen.

## WORLD AFFAIRS: FRENCH AND AMERICAN VOTERS HEAD TO THE POLLS IN KEY ELECTIONS

President Macron's re-election prospects look healthy enough but amid a highly fragmented political landscape, with a number of viable candidates polling around the 15% mark, the margin for error is low and we could end up with a surprise outcome at the second round. Whoever triumphs, the UK will be hoping 2022 can be a reset for UK-French relations which have been very strained of late, though 'UK bashing' on everything from fishing to irregular migration could feature prominently throughout the French election campaign.

The midterm elections in the US will also be very significant given the Republicans are favoured to end the Democrats' control of Congress and thereby hamstringing President Biden's agenda. A Republican majority would result in a more inward-looking America less able to play a meaningful role internationally on key issues including climate change.

# ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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## ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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