

The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2009... the Conservatives in 2022?

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Abstract

This is the first article to methodologically apply Heppell's model of 'degenerative tendencies' upon the current Conservative administration led by Boris Johnson. The model is divided into five component parts – namely, *governing competence*, *leadership credibility*, *ideological division*, *abuses of power*, and *a renewed opposition / sense that it is time for a change*. This model was developed and tested by Heppell on the long-standing Conservative administrations between 1951-64 and 1979-97, and on the longstanding Labour administration between 1997 and (at the time of original publication) 2008. Thus, the hypothesis of this article is that the similarly long-serving Conservative government from 2010-date is exhibiting signs of similar governing degeneration on each of Heppell's model criteria. By doing so, the article can suggest that the trajectory of the Conservatives under Boris Johnson appear to lack the clear direction of travel and purpose that characterized the remaining years of the Macmillan/Home, Major, and Brown premierships. Whilst it is by no means the aim of this article to produce a facile prediction, it is possible to conclude that at similar points in the lifetime of similarly long-serving governments, there is evidence to suggest the current Conservative administration has met the level of governing degeneration that affected the Conservatives in 1964, 1997, and Labour in 2010.

Keywords

Conservative Party; Boris Johnson; Labour Party; Keir Starmer; governance; leadership; economy; Brexit; COVID-19; Timothy Heppell

Introduction

In 2008, Timothy Heppell argued in his seminar article entitled *The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?* that 'the purpose of the degenerative model is to evaluate first, whether the degenerative tendencies relating to governing competence, leadership credibility, ideological division and abuse of power have been established; and second, whether those degenerative tendencies are likely to lead to electoral rejection'.¹ The question and academic concept of governing degeneration was similarly inspired by Philip Norton's 1996 study *The Conservative Party*

¹ T. Heppell, 'The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, pp. 578-96.

and through Brendan Evans and Andrew Taylor's *From Sailsbury to Major: Continuity and Change in Conservative Politics*.²

Heppell used the premise of governing degeneration to evaluate the performance of the long-serving Conservative governments of Harold Macmillan (and then Alec Douglas-Home) in 1963/4; the similarly long-serving Conservative government led by John Major in 1996; and the long-standing Labour government of Gordon Brown circa 2008 (the time of publication). Each of these governments were longstanding given they enjoyed repeat electoral success over the previous decade ahead of losing office due to questions over party cohesion, disconnection from the electorate, and an overarching sense that it was time for a change. By doing so, Heppell was able to uncover and identify repeat symptoms of governing decline *vis-à-vis* 'governing competence'; 'leadership credibility'; 'ideological division'; 'abuses of power'; 'renewed opposition/time for a change'. Using this as a typology for evaluating governing performance, he was able to conclude that in 1963 'the crisis-ridden third-term [Macmillan] administration demonstrated all of the symptoms of a degenerating long-serving government'; that 'by the mid-1990s, the key planks of the Thatcherite electoral winning strategy had dissolved' because 'the general election victory of 1992, which had convinced Conservatives that they had resolved the dilemmas of the post-Thatcherite era, was a mirage which had masked the symptoms of their decline'; and that 'Brown [became] the symbol of economic downturn, and Blair the symbol of economic prosperity, while Cameron align[ed] himself to aspects of the Blair legacy'. This typology enabled Heppell to uncover various aspects of governing degeneration that can be associated with the demise and eventual electoral rejection of long-standing governments.

These findings suggest that symptoms of governing degeneration may be present in the years preceding their loss of power. This, therefore, raises the question of whether the Conservatives are exhibiting similar symptoms of governing degeneration today. Should such symptoms be evident, then it may be possible to draw conclusions on the trajectory of the current political and electoral cycle, without seeking to make predictions or suggestions over their destination.

To contextualise this justification, it is worth remembering that the Conservatives have enjoyed a sustained period of government since 2010, which is of comparable (if not equal) length to the Conservative/Labour governments of Home, Major, and Brown respectively. This includes the period of the Coalition with the Liberal Democrats (2010-15) and post-2015 majority under David Cameron, and the 2017-19 minority government under Theresa May ahead of securing an 80-seat majority in December 2019 under the auspices of the incumbent leader, Boris Johnson. Over the last 12 years of Conservative government, they have sought to renew whilst in office yet under

² P. Norton, *The Conservative Party*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996, pp. 234-44; B. Evans and A. Taylor, *From Sailsbury to Major: Continuity and Change in Conservative Politics*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 131-3.

Johnson they appear to have exhausted opportunities to present new and fresh interpretations of conservatism to voters, which are explored further in this short article. Rather, economic and social policies are proposed with little association to present a forward-looking vision, thus suggesting an absence of ideological thought.

Arguably, this could be because since 2015, the divisions created by the Brexit referendum and subsequent negotiations have undermined the Conservatives' claim to be the party of the economy. This is symbolised by the infamous suggestion that Johnson's economic approach is simply to 'fuck business'.³ Indeed, normally supportive conservative voices are questioning the ability of the Conservatives to articulate a clear post-Brexit economic vision for the United Kingdom. Importantly, however 'while the period since the EU Referendum has seen renewed interest in values and identity as influences on political behaviour, it is a mistake to think of values divides as "new" or as created by the EU referendum'.⁴ The intricacies of these issues are explored thoroughly in other places, however for the purposes of this article, the shift away from economic prudence and towards identity-based politics suggests a commitment to a set of ideas that voters may not recognise as being consistent with ideals proposed by previous Conservative governments and their previously stated commitments and policies around protecting an economically liberal economy.

Furthermore, under the Johnson administration, the COVID crises have led to significant questions over their ability to claim competence on the areas Heppell argued were evident in long-standing governments that lost power. These relate to questions over 'governing competence', 'leadership credibility', 'ideological divisions', 'abuses of power', 'a renewed opposition/time for a change'. Consequently, the purpose of this article will be to evaluate the current circumstances facing the Conservatives under Johnson and the extent to which they fit Heppell's criteria for a government showing signs of degeneration. To address each question, I will first present evidence drawn from the Macmillan/Home, Major, and Brown governments to demonstrate their historical significance, ahead of presenting evidence to suggest such symptoms of governing degeneration are evident in the Johnson administration. Importantly, whilst this by no means enables a predication to be made of the outcome of a future general election, it will enable us to discern the extent to which they are on a similar trajectory that led to the loss of power for similarly longer-term governments. As such, I shall now consider each in turn ahead of drawing a series of conclusions.

A Question of 'Governing Competence'

³ T. Ross, 'Boris Johnson's "f*** business" approach to the supply chain is a risk for Brexit Britain', *The New Statesman*, 5 October 2021; <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/conservatives/2021/10/boris-johnsons-f-business-approach-to-the-supply-chain-crisis-is-a-risk-for-brexit-britain> (accessed 27 January 2022).

⁴ P. SurrIDGE, 'Brexit, British politics, and values', *UK in a Changing Europe*, 30 January 2021; <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/long-read/brexit-british-politics-and-values/>; (accessed 3 February 2022).

Issues of governing competence relate mostly to the capacity of the governing party to weave a consistent narrative pertaining to economic success. Such evidence of economic success should be felt by the electorate in their daily lives. Indeed, ‘our exposure to wealth and opportunity in the outside world, in addition to our standard of living of course, are key to determining our level of happiness’.⁵ Economic competence relates to job security; costs of living; cost of energy; housing security; and the sense that individual prosperity was reflected in the livelihoods of the majority. However, symptoms of degeneration can be found in growing questions over the economic direction of the country and the management of various crises. For example, Heppell argued that the long-serving Conservative government of 1963/4 was subjected to the 1961 economic crisis and the rejection of attempts by the UK to join the EEC, thus leading to 50%+ of the electorate increasingly questioning the policies of the Conservative incumbent;⁶ also that the long-standing Conservative government of 1996/7 was unable to recover its reputation for economic competence following the ejection of the UK from the ERM, thereby leading to Labour establishing an unrelenting double-digit lead over the Conservatives;⁷ finally, the long-standing Labour government of 2009/10 suffered ongoing fall-out from its management of the financial crisis, alongside the growing sense of unease New Labour’s capacity to renew under the leadership of Gordon Brown alongside growing questions over the legacy of Tony Blair and the Iraq War.⁸ These issues were longstanding concerns of the respective incumbent which led to each being tainted by a reputation for governing and economic ineptitude that proved impossible to reverse in government, and difficult to redress once in opposition.

For the Conservatives in 2021/22, the COVID crisis combines with Brexit to create a set of economic circumstances that the current longstanding Conservative government have yet to strategize an effective recovery plan. For example, the levelling up plan has been criticised for making ‘few commitments above the 2021 Spending Review’ and that ‘the Government could do more’⁹ and for being as ideologically ‘reminiscent of Cameron’s ‘big society’’.¹⁰ Also the energy crisis and the cost of living crisis both look set to impact on the disposable incomes of the electorate at a time when the high street economy is seeking to recover from the COVID lockdowns. Moreover, questions over Johnson’s personal governing competence are contextualised through an absence of

⁵ M. Notaras, ‘Does Economic Growth Make Us Happy?’ Our World – The United Nations University, 27 April 2012; <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/does-economic-growth-make-us-happy>; (accessed 3 February 2022).

⁶ T. Heppell, ‘The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, p. 583.

⁷ Ibid. p. 588.

⁸ Ibid. p. 592.

⁹ C. MacDonald, ‘What does the Levelling Up White Paper mean for Economic Policy?’ Policy Exchange, 2 February 2022; <https://policyexchange.org.uk/what-does-the-levelling-up-white-paper-mean-for-economic-policy/>; (accessed 4 February 2022).

¹⁰ J. Newman, ‘The Ambiguous Ideology of Levelling Up’, *Political Quarterly*, 22 May 2021. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.13010>; (accessed 5 February 2022).

cognitive ability which Fred Greenstein¹¹ argues is a fundamental concern of demonstrating an ability to govern. Thus, whilst there remains time for the economy to recover, like the John Major government (which ultimately presided over an economic recovery in the years following the ERM crisis), the Conservatives may find it difficult to capitalise on any recovery as evidence of governing competence.

A Question of 'Leadership Credibility'

The issue of personal leadership credibility is also a significant issue when seeking to determine whether symptoms of governing degeneration are evident governing administrations. For example, by 1963/4, Harold Macmillan was tormented by a collapse in approval ratings by 20% between 1961 and 1963, which Alec Douglas-Home was unable to reverse.¹² Similarly, Major appeared weak and indecisive against both John Smith and Tony Blair over the final term of Conservative government. This proved to be impossible for Major to reverse because of the internal divisions within the Party,¹³ culminating in his resignation of the Conservative Party leadership in 1995 (and subsequent victory).¹⁴ Despite his victory, he was unable to retain a grip of party discipline, thereby leading to continual questions over his leadership. Moreover, in 2009/10, Gordon Brown had been subjected to continual leadership speculation,¹⁵ with some suggesting that David Miliband would make a more effective leader at a time of growing discontent with Brown's leadership style. Indeed, in 2009 James Purnell resigned from Brown's Cabinet and called for the then Prime Minister to resign. These issues plagued the leaders of these longstanding administrations, thereby leading to questions over Johnson's position today.

For the current administration, revelations over parties taking place within Downing Street have led to substantial questions over Johnson's judgement and capacity to maintain a functioning operation at the heart of government. For example, over a 24-hour period between 3 and 4 February 2022, four senior aides resigned from Number 10 citing Johnson's leadership. These questions over Johnson's leadership are motivated by the assumption that the Prime Minister would have oversight of the culture within Downing Street, and that the secrecy and apparent 'double standards' of the parties during a nationwide lockdown implies a wider governing culture that is divergent from the values of the wider country. Given this divergence and apparent frequency of the parties, the questions over Johnson's leadership relate to his judgement and willingness to lead by example,

¹¹ F. Greenstein, *Leadership in the Modern Presidency*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

¹² T. Heppell, 'The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, p. 583.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 588.

¹⁴ T. Heppell, 'A Crisis of Legitimacy: The Conservative Party Leadership of John Major', *Contemporary British History*, 21: 4, 2007, pp. 471-90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 592.

thereby calling his leadership credibility into question and (ultimately) a small but significant number of letters over leadership competence being submitted to the 1922 Committee of Conservative MPs.

A Question of ‘Ideological Division’.

A further symptom of governing degeneration relates to ideological divisions within the governing party. The most common evidence of division within the Conservatives relates to membership of the EEC/Common Market/EU. This division was evident even in the long-standing Macmillan/Home government, in which the Conservatives were divided¹⁶ between a continual commitment to the remnants of the British Empire and Commonwealth (evidenced by the ‘wind of change’ speech), and the emerging disputes within the party over the leadership selection process through the so called ‘magic circle’. This process led to the selection of a new leader through a secretive process that was designed to create a culture of succession rather than election. Ideological divisions were also particularly evident over the course of the Major administration,¹⁷ especially over Europe and the consequences of the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Alongside the leadership election relating to the nature of the relationship between the UK and the EU, the divisions within the Party pertained to national identity, nature of sovereignty, and the ‘threat’ of UK membership of the Single Currency. Moreover, the ideological divisions within New Labour under Brown¹⁸, divisions over social democracy and how it should inform the policy direction of the Labour government led to questions about whether Brown represented a renewal or a continuation of the Blair period.

In terms of the current administration, Johnson sought at the 2019 general election to present his leadership as a fresh start for the Conservatives that would have new interpretation of conservatism in government. For example, appealing to northern working-class voters by embracing public spending, eschewing arguments for austerity, and appearing to be more willing to use taxation to fund investment. However, since 2019, the twin issues of Brexit and COVID have undermined attempts to combat a cost-of-living crisis, an emerging energy crisis, and questions over the sustainability of current spending plans. Moreover, in the Commons Peter Bone questioned the ideological approach to addressing the energy crisis by describing Chancellor Sunak’s strategy as ‘increasing national insurance contributions, and then handing money back to different people through rebates and discounts’ ahead of asking ‘is that a conservative approach or a socialist

¹⁶ T. Heppell, ‘The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, p. 583.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 588.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 592.

approach?¹⁹ Such issues suggest that an ideological crisis within the Conservatives will raise questions over the current government and its interpretation of conservatism.

A Question of ‘Abuses of Power’.

A penultimate consideration as a sign of governing degeneration relates to abuses of power. Here, Macmillan’s management of the Profumo affair bedevilled the Conservatives in 1961, leading to major questions over national security and the ability of Macmillan to respond adequately to what appeared to be a significant issue relating to political judgement.²⁰ Moreover, for Major, the ongoing issues of financial irregularities and relationships of Conservative MPs led to approximately 80% of the electorate feeling that Major was unable to manage the perception of abuse of power adequately.²¹ For Brown, the ongoing questions over ‘cash for honours’ were compounded by the expenses crisis, and the perception that sleaze was a cultural problem within the New Labour machine.²² Brown’s management of these crises and his inability to demonstrate moral leadership culminated in continual questioning of New Labour’s ability to govern in accordance with its earlier commitment to be ‘whiter than white’ when it came to financial matters.

In the current circumstances, accusations over abuses of power were levied at Johnson early in his Premiership, with the suspension of Parliament being seen as the first major abuse. This was an attempt by the government to circumnavigate Parliament in the passing of the Brexit Bill in 2019. Since then, further suggestions of abuses of power have been made, which culminated in 2021/22 over the series of parties in Downing Street. These are most likely to be considered symptomatic of Johnson’s abuses of power because of the attempts to curtail information appearing in public. For example, first claiming to have followed his own COVID laws, to claiming ignorance of the parties; and his successful moves to prevent the full publication of the Sue Gray report into the parties following the involvement of the Metropolitan Police. Police involvement prevented full publication of the Gray Report, thereby leading to accusations of abuses of power.

A Question of ‘Renewed Opposition’ and ‘Time for a Change’

The final question of governing degeneration relates to a ‘renewed opposition’ and a sense that it is ‘time for a change’ of Prime Minister. For example, in 1963/4, Harold Wilson had led Labour through a process of ideological renewal under the moniker of ‘scientific socialism’ and by ending

¹⁹ P. Bone, *Question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer*, House of Commons, 3 February 2022.

²⁰ T. Heppell, ‘The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, p. 583.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 588.

²² *Ibid.* p. 592.

the Bevanite/Gaitskellite disputes by calling for unity behind his leadership.²³ This successfully led to Wilson enjoying polling leads of over 20% over Douglas-Home as preferred Prime Minister (thereby reversing Macmillan's 1961 lead over Gaitskell).²⁴ In 1996/7, polls consistently pointed towards Labour as the party which enjoyed electoral support for competence, leadership credibility, and internal unity. In contrast, the Conservatives were in significant deficit in each area. Moreover, there was a sense within the Conservatives themselves that Major's time as leader was ending²⁵ and that manoeuvres were taking place ahead of the general election that favoured Michael Portillo as a potential successor.²⁶

At present, the Labour Party is beginning the process of presenting a united front behind Keir Starmer's leadership. The divisions between New Labour and Corbynite factions/tendencies are fading in significance as Starmer appears to seek a policy platform that embraces the principles of Milibandite One Nation Labour (similar to Corbyn) and a 'patriotic' image of his leadership alongside effective communications (similar to Blair). These are also being aided by the establishing of a narrative based on Johnson's governing incompetence and overall unsuitability to be Prime Minister as the UK recovers from the COVID lockdowns. Put simply, by constructing this rhetorical narrative, Starmer can continually critique Johnson's leadership whilst portraying himself and the wider Labour Party as a united shadow government in waiting. This technique is designed to undermine the image of the governing party, whilst establishing the opposition as the party with alternative ideas to address national difficulties and priorities.

Attempts to subvert this by some Conservatives are based on the assumption that a post-Johnson leadership can help them recapture their now lost credibility. Increasing numbers of MPs are publicly criticising Johnson's leadership in a way similar to the Major government. However, in the event Johnson remains as Prime Minister and the current symptoms of degeneration intensify, then it is unlikely that the Conservatives can recapture the lost momentum of the 2019 general election, making the prospects of re-election even harder to achieve.

Concluding Summary

The question considered here is whether the longstanding Conservative government under Johnson will suffer the same fate as other long-standing governments of Macmillan/Home, Major, and Brown. My hypothesis is that those longer-term governments were ultimately defeated because of those inevitable internal and external factors, each of which are present in the current political

²³ A. Crines, 'A Discussion of Rhetoric in Harold Wilson's White Heat Speech', *Renewal Journal of Social Democracy*, 2014, 22, pp. 128-34.

²⁴ T. Heppell, 'The Degenerative Tendencies of Long-Serving Governments... 1963... 1996... 2008?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61: 4, 2008, p. 583.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 588.

²⁶ T. McMeeking, *The Political Leadership of Prime Minister John Major*, Palgrave, 2021.

climate. It is not within the scope of this short article to predict or suggest that a particular course of action will produce a certain outcome, however as Will Jennings notes ‘the economic headwinds are truly grim’ and that ‘it would be highly surprising if this doesn’t impact the government’s popularity in the months ahead’.²⁷ I would conclude that given the historic signs of governing degeneration identified by Heppell are currently evident in the political climate, it can be suggested electoral defeat befalls such longstanding governments who are undermined by similar circumstances. Ultimately, ‘the economy will be the key factor’.²⁸

²⁷ W. Jennings, Twitter post, <https://twitter.com/drjennings/status/1489268035324194820>; (accessed 4 February 2022).

²⁸ Ibid.