

Mile End Institute

Boris Johnson's First Year



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Introduction

On 24 July 2019, Boris Johnson stood outside Number 10 for the first time as prime minister and promised to defy the ‘*doubters, the doomsters, and the gloomsters*’. Over the twelve months that followed, he closed down Parliament, won a general election, took Britain out of the EU and faced (and is still facing) a global pandemic. He expelled 22 MPs from the Conservative Party and lost a Chancellor.

In this collection, first published on the **Mile End Institute Blog**, colleagues from Queen Mary University of London and special guest contributors explore Boris Johnson’s first year in Number 10. The essays gathered here assess Johnson’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, his promise to ‘*Get Brexit Done*’, the prorogation crisis and its implications, and the emergence of a new immigration policy. They ask whether the ‘*doomsters and the gloomsters*’ were indeed put to flight, and look ahead to what Johnson’s second year might hold.



Overview:

Boris Johnson’s first year

Professor Tim Bale, Co-Director of the Mile End Institute and Deputy Director of the UK in a Changing Europe

As a classicist, Boris Johnson hardly needs reminding that hubris can lead to nemesis. But hubris must have been hard to avoid. After all, his first six months as Britain’s eighteenth Conservative prime minister were, frankly, little short of miraculous.

To grasp the sheer scale of Johnson’s achievements between July 2019 and January 2020, just recall for a moment quite how bad things had become for the Tories under Theresa May. Clearly, the snap election of 2017 was a shambles. But things didn’t turn truly catastrophic for the Conservatives until it became clear that May couldn’t persuade Parliament to pass her Withdrawal Agreement.

As a result, Brexit had to be postponed, at which point the party’s poll ratings fell off the proverbial cliff – with the word made flesh in elections to the European Parliament that saw the Conservative vote share dip below ten percent for effectively the first time ever.

By promising that he would do whatever it took to get the UK out of the EU, Johnson’s first impressive feat was to convince a whole bunch of Tory MPs and grassroots members who had grave doubts, not just about his character but also his competence, to vote for him as leader.

Johnson’s crushing victory in that contest saw the party’s poll ratings begin to climb steeply – an upward trend that his decision to play hardball with Parliament, however much it enraged his opponents and displeased the **Supreme Court**, did nothing to arrest and may even have accelerated.

Likewise his summary removal of the whip from MPs who

insisted on blocking a no-deal Brexit – some of them high-profile parliamentarians who had served their party and in government with distinction – only served to strengthen his hand and his hold over his front and backbenches.

Moreover, Johnson then had the absolute chutzpah to secure a last-gasp Withdrawal Agreement with the EU that involved drawing a border down the Irish Sea – something that Theresa May had sworn no UK prime minister could ever agree to and which broke all her promises to the DUP into the bargain.

More than that, Johnson was able to get his own Brexiteer ultras not just to vote for it but to join him in trumpeting the whole thing as some sort of diplomatic masterstroke.

As if that weren’t enough, Johnson then managed to entrap the opposition parties, via a combination of rational self-interest (the SNP), inflated expectations (the Lib Dems), and appearances’ sake (Labour) into granting him an early general election fought on his terms, not theirs.

He then proceeded to win by a landslide, primarily by successfully framing the contest as the chance for an exhausted and frustrated nation to ‘*Get Brexit Done*’ so they could move on to the stuff that matters much more to most people, like schools, hospitals and law and order, on which he promised to spend up large – although not as large as a Labour Party he found it all-too-easy to portray as a profligate shambles led by a Marxist throwback who couldn’t even make his mind up on the main question of the day.

And he did all that, remember, with questions about his ‘*colourful*’ personal life, about Russian interference, about dim-witted and dodgy candidates, about his relationship with Donald Trump, and about his running away from media scrutiny, hanging over him throughout.

All that remained, after what must have been quite a Christmas, was to speed through the passage of the Withdrawal Bill in the New Year and (the sad absence of

Big Ben bongs notwithstanding) to celebrate the UK’s great escape from the supposed shackles of Brussels. Oh, yes, and to replace a Chancellor who refused to do whatever he wanted with one who apparently would.

Except, of course, that it wasn’t all that remained. Because soon after that, everything – well, almost everything – began to go very badly wrong. The **coronavirus** struck, chaos reigned and has arguably reigned ever since.

Hampered first by his libertarian instincts and managerial inadequacies, and then by his physical incapacity, Johnson took the country too slowly into both lockdown and the test-trace-isolate strategy that might have offered a more rapid (and less economically damaging) route out of it, not least for families unable to send their kids back to school.

True, an initial **rally-round-the-flag effect**, combined with understandable human sympathy for a prime minister suffering from the self-same virus that was beginning to kill tens of thousands of their fellow citizens, staved off public criticism of the handling of the pandemic for a while.

So, too, did the swift response of a Chancellor who quickly proved himself more than just a pretty face. Likewise – at least for the half of the country still positively bursting with Brexit pride – Johnson’s insistence that, come what may, we would be leaving the customs union and single market at the end of the year.

But doubts soon began to creep in, followed in fairly short order by outrage (amplified even by normally-supportive media outlets) both at the mess that the government seemed to be making of its response to the pandemic and to the fact that, when it came to lockdown itself, it looked awfully like there was one rule for them and one rule for the rest of us – always a potential Achilles heel for the Tory (if not necessarily for the Boris) brand.

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Boris Johnson’s first year may have been very much a year of two halves – the first a triumph, the second something close to disastrous.

Whether that injury will heal, allowing the Conservatives to win a fifth consecutive term in 2024 will depend in large part on the economy.

And then there’s the outcome of the post-mortem on the pandemic Johnson has now promised to hold, as well as the fact that the public already seem to have decided that Labour’s new leader, Keir Starmer, unlike his frankly hopeless predecessor, may actually be capable of running the country. Nemesis, then? Well, not exactly – and not yet, anyway. Boris Johnson’s first year may have been very much a year of two halves – the first a triumph, the second something close to disastrous.

But, for all that, the government retains the support of clear plurality of British voters. And while it does so, Boris – his Teflon coating scratched but still essentially intact – seemingly sails on regardless.

This piece was originally published by the UK in a Changing Europe.

The prorogation of Parliament

Dr Robert Saunders, Reader in British History at Queen Mary University of London and Co-Director of the Mile End Institute

When the time comes to write the history of Boris Johnson’s premiership, historians will not be short of material. In his first twelve months as prime minister, Boris Johnson has shut down Parliament, won a general election, taken Britain out of the EU and faced a global pandemic. He has lost a Chancellor of the Exchequer, expelled 22 MPs from the Conservative Party, experienced the biggest economic hit for generations and taken on the wage-bill for a quarter of the workforce.

Yet perhaps the most significant moment of his premiership came at the very start. The Prorogation crisis, in August and September 2019, struck at the most basic principles of the British constitution. It drew an unprecedented intervention by the Supreme Court, and has set up a battle between the Executive and the Judiciary which will run throughout this Parliament.

Prorogation was not an isolated incident, nor an extreme response to the Brexit crisis. It encapsulated three principles that have become central to the Johnson government: a contempt for Parliament; an intolerance of dissent; and a determination to concentrate power in the hands of the Executive. Those principles have been entrenched by the twin emergencies of Brexit and Covid-19, which have further sidelined Parliament and enhanced the power of Number 10. The result has been a shift in the character of British democracy, with lasting consequences for how we are governed.

Suspending Parliament

The prorogation of Parliament in August 2019 was not, as ministers pretended, normal constitutional procedure. As scholars noted at the time, it was the longest suspension of Parliament since 1930, and was transparently intended to lock MPs out of the Brexit process: the single most important policy decision of the day.

In so doing, it subverted the very principles of parliamentary democracy. Prime ministers are not directly elected. They have no independent mandate of their own. Their democratic legitimacy comes solely from the House of Commons – the only institution, at a UK level, that is directly elected. A government that sets itself against Parliament, or that refuses to obey its laws, shuts off the source of its own democratic authority.

Had prorogation succeeded, it would have established a dangerous precedent: that a prime minister, installed in Number 10 by a vote of party activists, could use the powers of the Royal Prerogative to shut down our elected institutions.

On this occasion, the constitutional defences held: the Supreme Court ruled the prorogation ‘unlawful, null and of no effect’. Yet those defences are now themselves at risk, as the assault moves from Parliament to the Judiciary.

‘Getting the judges sorted’

The decision of the Supreme Court produced a furious response. Boris Johnson rebuked the Court for pronouncing ‘on what is essentially a political question, at a time of great national controversy’, while a ‘Downing Street source’ let it be known that ‘Dom wants to get the judges sorted’. After the General Election in December, the new Attorney-General, Suella Braverman, published an article urging ministers to ‘take back control ... from the judiciary’.

Curiously, Braverman presented her position as a defence of Parliament. She accused the courts of ‘supplanting Parliament’ and of ‘the disfranchisement of Parliament’ – a bold claim from someone who had backed closing it down.

Yet in both her examples of judicial overreach – the triggering of Article 50 and the unlawful prorogation – the courts actively restored decision-making to Parliament, after Number 10 had tried to remove it. In neither case did the Supreme Court make any judgement on policy. Instead, it insisted that Parliament must decide when to trigger Article 50, and that Parliament could not be suspended to exclude it from the Brexit process.

Braverman warned the judges that ‘they are not elected, they are not accountable to members of the public and it is for politicians to make political decisions’. Yet when Johnson suspended Parliament, he had been elected by no one except his own party activists. The only democratic body to which he was accountable was the House of Commons, which he had suspended. It was not possible for ‘politicians to make political decisions’, because Britain’s political institutions had been shut down.

When Braverman talked about the rights of Parliament, what she seems to have meant was the rights of the Executive: specifically, the right of a prime minister to shut down Parliament, ignore its legislation and exclude it from decision-making. What was at stake was not the supremacy of Parliament over the courts, but the supremacy of the Executive over Parliament.

‘A dead Parliament’

In the weeks after Prorogation, the Johnson government intensified its assault on Parliament. The Attorney-General, Geoffrey Cox, called it ‘a dead Parliament’ with ‘no moral right to sit’. Johnson himself told Parliament to ‘move aside and let the people have their say’, while the right-wing polemicist Andrew Roberts urged ministers to revive the

Royal Veto, striking down legislation intended to ‘subvert’ ‘the will of the People’.

In the election campaign that followed, Johnson became perhaps the first prime minister since the eighteenth century to run against Parliament, accusing MPs of ‘thwarting the democratic decision of the British people’. Having tweeted (falsely) that Johnson’s deal had ‘passed Parliament’, the party pivoted swiftly to the opposite position:

congratulating the prime minister for negotiating an agreement ‘despite Parliament’s best efforts to block his progress’.

The election produced a Parliament more to ministers’ tastes, with an 80-seat majority for the government. Yet the determination to reduce its powers continued. Downing Street has reasserted its power to appoint the chairs of parliamentary committees; and while that failed in the case of Chris Grayling, the expulsion of Julian Lewis from the parliamentary party has sent a clear message that disobedience will not be tolerated in

future. It was nearly ten months before Johnson appeared before the Liaison Committee in May, and he declined to commit to return.

More troublingly, the Brexit process has seen an explosion in the use of ‘skeleton bills’, which allow ministers to fill in the details of legislation after an Act has passed. The effect is essentially to pass law-making power from MPs to ministers. A report by the House of Lords Constitution Committee, published in June, warned that ‘skeleton bills’ were vesting ministers with powers of ‘breath-taking scope’, adding that it was ‘difficult to envisage any circumstances in which their use is acceptable’.

Parliament and the pandemic

The outbreak of Covid-19 has in some respects accelerated the side-lining of Parliament. It was not the government's fault that public health restrictions made it more difficult for the House to meet in person. Yet it was the government's decision to switch off digital participation at a time when only 50 MPs could fit inside the Chamber. The result was that nearly 200 MPs, who are shielding or have family members who are vulnerable, have been excluded from Parliament. The rest are mostly scattered around the parliamentary estate, unable to enter the Chamber or access support. Parliamentary votes have become so cumbersome that MPs are encouraged to avoid them altogether, while proxy voting has dropped hundreds of votes into the pockets of the party Whips.

At the same time, government has chosen to legislate as far as possible through Statutory Instruments and emergency powers: procedures that side-line Parliament altogether. As David Allen Green has noted, 'the recent coronavirus regulations have created the widest criminal offences in modern legal history'; and they have done so largely without parliamentary approval. In most cases, there was no special pressure of time to make this necessary, suggesting an active preference for legislating outside of Parliament.

A quasi-presidential system?

It is tempting to view all this as an assault on democracy. Yet if that were the case, the defences would not so easily have been breached. The attack on Parliament is better understood as part of a shift in the character of British democracy, to a model that views the Executive, rather than Parliament, as the carrier of democratic legitimacy.

This is rooted in the growing presidentialisation of British politics. General elections are increasingly cast as presidential contests, with televised 'prime ministerial debates' to decide 'Britain's next prime minister'. Televised addresses – delivered, not in Parliament, but at a presidential podium, in front of the Union Flag – have become part of the theatre of the modern

premiership, while the prime minister's recent illness saw much talk of 'designated survivors' in the event of his death. As the Cabinet sinks into irrelevance, power has shifted to prime ministerial appointees from outside Parliament: figures such as Dominic Cummings and David Frost, who serve – like a presidential 'administration' – at the will of the prime minister.

Yet the result is dangerously unbalanced: a quasi-presidential system that lacks any of the safeguards of an actual presidency. Unlike an American President, Number 10 is not constrained by a written Constitution. It does not have to share power with a separately-elected Congress, in which one or both Houses might be controlled by the opposing party. Its appointments do not require Congressional approval, or a formal nomination process. As the prorogation crisis demonstrated, Number 10 now claims a direct democratic mandate that is not only separate from that of Parliament but that can be mobilised against it. Yet it recognises no balancing sources of authority, able to limit its power.

Historically, the most important check on the Executive in Britain has been Parliament. Yet the ability of MPs to challenge their leaders has been significantly constrained. By transferring power from MPs to party members, parties have liberated their leaderships from parliamentary control and inverted the traditional relationship between Parliament and the Executive. Instead of leaders drawing their authority from MPs, MPs are expected to obey the 'mandate' of the party leadership. On this model, legitimacy flows downwards from The Leader, not upwards from Parliament.

In consequence, Parliament risks sinking into the position of the Electoral College in the United States: a largely ceremonial body of pledged delegates, whose functions cease once the Executive is in power. A Parliament demoralised by the referendum and scattered by the pandemic must decide whether it is willing to accept that fate – and what, if anything, it proposes to do about it.

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Boris Johnson and Brexit

Professor Anand Menon, Director of the UK in a Changing Europe and Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at Kings College London

Dr Alan Wager, Research Associate at the UK in a Changing Europe initiative at King's College London

A time traveller arriving from July 2019, interested in seeing how politics has moved on and what progress had been made with Brexit, might be forgiven, at first blush, for thinking nothing at all had changed. *'Britain close to abandoning hope of Brexit trade deal'*, declared the Daily Telegraph this week. *Déjà vu all over again.*

Yet on closer inspection, our esteemed traveller would realise that not everything was as it was before. The headline in question, for one thing, has slipped from the top to the bottom of the front page. The Covid-19 pandemic has made Brexit a second order issue. Meanwhile, across the Channel, its relative importance has slipped still further.

And, of course, the details have changed. A year ago, the big question was whether the UK would leave the EU or not. On 31 January this year, British membership came to an end. In this narrow – yet hugely important – sense, the Prime Minister has indeed delivered. Deal or no deal, the outcome of the referendum has been honoured.

One year on from Boris Johnson taking over, Brexit feels done. It isn't, of course. But if there's one thing we've learned from the past year it's that overall appearance matters every bit as much as, if not more than, the boring details.

There is, however, some residue from what was said and done last year from which Boris Johnson cannot escape.

Standing outside Number Ten a year ago, our new Prime Minister declared that he was *'convinced that we can do a deal without checks at the Irish border, because we refuse under any circumstances to have such checks.'* Some weeks ago, the Government announced that such checks will be necessary after all. Plenty of people in Northern Ireland and perhaps a number of unionists on this side of the Irish Sea will be less than impressed when the reality clearly and unambiguously contradicts the confident rhetoric.

More generally, the Prime Minister's much vaunted deal with the EU has not proven to be as *'oven ready'* as some were led to believe. As we write, negotiations on a trade deal have stalled, with EU insistence that the UK sign up to *'level playing field'* conditions running headlong into London's desire to regain regulatory autonomy. And, of course, there's fish.

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Here, history might provide us with something of a guide. After all, we know the script pretty well by now. The British Government talks up the gap between the two sides. It declares that it is perfectly willing to walk away. The odds against no deal tumble. And then, like magic - like last autumn in fact - the Prime Minister steps in. An injection of personal political capital is sold as opening space for a deal.

Once again, the headline will matter far more than the text below it. The fiddly details of what has been agreed will not detain most people for very long just as, last year, the Prime Minister was hailed for signing a deal that Theresa May had rejected – and one that, if truth be told, the EU much preferred.

Of course, things don't always go according to the script. Because Brexit is no longer a priority, the negotiations might suffer from the absence of the kind of sustained intervention from political principals that a successful resolution will require. If Europe sees a second Covid spike, then it is an open question as to whether Brexit will get much attention at all. The ticking clock, and the absence of any obvious way to

extend transition beyond the end of this year, suggest that the 31 December deadline is a real one.

What, then, of the future? In his first blogpost following his campaign to leave the EU four years ago, Dominic Cummings declared that *‘Taking back control to Britain is just the first step. The next step should be major political changes in Britain so that the broken Westminster and Whitehall system has to focus on the public interest in a way it does not now.’*

Mr Cummings has always had an interest in structures and processes. We have seen over the last twelve months that this administration is willing to test existing institutions almost to breaking point. Parliament was the focus of his ire last autumn. Prorogation triggered an intervention from the Supreme Court which in turn generated what some see as a menacing (albeit unspecified) promise of future judicial reform in the Conservative manifesto.

And the civil service seems set to be next in line. The tension between Number 10 and civil servants has already seen changes of Permanent Secretary at four departments and the loss of a Cabinet Secretary. Moreover, both Mr Cummings

and his erstwhile boss Michael Gove have promised significant reforms to come.

Yet this is precisely the kind of detail the wider public tend not to worry about. When it comes to electoral politics, it is delivery, not structures, that matters. Indeed, this was implicit in a referendum campaign that implied things would be better for people if the UK could only shake off the shackles of Brussels. Taking back control, in other words, wasn’t merely about symbols; it was about substance.

All of which points to the fact that Boris Johnson’s sternest challenges still await him. Delivering Brexit was one thing, but delivering on the opportunities he argued it would afford, not least in the context of a feared post-Covid recession, is something else entirely. At that point – the point of delivery rather than the point of sale, if you like – people might begin to worry more about the detail as it starts to impact on their daily lives. We know the

Prime Minister can talk a good game; but soon – perhaps sooner than many imagine – simply talking a good game may no longer be enough.

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Covid-19 and public health

Dr Sophie Harman, Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary University of London

Political leaders are bad at global health emergencies. This has been true of HIV/AIDS, Ebola and Covid-19. There are of course notable exceptions to this rule: current praise for Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, and Moon Jae-In and individual health and regional leaders suggest that it is possible to have good political leadership during a global health crisis. More common are leaders who falter at the start of the crisis - having underestimated the risk, or are unsure as to the extent of the problem, or just in plain fear of what is going to happen - but then quickly adjust, adapt and learn from early mistakes.

And then there are those leaders that start and end badly, whose catastrophic responses over-shadow any successful models. Boris Johnson falls into this latter category.

There are five traps political leaders can fall into when it comes to a public health emergency:

1. delay and downplay;
2. fudge the science;
3. isolation from the international community;
4. absence; and
5. double standards.

One year into his leadership, Boris Johnson has fallen into most of these traps. Under his leadership, Covid-19 went from a public health crisis to the biggest long-term shock to UK life since the Second World War, with significant consequences for the livelihoods and well-being of future generations. It did not have to be this way.

The first trap has the most serious consequences for people’s lives. There was the throwaway comment about coronavirus during a **speech** in February, then there was some standard stalling with added reassurances about the NHS, before a blunt reassessment of the severity of the virus come early March.

The problem here is not so much what Johnson was saying,

but what his government was not doing: no build up and distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to where it was needed; no advance preparation for what a lockdown would entail; no protection of people in care homes. There are a couple of basics to responding to health emergencies, and one of the biggest involves protecting your frontline health and care workers as they are going to be most vulnerable. By March, Johnson could not downplay the risk, **noting:** *‘I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.’* What he did not note is how government delay causes deaths of loved ones before their time.

The second trap – fudging the science - is the most contested. Johnson arguably did not fudge the science, he opted for one scientific strategy – herd immunity – while not following standard models of public health response: track and trace the virus, protect your health and care workers, protect your most vulnerable in society (do not send them to care homes where they are most vulnerable), effective community mobilisation to change behaviour. Calls for these measures were made but were **ignored**. Johnson did follow the science when **new evidence** suggested that if he did not change course, the UK might face 500,000 deaths from Covid-19, and

rapidly made the decision to lock the UK down. However, lockdowns are really a measure to buy time for other public health measures to work: notably, a functioning track and trace system, effective behaviour change communication, and proper healthcare supplies. To date, track and trace in the UK is still not fully functioning.

Johnson politicised science and scientific advice. This led to questions about the quality of evidence and independence of SAGE by the **wider scientific community** (and in part to the founding of the Independent SAGE). This has serious consequences for the response to an evolving virus: lack of

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public trust in government evidence, poor judgment of political leaders in their assessment of the evidence, and at worst the understanding that scientists had to justify rather than inform political decision-making.

Johnson's record on the third trap, isolation from the international community, is mixed. Unlike Donald Trump, Johnson has thus far avoided blaming the international community, most notably the World Health Organisation and its relationship to China, for the failures of the UK Covid-19 response. The merging of the Department for International Development (DfID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in June could highlight a shift away from some of the wider global health and development work undertaken by the UK. It is too soon to tell what this means for future UK engagement with global health security, other than perhaps a fundamental misunderstanding of how global health security works: invest in pandemic preparedness in low and middle income countries to protect all.

The big kicker on the international isolation front, is predictably Europe-related, with the UK opting out of the EU Covid-19 vaccine scheme, meaning the UK will do its own negotiation with vaccine suppliers should a vaccine become available. For those unfamiliar with the wider politics of vaccines, this is where multilateralism around global health security will get really nasty. Finding a vaccine for Covid-19 is relatively easy when compared to arrangements for equitable and universal access around the world.

The fourth trap – absence – is more sombre, given Johnson's critically ill-health and hospitalisation from Covid-19. To be absent from leading the national response to a health emergency because of your ill health is definitely to be forgiven. Near-death experience and new parenthood would usually combine to boost public empathetic support for a Prime Minister. However, the manner in which Johnson's health was managed seemed to do two things: first, compound concern about trusting information from Number Ten; and second, raise

new unease as to who was in charge – special advisors, Dominic Raab, or Matt Hancock – and whether they were up to the job. Johnson may be bad but he seemed better than his temporary replacements.

The final trap is the real headache for Johnson and the Conservative Party: double standards. People can rationalise the first four traps as an extreme situation faced by a government trying its best: however, as a recent **The UK in a Changing Europe** study suggests, the perception of 'one rule for them and another for us' is an issue for UK voters. Despite special advisor Dominic Cummings' attempt at obfuscation through excessive detail in the Rose Garden, the British public know that the lockdown rules were simple and that he broke them; and that, in allowing him to keep his job, Johnson signalled that he was okay with that. This may not impact on Johnson's electoral fortunes in the next General Election but it may be a legacy issue for the Conservative Party.

What is absolutely not true about Covid-19 is that health emergencies and pandemics are unprecedented or once in a generation. What is absolutely true is that public health emergencies become unprecedented crises with tragic loss and huge impacts on society because of bad politics and poor political leadership.

Simply put, the high UK incidence and death rate could have been avoided. There will be investigations, reports,

inquiries, and countless blogs like this that will investigate government liability, accountability, and failure and the appropriate consequences of this. For his next three years in power, Johnson needs to avoid the future traps of pandemic recovery: avoiding accountability and apportioning blame to the wrong sectors of government (reducing efficacy in pandemic preparedness planning); failure to invest in the pillars of pandemic response (care sector, local authorities); and isolation from multilateral co-operation on global health security. The first year of Johnson's leadership has been catastrophic. With a new wave of Covid-19 and economic crises imminent, his second year could be a lot worse.

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Immigration: a new centre- ground?

Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future

What would *'taking back control'* mean for immigration? That central question would determine how far the government would make its own choices about immigration in Boris Johnson's first year as prime minister.

In a year dominated by the Brexit stand-off, the snap General Election and the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration was further from the headlines than before. Yet the Johnson administration made more major policy decisions on immigration in its first 12 months than are usually made across a parliament.

Having been the most polarising issue of the previous decade, might the pattern of policy choices reveal the quiet emergence of a new centre-ground on immigration policy?

Ditching the net migration target

Boris Johnson's first significant move on immigration policy came in his first 24 hours as Prime Minister, dropping the government's flagship target to reduce net migration to the *'tens of thousands'*. Theresa May had championed the target for a decade as Home Secretary and then Prime Minister – yet she left office with net migration at 272,000. Though considered totemic in Westminster, the net migration target sank without trace. Few mourned a pledge that had proved impossible to keep.

Downing Street explained that Johnson did not want *'to play a numbers game'* on immigration. Ditching this one-size-fits-all target freed a new Prime Minister to argue for some flows of migration to rise as others fell. Johnson frequently declared that he wanted Britain to be *'a giant magnet'* for scientists from around the world, while arguing for reductions in low-skilled migration from the EU. The government significantly liberalised the rules on enabling more overseas students to work in the UK after graduation.

A new promise to cut the numbers

The **Conservative manifesto** in 2019 reflected Johnson's self-image as a *'balancer'* on immigration. Its narrative was of a *'balanced package of measures that is fair, firm and compassionate'*, consciously cycling through the themes of *'control'* offered by an Australian-style points-based system; of *'contribution'* as *'Global Britain'* welcomed skills that are needed; and *'compassion'* in protecting refugees, securing the status of Europeans in Britain, and acknowledging the shame of the Windrush scandal. A prominent new memorial would fully acknowledge the Windrush generation's contribution.

Immigration, having fallen to the ninth most salient issue for voters, had a low campaign profile. Yet the Conservatives still made a significant policy shift during the campaign's opening week, adding a commitment that 'overall numbers would fall', even after the manifesto had gone to print. Had the numbers game returned by the back door?

The post-Brexit system: what do points mean?

The Conservatives' victory at the General Election ensured that Britain would leave the EU – and so gave the re-elected government ownership of the biggest immigration policy changes for over forty years. Free movement would end – but what would follow it?

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) was asked to revisit the 2018 White Paper proposals. Its **report** in January 2020 proposed to liberalise non-EU work migration. The threshold for tier-two visas would fall from £30,000 to £25,6000, with no limit on numbers of economic migration visas above this salary threshold. For workers under 25, the salary threshold would be lower – starting at £20,500 – a policy announced so quietly that few have noticed.

The MAC proposals, fully accepted by the government, were broadly in line with public intuitions about different flows of migration, except in offering no route for social care visas. But with non-EU migration having risen since 2016, as EU migration fell, these policy choices were not designed to meet the campaign commitment to cut overall numbers.

Windrush, immigration and race

For decades after the *Empire Windrush* arrived in 1948, immigration and race relations were often treated as a fused issue. By 1990, most ethnic minorities were British-born and the post-2004 immigration debate focused on the arrival of

white Europeans from Poland and accession states. So the greater public separation of race and immigration was long overdue.

Yet the Windrush scandal showed how migration and race remain closely connected, particularly in immigration enforcement. Wendy Williams’ **Lessons Learned Review** sets out why the Home Office must embark on the type of institutional and cultural reform which the Metropolitan Police attempted after the Macpherson report – and which this department has never attempted. The dramatic resignation of Permanent Secretary Phillip Rutnam, to bring a constructive dismissal claim, means it will do so under new management.

The prime minister spoke too, in his first Commons appearance, of his long-standing view that undocumented migrants who have lived in Britain long-term should be offered a route to legal status. There has been no significant move on this. The political risk of a high-profile ‘amnesty’ may prove prohibitive. The government could also review and simplify the existing routes to regularisation. The Prime Minister appeared surprised to hear, from select committee chair Stephen Timms, that current policy leaves many thousands of people with leave to remain without recourse to public services or funds.

An offer to Hong Kong

China’s new security laws in Hong Kong saw the UK government offer 350,000 British overseas nationals and 2.6 million others a special route to come to the UK, with a path to citizenship after six years. Remarkably, there has been unanimous support in the House of Commons – in stark contrast to the heated clash on the same subject between **Paddy Ashdown and Norman Tebbit** in 1990 -

while **polls showed public support** spanning party and referendum tribes.

The Hong Kong case has special features, yet illuminates broader debates too. This decision confirms that numbers are not always trumps in immigration policy – neither for this government, nor for sections of the public who support reductions overall. Nor does ethnicity or demographic change dominate public views. Historic ties with an English-speaking

group, perceived as economic contributors, clearly trump East Asian ethnicity in this case.

Hong Kong also joins Ireland as a significant exemption to the principle that post-Brexit immigration policy will be geography blind – though no national immigration system has ever adopted this principle without exceptions.

Immigration after Covid

Covid changed the immigration debate. It brought much migration and economic activity to a halt. Asylum processing was disrupted and citizenship ceremonies were halted. The routine collection of immigration statistics was suspended, with significant reforms planned before they return. Ironically, the government may not know if it were to finally hit the ditched target by accident, with universities fearing a major loss of

income if international student flows are reduced.

The pandemic rather overshadowed the government’s flagship immigration bill – an historic but skeletal piece of legislation, creating the legal basis for future policy, without specifying what choices should be made within it.

The government did make policy u-turns under public pressure, dropping the NHS surcharge for health workers.

On less salient issues, more minimal concessions were made. Asylum support rates rose £1.85 a week to £39.60 in June, but the government intends to restart evictions from asylum accommodation for those granted refugee status.

Have public attitudes changed? Seven out of 10 people said they were more aware of the positive contribution of migrants in key services. **A report by King’s College London and British Future** found that, while ‘perceptions of perceptions’ had changed, attitudes before and after the pandemic and overall attitudes to migration remained similar. The research suggested that political and media discourse had caught up with where the public already were – highly supportive of migration in the NHS and in social care; with nuanced and pragmatic views if migration was necessary to fill skills gaps or do necessary work, not just in highly paid roles.

Conclusion: the year two challenges

Shifting public attitudes to immigration has created space for a ‘*balancer*’ agenda on immigration. While its public voice has swung between tougher ‘*control*’ and more welcoming ‘*contribution*’ messages, the government’s policy choices have often been quietly pragmatic.

This government’s first year was often about the politics of future policy. Many of next year’s immigration challenges will be about implementation.

The post-Brexit system needs to move from the principles to the practical system. This will be introduced in January 2021, six months before the grace period for EU nationals to secure their status ends in June. The government may be unable to differentiate new arrivals from existing residents for the first six months. A route to the settled status scheme must be kept open beyond that deadline – or Boris Johnson and Priti Patel’s

2016 pledges that nobody who had legal status should lose it would be broken.

The political debate about post-Brexit migration has focused almost exclusively on who gets visas to work and study. Asylum and family migration will need more attention.

Implementing the post-Windrush reform agenda should be a central benchmark for the Home Office. Tensions may arise from Wendy Williams call for a review of the ‘hostile/compliant environment’ policy and the government’s security-led instincts when under pressure over spontaneous arrivals on the Kent coast.

The government lacks an integration strategy, and is under pressure to respond to a domestic race equality agenda in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests.

Its Hong Kong decision could become a springboard for the government to develop a proactive strategy to the neglected area of citizenship policy, as **a cross-party inquiry chaired by Conservative MP Alberto Costa** is to recommend.

Voices outside government will face new challenges too. The post-pandemic recession will require economic stakeholders to rethink their advocacy – doing more to integrate approaches to domestic skills and recruitment with migration. Civic society advocates will seek to persuade the government that an effective and fair system could combine principles of control and compassion too.

Combining the themes of control, contribution and compassion needs to be more than a political message. Next year’s challenge is to secure public confidence in a new immigration system that is fair to those who come to Britain and to the communities that they join.

The Mile End Institute brings together politicians, policymakers, academics, and the public to discuss and debate the major challenges facing the country in a fast-moving and ever-changing world.

The Institute calls upon expertise from the School of Politics and International Relations and the School of History, based in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Queen Mary University of London and disseminates through **public and digital events**, **webinars**, **podcasts** and the **Mile End Institute Blog**.


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