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PANDEMIC TURMOIL: THE UNITED KINGDOM AFTER THE FALL OF BORIS JOHNSON

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Abstract

Thirteen years of Conservative administrations in UK were defined by intertwined shocks. Brexit and COVID-19 prolonged and abbreviated the lifespan of Prime Ministers. An unfavorable external scenario fueled nationalism and populism. In-between crises, pragmatism abounded. Theresa May rose to power after the Brexit-infused fall of David Cameron. May's fate was sealed as long as Brexit remained undone. In spite of getting Brexit (almost) done, Boris Johnson's populism did not survive pandemics. Liz Truss was the net outcome of those controversies. In 2022, "Global Britain" faces such challenges amidst anxiety, uncertainty and burgeoning crises at domestic economy and international relations.

Keywords: Boris Johnson, Brexit, Conservative Party, Covid-19, United Kingdom.

Resumo

Treze anos de governos conservadores no Reino Unido foram definidos por choques entremeados. O Brexit e a COVID-19 prolongaram e abreviaram a duração dos Primeiros Ministros. Um cenário externo desfavorável alimentou o nacionalismo e o populismo. Entre crises, o pragmatismo abundou. Theresa May chegou ao poder após a queda de David Cameron, impulsionada pelo Brexit. O destino de May foi selado à medida que o Brexit permaneceu incompleto. Apesar de ter conseguido (quase) realizar o Brexit, o populismo de Boris Johnson não sobreviveu à pandemia. Liz Truss foi o resultado dessas controvérsias. Em 2022, o "Reino Unido Global" encara tais desafios em meio a ansiedade, incerteza e crises prementes na economia doméstica e nas relações internacionais.

Palavras chave: Boris Johnson, Brexit, Covid-19, Partido Conservador, Reino Unido.

2022 started auspiciously for developed economies – including the United Kingdom. One year after the start of COVID-19 vaccination, robust economic recovery swept across the latter part of 2021. This brief euphoria, however, was curtailed by Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 24 2022 (SENHORAS, 2022a). As fuel and food prices soared, G-7 economies experienced the greatest inflation rates since the 1980s.

A rude awakening to economic recovery put an end to Boris Johnson's convoluted administration. In September 5, Elizabeth Truss (a former minister of Johnson, Theresa May and David Cameron) become the new Conservative leader. In September 8, Queen Elizabeth II passed away, after 70 years of public service – the longest reign in British history.

Out of the blue, the UK faced overlapping economic and political transitions. The new administration experienced hardships early on. Truss' electoral promise of massive tax cuts brought the Sterling Pound to the lowest exchange rates to US dollar since 1985 (JAMES, 2022). The escalation of Russian aggression in Ukraine increased military compromises in NATO and enhanced fuel and food scarcity. In October 14, Prime Minister Truss sacked Chancellor of the Exchequer Kwasi Kwarteng,

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after just 38 days in office (ZAKIR-HUSSAIN, 2022); his “mini-budget” was widely panned by different economic agents.

The current economic crisis is the latest offering in a long-standing series, triggered by the 2008 global economic crisis, which affected polities around the world in significant ways. The 2008 crisis put an end to the commodity boom who propelled emerging economies since the beginning of the century. It also triggered a decade of nationalism and populism, soaked in nostalgia and score settling (HARRIS, 2019).

The rise of the Conservative Party at the United Kingdom enmeshed with those pivotal events. The Labour Party’s long reign was cut short, after Gordon Brown’s defeat in general elections by an unexpected coalition of Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats (by then, led by Nick Clegg). Onwards, Prime Minister David Cameron triumphed at the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. As the European Union experienced hardships on the onset of the 2008 crisis, Cameron played the referendum card once again, this time in an attempt to appease Euro-scepticism within Tory ranks.

Cameron’s decision triggered a domino effect, unveiling the existential issue of a generation: Brexit. Experiencing the apex of his popularity and empowered by the Unionist undertones of the Scottish vote, Cameron expected another victory lap (GAMA, 2015). He raised the “Better Together” banner, campaigning for the UK to remain an EU member – a proposal that, at the time, enjoyed comfortable poll rates. Among the many Conservatives who joined the “Remain” side, Cameron counted on support from the likes of Members of Parliament Theresa May and Elizabeth Truss (a former Lib-Dem).

However, things did not turn to be what Prime Minister intended in 2015. Spearheaded by UKIP leader Nigel Farage and Tory Brexiters (like London Mayor Boris Johnson and European Research Group leader Jacob Rees-Moog), “Leave” assembled a vicious media campaign which, against the background of economic turmoil and political anxiety, turned the tide. In June 23 2016, a majority of UK constituencies rejected EU membership (GAMA, 2021a). Labour and Lib-Dems faced Brexit lacking consensus; they were soundly defeated. As Brexit duly won, Cameron immediately resigned.

Brexit remained a polarizing issue within the party system. Turbulence within Conservative ranks opposed “Hard Brexiters” and moderates. After Cameron’s resignation, the search for a compromise eventually led to Theresa May’s ascension to 10 Downing St. Switching sides, May became a Prime Minister torn apart between delivering Brexit and negotiating its divorce terms with EU (GAMA, 2021b). She won two intermediary elections, but her Checker’s Plan never conquered the approval from the twin chambers of British Parliament. Gradually, party support eroded (GAMA,



2021c). Recurrently confronted with prospects of a “no-deal Brexit”, May left office in 23 July 2019 (just 3 years past the referendum).

Boris Johnson followed May, promising to “get Brexit done”. In December 2020, the Conservatives obtained one of their broader electoral victories in Parliamentary history, with Labour (under Jeremy Corbyn) receding to their lowest number of seats since 1930 (GAMA, 2021c). With an emboldened mandate, Johnson quickly established himself as one of the world’s most notorious populist leaders. His confusing term was marked by frequent polemics, many of them regarding Brexit. An agreement with EU arrived, at the 11th hour, in Christmas Eve 2020, just days away from relapsing into WTO norms (BOFFEY; O’CARROL, 2020). Before that, Johnson looked for Executive powers (unsuccessfully) beyond legal regulations.

Brexit triggered a set of unforeseen consequences. One year before pandemic hit the UK (March 2019), the European Medicines Agency relocated from London to Amsterdam (Netherlands). As the major hospital of his Oxbridge Constituency laid in ruins, Johnson seem unlikely to invest considerable amounts in Health policies. However, COVID-19 proved to be a game-changer in domestic politics (SENHORAS, 2020). Johnson – whose mandate neatly coincided with pandemics – was especially vulnerable during this period. Despite austerity rhetoric, he championed UK’s National Health System, especially after contracting COVID. The UK was the pioneering country in COVID vaccination, in December 2020.

Such accolades prolonged the “Hard Brexiter” stay in power. This said, more than once, Johnson was investigated for breaking social distancing and lockdown norms during the initial coronavirus waves (UNITED KINGDOM, 2022). The “partygate” scandal (including Johnson’s birthday party at government offices in June 2020) gradually took hold of media outlets and public opinion, against his favour. The spread of a new COVID-19 variety discovered in Kent in September 2020 (Alpha variety) coincided with the downfall of Prime Minister’s popularity.

Economic recession was another enduring COVID-19 effect. Inflation in UK reached the highest levels among G7 nations, reaching figures unseen since the end of Cold War (THOMPSON, 2022). Unemployment and indebtedness also soared, with the prospect of millions facing the poverty line. Government-sponsored economic aid packages ameliorated the overall picture, at a high cost. Such policies were further undermined by Russian invasion of Ukraine, which sent grain and oil prices into the rooftop (SENHORAS, 2022b).

After nominating a notorious sex offender (Chris Pincher) to ministry, moral condemnation proved unsurmountable to Johnson’s permanence. Faced with Cabinet resignations en masse, he



resigned in July 7 2022. Another succession contest ensued within Conservative ranks, with Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss facing Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak (PERRIGO, 2022).

The offices previously occupied by Sunak and Truss neatly summarize how Johnson managed to stay in power since 2019. “Getting Brexit done” was the framing concept that brought hard Brexiteers to the crest of Conservative power after 2016. At the Foreign Office, Truss dealt with the resulting debris from the divorce agreement – from the status of Northern Ireland to the fate of migrants across the Channel (one of the last Johnson policies was a controversial decision to forcefully repatriate asylum seekers back to Rwanda).

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sunak attempted to revert a spike in oil prices, amidst other COVID-19 side-effects. Goods and energy prices were already on a high before pandemic and well before Russian war on Ukraine. According to IMF and World Bank, historical series on those items peaked across 2019 – and Brexit hardly provided an edge for their fallback. COVID-19 and war only worsened already visible structural constraints and dire choices.

In September 5, the Conservative Party announced Liz Truss as new leader and Prime Minister, A free trader who promised massive tax cuts, she arrived with the cumulated experience of integrating consecutive administrations. The road to Downing St. 10 is paved with narrowing gaps. Her pragmatism won the favour of Cameron, May and Johnson, apart from party members’ sympathy that proved decisive for a slight victory over a highly appreciated Sunak. On the other hand, Truss’ appreciation of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) brought relentless public controversy to her package – including accusing the EU of “breaching” the Brexit Agreement in August 2022 (GALLARDO, 2022) and a toughening of relations with Russia.

Truss faces a considerable string of challenges, some of them overlapped in complex ways during the COVID-Ukraine conundrum. With a GDP roughly equivalent to 2008 figures (WORLD BANK, 2022), future prosperity do not seem an easy target. Even though Western nations tightened their alliance against Putin (including a price cap on Russian oil), – something familiar for the former Foreign Minister – the global economic impacts of this regional war remain far more visible for the British taxpayer.

Can public policies with limited impact (in terms of time scope and economic revitalization) cope with pervasive effects of pandemics and war? Cutting fuel duties and looking for energy efficiency through tax cuts run against one another, in terms of sustainability. Short-term measures, eventual returns may hardly suffice to cover the costs of past and present choices. Transition to a more sustainable economic platform will take more time.



One of the biggest pandemic effects in economies around the globe was rising indebtedness levels to alarming heights. Individuals as well as governments are facing dire choices in the near future. Will short-term measures proposed by the government enhance Debt-to-GDP ratio – which has been ballooning since the beginning of pandemics? Instead of cutting fuel duties, Tories seem to be fueling a debt crisis already looming at the horizon.

In spite of Johnson's downfall, pervasive effects of populism remain a pressing issue. In spite of solid institutions (including not only effective checks and balances, but effective channels for citizens' participation and deeply entrenched efforts for assuring public outreach), political systems like UK's display different dimensions of this phenomenon which affected liberal democracies across the globe since the 2008 crisis. Populism impacted a mature political system, including new segmentations across voting patterns, regions and issues, changes in constituency across the 21st century, as well as stakes, statuses and choices of different political players across the period.

13 years of Conservative administrations in UK were defined by intertwined shocks. Brexit and COVID-19 prolonged and abbreviated the lifespan of Prime Ministers. An unfavourable external scenario fuelled nationalism and populism. In-between crises, pragmatism abounded. Theresa May rose to power after the Brexit-infused fall of David Cameron. May's fate was sealed as long as Brexit remained undone.

In spite of getting Brexit (almost) done, Boris Johnson's populism did not survive pandemics. Liz Truss was the net outcome of those controversies. Burgeoning crises in domestic politics and international relations provided the background to her infant mandate. In 2022, "Global Britain" faces challenging times amidst rising anxiety and uncertainty.

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