

View from Westminster

Let us begin with an unavoidable truth. It is somewhat difficult to write a balanced column satirising the contemporary political issues of the day. It is one of those rare occasions where the greatest comedic and tragedy writers would collectively give up the ghost and say the submitted plot is too farcical and fanciful to be believed. Yet here we are...

The easy way forward from here would be to embrace what is affectionately known as the backbench-conservative-has-a-PMQ position. This would involve pretending nothing scandalous or noteworthy is happening whatsoever and instead see us focusing on tractor production statistics like some Politburo member in seventies Soviet Russia. Or perhaps one could pretend the column has been ambushed by a cake. But to do so would be a cop out and so, with an unusual word of thanks to my lawyer, we proceed to discuss the only story in dodge.

In the interests of balance, we do so at the doorstep of Starmer. For whilst most media focus has been elsewhere, some have sought to shine a light on the fact the Labour leader was photographed beer in hand in an unventilated room full of non-household contacts. It is a reminder that politics is a game of casting stones, but very few can do so from a sinless position. Righteous indignation is usually tempered by a smidgen of hypocrisy. Starmer, it should be noted, robustly defends himself.

That dispensed with, let's look at the crux of the problem facing Johnson. Which, when all the spin is removed, is essentially thus: people buried their loved ones alone whilst Downing Street partied like it's 1999. There is nothing the Gray Report, or the Metropolitan Police, can reveal or show that alters the fundamental equation in play. That is, that those who gave us life-changing restrictions seem to have flouted the rules themselves. And, in our liberal democratic system, lawmakers cannot be, or indeed be seen to be, lawbreakers.

That is the judgement to be made now. Do enough Conservative MPs think Johnson is toast because the perception of ineptitude and hypocrisy is irreversible? It is widely accepted a vote of no confidence will happen. In politics, never believe punditry of this kind. Nothing happens until it happens. Should it happen the question will not be, has Johnson done legal or moral wrongs? Such weighty luxuries are the concerns of lawyers, priests, and philosophers. It will be, is Johnson a busted flush with the wider public who individually give MPs their seats and collectively delivered the 80-seat majority?

Opinion polls say yes, but not conclusively. The range is between 4pct and 10pct as a Labour lead. Commanding, but not irreversible. Specific red wall polling is however more grim and the personal numbers for Johnson make him now as disliked as Corbyn. Nonetheless, opinion is susceptible to change.

Perhaps Johnson's saving grace is his idiosyncrasy. It's somewhat priced in. People elected him knowing he wasn't another beige politician. And none of

his supposed rivals yet truly resonate. Truss is bogged down with Europe when not jetsetting in Oz...Sunak is being clobbered by the cost of the living crisis... Hunt's personal numbers are terrible...Gove seemingly doesn't want it...Mourant and Tugendhat remain names only those in SW1 really know.

A hostile public, May elections pending and no obvious successor present a difficult challenge for Tory MPs. There is an argument that they conclude it's better the devil you know. Let alternatives strut their stuff until the public pass judgement on all this in the spring. If that judgment is one of electoral significance, then send for the men and women in grey suits and hold the leadership beauty contest. Johnson fights hard for his future. But it's not in his hands. It is, as always, in the hands of his parliamentary foot soldiers and the people. When will they strike? Your guess is as good as mine.