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Sensible Boris can lift Tories back to 'dizzy' heights

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It may be that the light at the end of the Brexit tunnel is a train coming the other way. But once the blood has been cleaned off the tracks, Britain's political crisis is likely to be behind it, making it easier for the country to adjust to whatever economic shocks Brexit may bring.

And, while they could pay a price for those shocks in the short run, the Conservatives should be well placed to prevail over the longer term.

To say that is not to ignore the fractures Brexit has caused in both Labour and the Conservatives. However, two-party systems — that is, political structures centred on two major parties, which typically compete to secure an absolute majority in “first past the post” electoral contests — are extraordinarily resilient.

Indeed, examining 900 combined years of government for 11 two-party systems, political scientist Alan Ware identified only three instances of a major party collapsing or being relegated to minor-party status: the American Whigs in the 1850s, the British Liberals at the beginning of last century, and Canada's Progressive Conservatives after 1993.

In all the other cases Ware analysed, the two-party structure remained intact for decade after decade, as did the broad identity of the parties that composed it, even though each party experienced crippling divisions, widespread defections and catastrophic defeats on more than one occasion.

The staying power of the major parties has many sources: the strength of party brands; the parties' ability to reposition themselves after electoral losses; the natural tendency of voters, when they become dissatisfied with the governing party, to turn to its largest competitor; and the fact that it is far easier for aspiring politicians to join an existing party than to found a new one.

There is, nonetheless, one set of circumstances that characterises all the instances of collapse and most of the near misses: when social change, and the emergence of new issues, fragments the constituency on which a party rests and exposes it to simultaneous challenge from both sides of the left-right spectrum.

That was the dilemma the Liberals, who dominated British politics in the 19th century, faced in the period that stretched from the crisis over Irish Home Rule in 1886 until their marginalisation after 1916.

With the newly formed Labour Party undermining the Liberals' ability to compete for working-class votes, the party was tempted to move left; but the resurgence of the Conservatives made that suicidal, as it would have cost the Liberals their affluent core constituency.

Trapped between opposing forces, the party hollowed out: its declining electoral base made it ever harder to attract strong candidates, which only accelerated the loss of votes.

Conversely, the party's new competitors soon passed the threshold at which they were the ones who defined the choice in voters' minds.

Whether further delays in the Brexit process would have triggered the same downward spiral is hard to say. But had a general election been fought under Theresa May, with the government still committed to the interim agreement, there is no doubt that the Conservatives would have haemorrhaged votes both to the Brexit Party and to the Liberal Democrats.

And it is also clear that if the losses proved sufficient to reopen the entire issue of membership in the EU, the Tories would have been torn apart.

Now, as new leader Boris Johnson removes any ambiguity from the party's stance, the Conservatives, even if they are forced to an election before Britain's scheduled departure from the EU, would fight on one front only, while Labour would still have to cope with a two-pronged attack.

And if Johnson delivers Brexit on its due date, taking the issue off the table, the Conservatives could cement their position, while Jeremy Corbyn's unpopularity would continue to drive potential Labour voters away.

There is, of course, the question of whether Johnson, who has been derided as a buffoon, will crash and burn. But Max Weber was surely right that crises demand charismatic forms of leadership that succeed precisely because they depart from the conventional, quasi-bureaucratic style of authority May so perfectly exemplified.

It is, after all, no coincidence that the great realignment that precipitated the decline of the Liberals and laid the foundations for the Conservatives' extraordinary success in the 20th century was due to Benjamin Disraeli, who was ridiculed as a charlatan until his stunning defeat of William Gladstone in 1874 ensured that he was known as "the Wizard".

Hannah Arendt, in her magnificent essay on "Dizzy", noted that he always "played the game of politics like an actor in a theatrical performance", deliberately accentuating "his lucky strangeness" by "dressing differently, combing his hair oddly, and by queer manners of expression".

By demarcating himself sharply from the Tory grandees, he was able to appeal directly to ordinary people, shamelessly relying on the penny press — which flourished after the taxes that had been used to suppress inexpensive newspapers were finally repealed in 1861 — to reach a public the Tories, until then, had ignored.

All that led his adversaries to denounce him as a demagogue, whose rhetoric, dumbed-down to please "the mob", would destroy serious politics. As Peter Mandler, a leading historian of late Victorian Britain, writes, "when the 'democratic' electorate chose flashy, flabby and foreign Disraeli over the sober, upright and thoroughly English Gladstone", Britain's Liberal

intelligentsia — in a precursor to Trump and now Johnson “derangement syndrome” — condemned Disraeli’s victory as symptomatic of trends that “would crush individuality, breed a ‘mass society’ rather than a nation of liberty, and separate the masses from their natural leaders”.

But Disraeli, who was convinced that ordinary Britons were inherently patriotic and even more devoted to the country’s institutions than its upper classes, seized the opportunities created by tumultuous social change to redefine British politics around a “popular conservatism” that helped give Britain’s democracy its unparalleled stability.

That is the tradition in which Johnson sits. Whether he has Disraeli’s remarkable political skills remains to be seen; he will certainly need them to manage the fallout from Brexit and revitalise a Conservative Party that, ever since it embraced David Cameron’s “compassionate conservatism”, has lost its way.

But at least Johnson has stopped the rot. And in stark contrast to the situation in the EU, where double-speak reigns supreme, he has brought a refreshing directness to Britain’s political debate.

High time too; for as Enoch Powell put it in admonishing the Tories’ endless lip service to ill-conceived economic policies, “it is impossible to go on behaving sensibly while constantly talking nonsense”. Having started to talk sensibly, Johnson’s challenge is to show he can act sensibly.