

Comparing Boris Johnson's premiership to Silvio Berlusconi's

How will Boris Johnson's time as UK Prime Minister be remembered? Ben Worthy and Mark Bennister draw a parallel between Johnson and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. They write that both Johnson and Berlusconi were removed from office for the same reasons, particularly their involvement in several scandals and their inability to do anything in the face of economic crisis.

He was a great communicator and election winner. He had, it was said, the Midas touch, and could reach out to voters beyond the normal range of a politician. His informal style, risqué jokes, and off-colour comments, which often tipped into racism and offence, gave him the flavour of an 'outsider'. Despite coming to power amid deep crisis, his sunny optimism promised change.

Love him or hate him, and plenty did both, he dominated all political discussion. One star-struck journalist praised his 'energy' and saw in his 'unprecedented majority' a 'huge opportunity to proclaim his vision'. Yet he ran aground amid a growing economic crisis and wave after wave of personal and moral scandals, as his retreat from reality and seeming pathological lying grew more pronounced.

The politician was, of course, Silvio Berlusconi, three-time Italian Prime Minister, and the star-struck journalist was a [young Boris Johnson](#) visiting his villa. Johnson wrote gushingly about Berlusconi's charisma and popularity, but doubted whether he could translate all of that into political change.

As others have pointed out before, Johnson resembled [Berlusconi in many ways](#). Now, at the end, the parallels are rather remarkable. Did Boris Johnson and Brexit actually '[Berlusconify](#)' Britain? The two leaders are exemplars of a certain type of unconventional '[celebrity politician](#)'. Both governed in crises they helped to create, whether Britain's Brexit or Italy's [Tangentopoli](#) corruption scandal. Electorally, Johnson and Berlusconi tied together – sometimes by force of their own personality – unwieldy voter coalitions across the north and south of their countries.

Their personality and style dominated political debate, while their rather woolly philosophy mixed traditional hard right policy and big spending projects. They even shared an obsession with promising bridges that never got built, whether Berlusconi's '[Messina Straits](#)' suspension bridge, or Johnson's non-existent bridges to France or [Northern Ireland](#), the latter of which would [run over](#) a million tonnes of 'unexploded munitions, plus chemical weapons and radioactive waste'.

Their style was enabled by the system itself. Berlusconi and Johnson stand as extreme examples of heavily presidentialised and personalised leaders within parliamentary systems. Such leaders, while not actually being presidents, follow the '[logic of behaving like them](#)'.

In the UK, there has long been discussion of the dominance of 'presidential' prime ministers, and a succession of leaders were seen to dominate the executive, their parties, and electoral competition. In Italy, until the late 1980s, prime ministers were little more than caretakers until a slew of institutional reforms, alongside electoral and media pressure, transformed the office by the 1990s. Berlusconi actually tried to create a [more presidential system in 2006](#), while Johnson and his supporters clearly believed he had [some form of personal mandate](#) from the people.

Silvio Berlusconi and Boris Johnson were 'presidentialised' in a particular way, as personalised leaders acting as a '[communicator in chief](#)' or '[mediatised leader](#)'. It was this supposed communicative power, tied to electoral success, which allowed the two leaders to dominate.

At the core of their communication strategies and political style was a claim that they were 'radical' 'outsiders' and populists, anti-elitists who, somehow, embodied 'the people'. This power was the essence of their election victories, as each election became about *them*. And win they did. Berlusconi won in 1994, again in 2001 and unexpectedly bounced back in 2008. Johnson was the key to winning the Brexit referendum and the 2019 majority was his victory.

Both leaders used their power to promise radical reform and change, whether a new 'Italian miracle' or 'levelling up'. They also used it, in high populist style, to divide their opponents, a rather unexpected coalition of left-wing snobs and immigrants according to Berlusconi, or remainers and enemies of the people's will to Johnson. Both leaders tried to reach across and beyond their parties with highly personalised promises: who can forget Johnson himself promising to 'get Brexit done' by driving [a JCB through a polystyrene wall](#)? Berlusconi [went even further](#), and signed a five-point 'contract with the Italian people' live on television with five promises, promising to not run again if he didn't achieve at least four.

Despite their presidential style and sweeping mandates, Johnson and Berlusconi are seen as [failures](#). Neither of their extensive political reforms happened. Berlusconi's 'presidential' plans were defeated in a 2006 referendum and Johnson's great Democracy Commission [just slowly fizzled out](#). You'll be surprised to know, dear reader, Berlusconi failed to meet his five contractual promises but then failed to leave politics. Even Johnson's greatest achievement, of 'getting Brexit done', may not be as final as his [January 2020 gong banging](#) made it appear. A [recent poll](#) found 51% believed Brexit was 'not done' [as opposed to just 21% who believed it was](#). Whether Brexit is 'finished' may vary if you are in London, Dover, Edinburgh or Belfast. Levelling up, too, remains [more of a Wikipedia entry than a policy](#).

The problem was that their presidential style rested on weak foundations. First, their communication skills [were their weakness as well as their strength](#). Their outlandish promises created a yawning gap between what was said and what happened, and their sunny dispositions hid an unwillingness to make decisions or face unpleasant facts. Johnson, when confronted with Covid-19, simply froze, and [a later report](#) concluded that the government's lack of response mixed 'fatalism', groupthink, and an ignorance of practice elsewhere. His [hesitation](#) on lockdowns and failure to protect care led to thousands of unnecessary deaths.

Second, the coalitions on which their presidential style rested proved fragile and volatile. Berlusconi's shifting coalition and Johnson's alliance between 'red wall' and traditional MPs began to fall apart as their popularity waned. Coalition allies and backbenchers turned on their 'presidents'. While Berlusconi was genuinely popular, Johnson's support was even more fragile, being relative, not absolute. Theresa May was [more popular than Johnson ever was](#), and his unpopularity [plumbed depths](#) May's never reached.

Thirdly, Johnson and Berlusconi's style sowed further division. Both regularly attacked the judges, politicians or journalists who dared question or challenge the 'people's will' they embodied as leader. Their attempts to evade and undermine democratic norms and rules generated opposition from courts, investigators, opponents and, finally, from those around them. Courts regularly struck down policy, whether it was Johnson's Prorogation or Rwanda flights, or Berlusconi's conflicts of interest.

Most of all, the focus on personality and personal power made everything about them, which bought victory but also scrutiny. Both leaders were, in the eyes of many, liars and corrupt. They entered power with huge questions over their suitability to govern and, once in office, they corrupted those around them (see [Johnson's 50 biggest scandals](#) or the extensive '[controversies surrounding Silvio Berlusconi](#)' page).

Formal investigations, journalistic inquiries and questions rolled around their premierships and came to dominate them, revealing a toxic mix of personal, political, and financial impropriety. The continual scandal eroded the trust of the public and alarmed their allies. Their presidential style and personalised politics were the roots of their success, but also the cause of their undoing.

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