

A 'dishonourable' honours list by Boris Johnson would further expose the fallacy of the UK's system of 'club government'



[Dave Richards](#) discusses some of the ways in which Boris Johnson has discredited the Office of the Prime Minister and warns that more may still lie ahead if the convention of a Prime Ministerial Resignation Honour's list is afforded him.

The psychodrama played out over recent months within the Conservative Party has finally, and not unexpectedly, culminated in the resignation of Boris Johnson. Parallels between the [Johnson and Trump](#) endgame are not uncommon, though the latter lost an election rather than being forced from office. Instead, in the modern era, Johnson's departure is the closest British politics has come to a [Nixonesque](#) moment: an incumbent leader forced to resign for traducing the most senior office of state through their own actions. [Anthony Seldon](#), the Harold Robbins of contemporary Prime Ministerial political biography, observes:

As Johnson showed, the rules and conventions governing and restraining the prime minister are highly malleable. The system has worked in the past because incumbents have chosen to behave in ways that didn't infringe convention. Some have now concluded the Johnson experience to be so damaging that a more formal codification to the rules and conventions needs to be written to ensure that never again will another prime minister act similarly.

Seldon is emphasising that, in the absence of a written constitution, the Office of Prime Minister is shaped by its holder's actions and, in Johnson's case, words. Indeed, the irony will not be lost on Johnson that his own downfall can partly be explained by what his political hero, Winston Churchill, euphemistically referred to as [terminological inexactitude](#). To that end, [Peter Osborne](#) has catalogued Johnson as a serial offender; one who was finally and [fatally called out](#) by the former Foreign Office Permanent Secretary Lord McDonald over the [Pincher debacle](#). This, when placed along actions that include the [unlawful proroguing](#) of Parliament, [partygate](#), the [Owen Paterson](#) affair, and the [resignation of two ethics advisers](#) highlight a long list of shortcomings by Johnson described by the constitutional historian Peter Hennessy as '[a bonfire of the decencies](#)'.

Johnson's actions have seen the resurrection of Hennessy's '[good chap theory of government](#)' to explain the practical workings of the [constitution](#): in the: '...absence of clear legal rules, the constitution relies on a shared understanding of what constitutes good behaviour in public and political life, and trust that people in positions of power will abide by that understanding'. [Mick Moran](#) and [David Marquand](#) provide similar, but more nuanced accounts, identifying a deeply embedded culture of 'club government' within UK politics. Its origins lie in the 19th century, the emergence of Parliamentary democracy and a mode of governance subsequently familiarly referred to as the [Westminster model of government](#). Moran [highlights](#) the way in which one of the original accounts of the Westminster Model by Marquand was used as:

...a synonym for the 'club model' ... The atmosphere of British government was that of a club, whose members trusted each other to observe the spirit of the club rules: the notion that the principles underlying the rules should be clearly defined and publicly proclaimed was profoundly alien.

It was grounded on the notion of 'gentlemanly honour' and all the social, hierarchical, and class characteristics of mid-19th century Britain such a concept evokes, taking inspiration from the gentleman clubs of Pall Mall. Theory then goes, Boris Johnson, Eton- and Oxford-educated – where he was also infamously a member of the exclusive Bullingdon Club – should have been well-versed in the codes of conduct expected of someone from his background. Yet, paradoxically, both [Simon Kuper](#) and [Michael Cockerell](#) suggest Johnson operates to his own set of rules, as a consequence of his own social background. Cockerell makes the case, quoting Johnson's housemaster at Eton: 'I think Boris honestly sees it as churlish of us not to regard him as an exception – one who should be free of the network of obligation that binds everyone else'. By abandoning any sense of obligation to the principles of 'club government', Johnson will be remembered for the almost complete breakdown in the conventions underpinning the Office of Prime Minister.

Returning to Seldon's critique, the unwritten nature of the UK constitution exposes this most powerful, yet malleable, post in British politics is highly susceptible to rogue design by its holder. It has not gone unnoticed that, as is the case with Johnson, his Cabinet was too supine, and in turn complicit, in going along with the [dissembling emanating from Number 10](#). In such circumstances, it should then fall to the Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, to act as a check on such activity. Yet Case, a surprise appointment by Johnson, is [seen by some](#) to have 'equivocated' in his duty to 'speak truth unto power'.

Under Johnson, the final act in discrediting the Office of Prime Minister may still lie ahead. At the point of announcing his resignation, the House of Commons is still undertaking an inquiry into whether Johnson misled Parliament. It is unclear what the outcome for Johnson will be if completed and the Committee finds against him. Such an eventuality brings into sharp focus the question of whether the convention of a [Prime Ministerial Resignation Honour's list](#) should still be afforded him. There is no modern-day precedent to inform such a decision.

Reports from Number Ten suggest Johnson is fully intent on forging ahead with a [list of over 20 peers](#), notably longer than both his recent predecessors, Cameron (8) and Theresa May (13), and despite fears of the number of [controversial names](#) which maybe included. A 'good chap' would be expected to forego this convention. As we have seen, Johnson has constantly sought to play by his own rule-book. In such circumstances, Harold Wilson's infamous Lavender-list will likely appear little more than a small footnote in history compared to Johnson's potentially 'dishonourable Honours' list

In 1974, Nixon received an [official Presidential pardon](#) from his successor Gerald Ford, a decision predominantly borne out of a desire to heal the divisive scars left over US politics by the Watergate affair. In the UK's Parliamentary system of government, no such parallel mechanism is available. Yet there is a pressing need to move on and repair what has been such an unseemly and corrosive period of government. A symbolic starting point would be for Johnson to forego the *entitlement* of an honours list. More crucially, there is the pressing need for an end to the UK culture of club government through the formal codifying of the UK's unwritten constitution.

About the Author



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