CHAPTER 1

The Bookend Prime Ministers

Walpole and Johnson

TÊTE-À-TÊTE OVER DINNER

Two well-nourished men, lit by a blaze of candles, are hunched over a celebration dinner in Downing Street for the 300th anniversary of the prime minister. They are engrossed in the conversation.

‘I always liked this room. It was my favourite.’
‘Not bad for a town pad above the shop.’
‘I never thought the job would last long, but you tell me that it has lasted 300 years? It surprises me.’ He surveys his host warily.
‘Indeed it has. They say I’m the 55th prime minister. Ha! Imagine that: me as prime minister!’
‘And what did you do to make yourself “prime minister”?’
‘A good question. Many people ask. I was Mayor of London for eight years, and then Foreign Secretary. Before, I wrote newspaper articles.’
‘The Mayor and journalism I know. But what’s a Foreign Secretary?’
‘He runs British foreign policy. Well, doesn’t actually run it. At least not now. I do all the interesting stuff.’
‘So when was it created?’
‘. . . A long time ago. Didn’t you have a Foreign Secretary?’
‘Certainly not. Increasingly I did it. You’ve kept the Americans under your thumb I trust?’
‘Not exactly.’
‘Don’t tell me you’ve let the buggers go.’
‘Bloody North,’ Johnson mutters under his breath. ‘Tell me, what did you do to become PM?’, rapidly changing the subject.
More Information

THE BOOKEND PRIME MINISTERS: WALPOLE AND JOHNSON

‘I saved the establishment of Great Britain when their greed threatened to overturn it all, returning order and good governance – of a kind. It helped that almost all those at Court who disfavoured me managed to disgrace themselves.’

‘Ah yes, the South Sea Bubble, I learned about that at school - at Eton.’

‘You went to Eton? So did I.’

‘Yes. A King’s Scholar, actually,’ the host boasts, swallowing the last of his Beef Wellington with a satisfied burp.

‘So was I. Destined for the Church, I was. At Eton I studied in Lower School, then Upper School, rebuilt shortly before I arrived.’

‘Mehercle! I was taught there too.’

‘I boarded in Long Chamber.’

‘So did I!’

‘I ate in College Hall.’

‘As did I!’

‘I prayed in College Chapel and exercised in School Yard.’

‘Ehem!’

Two British prime ministers, 300 years apart, nurtured in the same buildings and spaces.

The common ground of their alma mater established, both men start to relax.

‘So what keeps you awake at night?’ the older man asks, adjusting his wig.

‘The economy. I need money to “level up” the north.’

‘Level up? I never went to the north. Barbarians. Have you tried taxing cider or putting up duties on imports from the American colonies? Sorry yes you said: you lost them. Bloody North indeed. What else troubles you?’

‘Scotland. Nightmare. Damned nationalists want to break up the Union. Disaster.’

‘We’d just unified Parliaments when I became the First Minister. The Jacobite rogues rose up in 1715 and tried to take over the country.’

‘That’s what the bloody EU have been trying to do for years!’

‘The EU?’

‘Yes, Europe. But I’ve fixed that now. We are free of them at last. Sovereignty reclaimed! Freedom to do what I will!’

‘You think so? I tried to keep them on the other side of the Channel too. Though I had a German as my monarch who tried to be at the heart of everything. What else vexes you?’

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‘The epidemic ravaging our country. Crapulentus sum!’

‘London was still suffering from the plague in my years. Then the Great Plague of Marseilles spread to England in my first year.’

‘I nearly died of the illness: touch and go it was. I thought my number was up.’

‘I nearly died in my first year too! The crows hovered! The dastardly Carteret – bastard! – was priming himself to take over. Damned business; Destouches, the French ambassador, gossiped everywhere about it.’

‘Never trust the French,’ the host replies, rustling his unkempt blond hair knowingly.

There’s a knock at the door. ‘Are you coming up soon? It’s very late,’ says a young woman.

‘In time, in time.’ The door is closed, noisily.

‘Who is that beauty?’

‘Carrie.’

‘Your wife?’

‘Not exactly. Fiancée.’

‘Ah-ha… well I had my mistress with me, Maria. 26 years my junior. Her?’

‘Carrie is 24 years younger.’

‘Aha,’ says the guest with a new admiration. ‘One needs one’s distractions. It’s hard being the man in charge,’ he continues. ‘Worst of it is that people are always plotting to get rid of you.’

‘Touché! I got rid of my man next door early on, but no sooner had the new one arrived than he was after my office. They are the worst.’

‘The man next door?’

‘Chancellor of the Exchequer. Second Lord of the Treasury. He wants to control the money. Cheek. How was yours?’

‘I was the Chancellor of the Exchequer.’

‘You controlled the money?’

‘I did!’

‘Lucky you. But you didn’t have to deal with the ghastly people in the press like I do: they’re as bad as my MPs.’

‘I had a livid sewer thrown at me daily from writers, journalists and cartoonists. So Parliament tough, too?’
'I never go there. Apart from when I am told I have to.'
'I had no option. I was Leader of the House of Commons.'
'Good grief! We are told the PM’s job has become steadily more powerful. *You* weren’t supposed to have had any real power.’
'Really? I could do largely what I wanted. Those unconvinced by my rhetoric would soon change their minds with a few payments from the Secret Service Fund.’
'No pushback on your leadership from the Lords?’
'Pussycats.’
'Judges?’
'Powerless pontificators.’
'Business?’
'In my pocket.’
'Devolved nations?’
'What?’
'Municipal mayors?’
'Never heard of them.’
'The bloody Treasury?’
'Look, my friend, I ran the Treasury.’
'The Tory Party?’
'A troublesome lot, but in opposition. They were always awkward.’
A sigh. He drains another glass of *Château La Fite*.
'Look, my friend, you have to understand. I ran the government. I oversaw Parliament. I dispensed patronage. I spent the nation’s finances, ran the elections, I kept us out of wars.’
'I’m exhausted contemplating it.’
'Oh it wasn’t so bad. There were real compensations too.’
'Such as?’
'Power.’
'I’d like some more of that.’
'And an abundance of food.
'Yes.’
'Fine wines.’
'Yes, please.’
'Women and money.’
'Well . . . ’
'Weeks away in the country, quite cut off from Downing Street: letters took two days to reach Norfolk. Bliss!'

Another sigh . . . The older man shoots a look of sympathy at his host.

So we leave both men, talking late into the night.

Just an imaginary conversation, or is there any truth in their remarks? Despite the great differences in the office, and the periods in which they held it, are the similarities more striking than the differences? Let us now explore these questions.

Striking certainly are the similarities between the two men who occupied the office at the beginning and end of our time. Both came to power on opportunistic responses to national crises: for Walpole, the South Sea Bubble, where he posed as the defender of the political establishment against rampant greed and speculation, while for Johnson it was Brexit, capitalising on the widespread national frustration with the stumbling of his predecessor, Theresa May (54th, 2016–19), and offering a bold way through the impasse.

Walpole and Johnson were high-stakes chancers, revelling in their coup de théâtre: for Walpole had protected many of those who had let the South Sea Company get out of control, up to and including the king, adopting the ‘skreen system’, described as ‘an extraordinary incidence of political nerve’.

For Johnson, it was challenging the establishment head on in forcing through the Brexit vote in Parliament, and his bravura in calling a make-or-break general election in December 2019.

Both prime ministers needed luck, and each enjoyed more than his fair share of it: for Walpole, many of his rivals for power were damaged by the South Sea scandal, like Charles Stanhope and John Aislabie, or died, like James Stanhope and James Craggs. For Johnson, Brexit undid those who had previously blocked his path to power, David Cameron (53rd, 2010–16), George Osborne, and, eventually, Theresa May.

Historians have highlighted the changes to the office of prime minister since 1721, and this book examines these in depth. But is the job that Johnson is doing in 2021 one that Walpole would have recognised, which justifies it being considered the same office, and how do their powers compare?
Thursday 3 April 1721 was an unremarkable day in political London. No fanfare or ceremony surrounded the announcement by George I of his appointment of Walpole as First Lord of the Treasury, and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Merely a bald paragraph appeared in the press announcing: ‘We are inform’d that a Commission is preparing, appointing Mr Walpole first Lord Commissioner of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer.’ The appointment was not unexpected. Eight months earlier in June 1720, Walpole had been made Paymaster-General with the understanding he would become First Lord of the Treasury at the earliest opportunity. But 1721 was not seen by contemporaries as in any respect a transformational year, like 1776 in the United States, or 1789 in France.

More public notice came when George II, who succeeded his father in 1727, offered Walpole Number 10 Downing Street as a personal gift. Initially he declined the offer, but later accepted it on the condition that it should ‘be & remain for the use & habitation of the first Commissioner of his Majesty’s Treasury for the time being’. The Gentleman’s Magazine recorded: ‘Thursday, 20th July, 1732. Sir Robert Walpole, being an Inhabitant of the Parish of St Margaret’s at Westminster, by having obtained a Grant of Count Bothmar’s house in St James’s-Park.’ Sitting tenants, Mr Chicken and Mr Scroop, had first to move out, and extensive work was carried out on the shoddy building, before it was ready for Walpole and his family to move into three years later. The London Daily Post duly recorded in September 1735: ‘Yesterday the Right Hon. Sir Robert Walpole with his Lady and Family removed from their House in St James’s Square to his new House adjoining to the Treasury in St James’s Park.’ No one at the time could have foreseen that this move would prove of so much historic significance in defining the office and home of the prime minister. The acquisition further marked out Walpole’s position against his other colleagues as the recipient of the king’s special favour. No other minister was afforded the privilege of a central London home, so close to Westminster and the royal palace of St James’s, from where George I and II conducted much of their business.

The lack of excitement surrounding Walpole’s appointment contrasts with the high drama and international media hysteria which greeted
Boris Johnson’s meticulously choreographed appointment as prime minister on 24 July 2019. On the day before, it had been announced that he had beaten his final competitor, Jeremy Hunt, and became leader of the Conservative Party by a margin of 66 to 34 per cent.

May spoke for her final time in the House of Commons as prime minister the following day at Prime Minister’s Questions. At 2.30 p.m. she delivered her departing speech in the street outside Number 10, arriving at Buckingham Palace twenty minutes later to resign formally to the monarch, Elizabeth II. At 3.10pm Johnson arrived at Buckingham Palace to ‘kiss hands’ with the queen, when she constitutionally invited him to become her fourteenth prime minister. For those few minutes before, Britain had no prime minister, and all executive power had been invested in her. At 3.55pm Johnson spoke outside Downing Street, both to the crowd of journalists and to the watching world, delivering the message: ‘The time has come to act, to take decisions, to give strong leadership and change the country for the better’, and he pledged that Britain would leave the EU on 31 October 2019, ‘No ifs, no buts.’

Was Walpole given instructions by the monarch? No records remain. History cannot tell us what words passed between George I and Walpole on 3 April 1721, if any did, nor indeed will we know what precise words Elizabeth said to Johnson on his appointment 298 years later, beyond his indiscretion that she told him ‘I don’t know why anyone would want the job.’

We know better what the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, the custodian of the British constitution, said to Johnson less than an hour later. The two men had conversed in the brief interval between Johnson’s election as Conservative leader and his appointment as prime minister, to talk about the contents of a letter Sedwill wrote him, which opened: ‘Tomorrow you will become the 55th prime minister of the United Kingdom.’ It laid out the range of responsibilities, the main choices and decisions, that he would have to take early on in office. The official carefully outlined the principal national security issues, explaining what his roles as First Lord of the Treasury and Minister of the Civil Service entailed. When composing his letter, Sedwill had searched out the missive that his predecessor as Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, had sent to Theresa May when she herself became prime minister in July 2016. Much was similar.
The secret Cabinet Office briefing expanded on the challenges he might expect in his first 100 days. It assured Johnson that the Civil Service was behind him and would give their very best to him. It branched out into Johnson’s ‘war powers’, including his oversight as Chair of the National Security Council of the Intelligence Services, the National Command Authority, the nuclear deterrent, and the engagement protocols for 9/11-style attacks. These, and other duties it explained, were the prerogative functions he would be exerting on behalf of the monarch.

Johnson had not anticipated such a long and grave list. The briefing advised him that he would need to work closely with the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the government was to succeed. He paused at the long list of economic challenges, not an area of expertise. Nor was bureaucracy, so he flicked quickly through the paragraphs on his responsibility for the Civil Service, and for its top 200 appointees. He was more interested in his options for appointing Cabinet, and his choices on the structure of Cabinet committees. He perked up when reading about options for securing Brexit and Global Britain, the risks surrounding no deal, and preparing the Queen’s Speech. At last, the moment he craved had arrived.

When Johnson returned from the Palace, Sedwill greeted him in Number 10’s entrance hall before escorting him down the long corridor to the Cabinet Room. Then, he passed through that famous room into the adjacent office that has served as a study for prime ministers since Blair. Sedwill and he were joined by senior civil servants Peter Hill and Helen MacNamara, as well as members of his own team, including Eddie Lister, Lee Cain, and Dominic Cummings. Mark Spencer, whom Johnson had earmarked for Chief Whip, soon joined them.

In the study, he at last sat down for a cup of tea and his first meeting as prime minister. They used the Cabinet Office letter as an agenda. The civil servants told him how the prime minister, more than any other member of government, can personally shape the way they operate in office, because unlike other Cabinet positions, which have a full job description, his new job is much less prescribed. The PM, he was told, can operate in a loose way, as Ronald Reagan did as president of the United States during the 1980s, or could be very interventionist, like Gordon Brown (52nd, 2007–10).
Johnson then discussed his schedule for the next few days, which would focus on appointing his Cabinet. Other key duties would follow, including defence and security briefings, and the writing of ‘Letters of Last Resort’ to the commanders of Britain’s nuclear-armed submarines, which provide instructions in the circumstances of the total destruction of British political and military command. Calls from world leaders, including those of Britain’s NATO allies, needed to be placed in order.

As these discussions continued, in the study for his first time, while going through his duties as PM, observers saw the full weight of the office begin to dawn on Johnson. Before, it had been a dream, a lifelong ambition. Now, the heavy responsibility seemed all too real.

**THE INHERITANCE IN 1721 AND 2019**

Walpole and Johnson both came to office at moments of great national importance. For the former, financial consolidation was imperative after the Nine Years’ War (1688–97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), described by former Treasury official Nick Macpherson as ‘the most expensive war Britain had fought to date, which more than doubled the national debt’. By 1719, it had reached £50 million, before the South Sea Bubble further jeopardised the national finances. Negotiating new tariff arrangements was an early claim on Walpole’s time, as was finding a balance between the interests of the City of London and British companies. His task was to protect British business from foreign competition through a complex new tariff system, while ensuring that the tax burden was spread more fairly.

The economy was equally central to Johnson. His most urgent task was securing Britain’s exit from the EU with a trading relationship that would support British business and the City. Achieving a fairer distribution of economic activity across the nation, particularly in the Midlands and the North, where many traditionally Labour constituencies voted Tory for the first time in the 2019 general election, was another central concern. As an official said:
The impossible office?

Anthony Seldon, Assisted by Jonathan Meakin, Illias Thom

Excerpt

More Information

There were two very big issues that Johnson kept returning to from the outset, which saw his energy levels shoot right up: they were Brexit and ‘levelling up’ which encapsulated his view about what a modern Toryism was all about, socially as well as geographically.\(^\text{16}\)

The Union was of existential importance to both prime ministers. While Walpole faced the Jacobite threat – supporters of the exiled Stuarts who dreamed of overthrowing the Hanoverians, and lingering discontent among Scots following the Union with England in 1707 – Johnson faced a different threat to the Union, not as violent, but no less serious. Walpole’s task was to maintain Scotland securely in the Union; Johnson’s task was to ensure that it didn’t leave the Union entirely, a challenge made greater by Brexit and the SNP administration in Edinburgh pressing for a second independence referendum to reverse the result of September 2014. To help combat the risk, which he knew would prove fatal to his premiership, Johnson appointed himself the first Minister for the Union: ‘To ensure that all of government is acting on behalf of the United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales’.\(^\text{17}\)

Walpole came to office without any great relish for foreign policy, imagining he could leave it to other ministers. The task fell principally to Lord Townshend as ‘Northern Secretary’ (1721–30), who shared it with the ‘Secretary for the Southern Department’. Walpole, though, found himself, as did his successors as prime minister, increasingly sucked into it. His claim to be undisputed First Minister became much stronger with the resignation of Townshend in May 1730. Likewise, Johnson too came to office with little relish for foreign affairs, partly due to his less than happy period as Foreign Secretary (2016–18). He, too, found himself getting drawn in once PM, finding the top global table the prime minister sits at much more congenial than the Foreign Secretary’s lot. Walpole’s foreign policy inclination was to promote peace with Europe at all costs, one of many stances he shared with his Tory adversaries. He remained pragmatically pacifist: he ‘resisted the calls for belligerence to the very end. His defeat on the issue [over the War of Jenkins’ Ear] signalled . . . a decline in his political power’, wrote Reed Browning.\(^\text{18}\) Johnson equally came to power seeing his mission after Britain left the European Union as building amity and trade with foreign powers.