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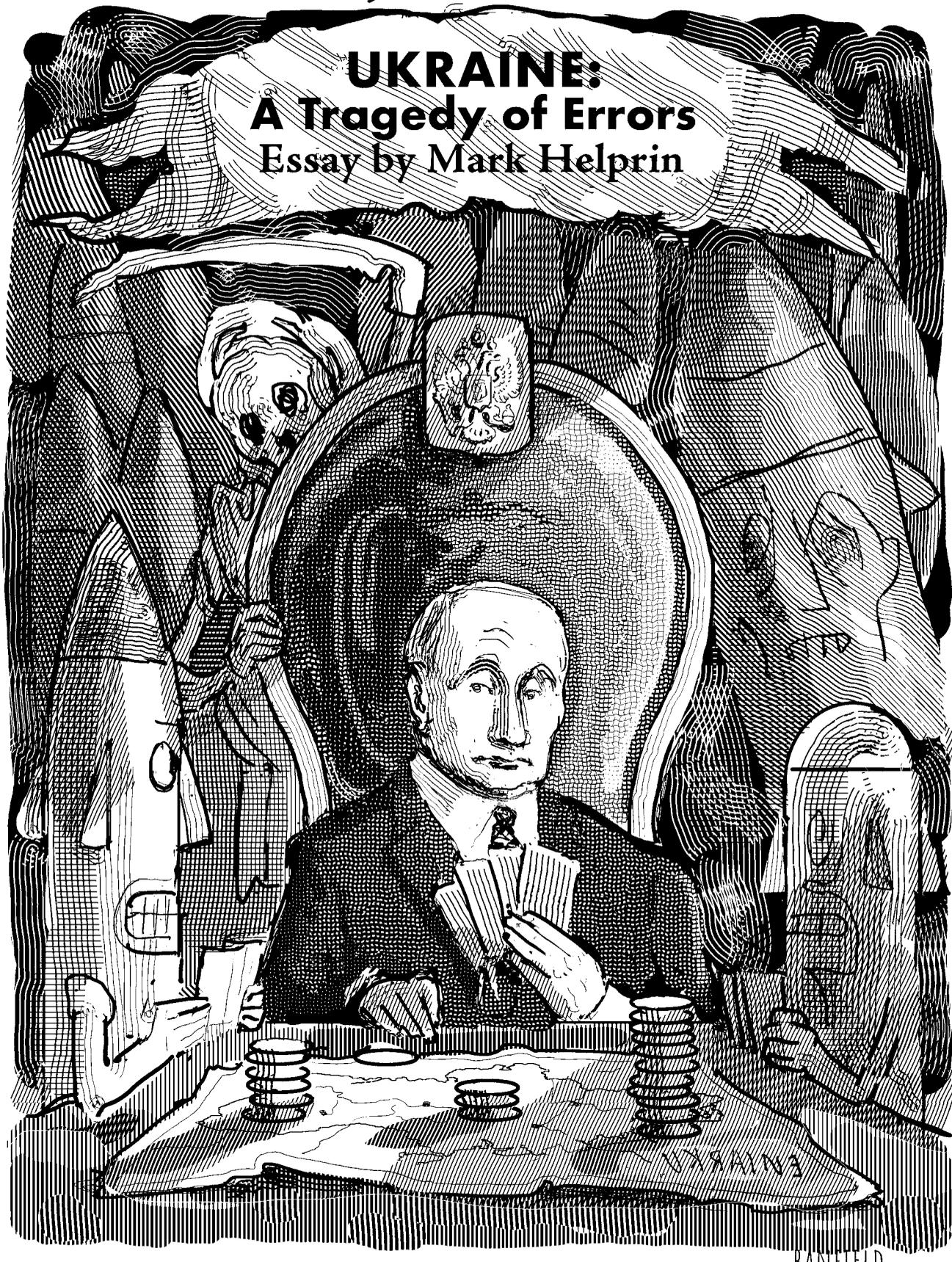
Randy E.  
Barnett:  
**Adrian  
Vermeule's  
Con Law**

Lucas E.  
Morel:  
**The Black  
Man's President**

Jeffrey H.  
Anderson:  
**Looming,  
Dooming Debt**

Norman  
Podhoretz:  
**The Anti-  
American Left**

Diana  
Schaub:  
**Why We  
Are Restless**



**UKRAINE:  
A Tragedy of Errors**  
Essay by Mark Helprin

William  
Voegeli:  
**Never Trump  
vs. MAGA**

Christopher  
Caldwell:  
**BoJo Looks  
for His Mojo**

Allen C.  
Guelzo:  
**Alan Taylor's  
Bleak America**

Daniel J.  
Mahoney:  
**The 1619  
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

## BORIS JOHNSON'S PARTY POLITICS

*Is the prime minister who saved Brexit headed for the exit?*



*Carrie and Boris Johnson*

BRITISH CITIZENS LEAFING THROUGH their newspapers on April 1 this year would have been reminded that local elections were looming, that Vladimir Putin's missiles were continuing to strike Ukrainian cities, and that inflation was eroding wealth at a clip unseen since the 1970s. Next to such matters, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's attempts to explain his way out of another picayune controversy of "wokeness" probably went unnoticed. Since 2018, the British government had been committed to banning "conversion therapy," as detractors call any attempt to change a patient's sexual orientation, though no law had been passed to that effect. In a sign his government was tacking right, Johnson withdrew that commitment. When an uproar arose among gay groups, Johnson backed down. His reversal upset more traditional conservatives, who convinced Johnson to permit conversion therapy for transgender persons. But isn't transgenderism itself a form of conversion therapy? It was an odd story, but no one who has been paying attention to

British politics would have mistaken it for an April Fools' joke. It's just the way the British government works now.

Johnson has somehow acquired a reputation as one of the most right-wing politicians in the world. To Britain's administrative elites, for whom the word "populist" is a slur, he is an arch-populist, almost a British Donald Trump. That is because he was the most prominent mainstream politician to back Britain's secession from the European Union in the successful 2016 "Brexit" referendum. When those same administrative elites succeeded in stalling Brexit for three years through one administrative maneuver after another, it was Johnson who purged Brexit obstructors from his divided, demoralized party and forced an election in 2019, in which he rallied the Conservatives to their largest share of the vote since Margaret Thatcher came to power in the 1970s. Britain could not have left the E.U. without him.

But Johnson was never a run-of-the-mill British Tory. He rose through the ranks not as a country squire or an entrepreneur but

as mayor of London, a hub of finance where white Britons make up well under half the population. Balancing conservatism at the national level with progressivism in Britain's global cities was long a strength of Johnson's. It isn't now, though. The enemies he made in his fight against the European Union want him out, and they are passionate and implacable. The comrades who rallied behind him during Brexit are beginning to worry that Johnson himself is, to use a favorite expression of Thatcher's, going wobbly.

In a special election in Shropshire last December, brought about by a lobbying scandal, voters shifted against the Conservatives by 34 points and gave to the Liberal Democrat Party a seat that the Tories had held for 115 years. The party was running 8 points behind the Labour Party when the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out. Had it not, Johnson might well have found himself out of power before the crocuses came up.

Johnson's troubles are a lesson with broad application elsewhere. In almost every coun-

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try the reform agendas of “populist” politicians are quite popular. Such politicians frequently win elections. But even when they do, they have few weapons to cut through a political system and a judicial system that have been ingeniously fortified against reform.

### The Strategist Who Got It Done

JOHNSON'S PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES have not helped. To understand his political difficulty, one needs to look at the conflict between his advisers and his third wife, and the inability of the publicly-ebullient-but-privately-diffident Johnson to mediate successfully between the two. Johnson's entourage has been called a “court” because he faces a classic problem of political systems: The prime minister, like pre-Enlightenment kings, has two “bodies.” He is a political leader (the body politic) but he is subject to passions and prejudices like any other guy (the body personal). Some of Johnson's enemies fear for Brexit if he is ousted. Others fear for Brexit if he is not.

The 2016 Brexit campaign was an archetypal populist victory. It drew on discontents of several kinds: about social dislocations shaped by government policy, such as immigration and de-industrialization; about constitutional usurpations, such as conferring on European Union law supremacy over British law; about matters of emotion and prestige that were sometimes related to these social/constitutional ills, like London financial elites' perceived contempt for idle and undereducated laborers in the blighted manufacturing and mining towns of the north.

Because the grievances were so diverse, the anti-E.U. campaign broke into two broad wings. The more proletarian one was led by the longtime head of the UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage, a beer-loving loudmouth who may be the most important British politician of the past generation. A sometime guest speaker in Washington at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Farage made jingoistic arguments about the crookedness of Brussels, the sacredness of the pound sterling, and the dangers of mass immigration. Farage's followers accounted for the energy behind Brexit. But they could not have managed it alone.

It was Vote Leave, the official Brexit organization, that rallied the more polished voters in the anti-E.U. wing of the Tories, prominent among them Johnson and cabinet minister Michael Gove. Vote Leave was led by Gove's former aide Dominic Cummings, a bookish, reclusive, Russophone systems analyst who was also the most gifted British political

strategist of his time. Cummings's team made the appeals that Farage's could not: about the philosophical underpinnings of sovereignty, as well as the ways Britain could benefit economically from breaking its ties to Brussels and developing a new trade regime for itself. But when Brexit triumphed in June 2016, Cummings's work was only beginning.

Why? Because another thing that made the Brexit struggle a populist archetype was the power of the people it promised to dislodge. The beneficiaries of British membership in the E.U.—mostly residents of London, Scotland, and the university towns—were a minority, but a compact and influential minority. No sooner had Brexit passed than they began placing juridical and regulatory obstacles in its way. The lackluster negotiators appointed by Conservative prime minister Theresa May, who had not backed Brexit, agreed to a protocol whereby a post-Brexit U.K. would surrender some of its sovereign rights over Northern Ireland. The anti-Brexit Speaker of the House, John Bercow, himself brought to power by Conservatives, broke centuries-old precedent to allow parliamentary minorities to control the order of debate, and stymie the Brexiters.

Meanwhile, the progressive investment manager Gina Miller won a judgment of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom that Parliament would have to vote *again* in order for Brexit to become law. This Supreme Court, wholly alien to the British constitutional tradition, was installed by Gordon Brown's Labour government in 2009 for the express purpose of using American-style judicial review to override British laws that were incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. In a divided Conservative Party, bringing Brexit over the newly constructed hurdle of a parliamentary vote seemed impossible. Certain Conservatives began to waver.

Among Conservatives, Cummings alone understood the tactics of litigation, scheduling, and regulatory misdirection by which Brexit was being undermined. He alone understood what needed to be done to get it enacted. It was Cummings who in 2019 crafted the incoming Prime Minister Johnson's bold strategy for forcing a fresh election. In December, Tories got their landslide, winning 365 of 650 seats. A few weeks later Parliament voted, 358-234, to take Britain out of the E.U. And it was Cummings who, once Brexit was squared away, devised an agenda for destroying all the still-existing administrative traps through which the E.U. had ensnared the British government and compromised its sovereignty. Ultimately, this might mean repealing the

Human Rights Act that Prime Minister Tony Blair passed in the late 1990s. It might mean suspending the role of the European Court of Human Rights in British life. It might mean getting rid of the country's Supreme Court.

Naturally, the multiparty opposition made it a top priority to oust Dominic Cummings. In the early days of COVID, there was a drumbeat in the left-wing press to shame Johnson into firing Cummings for having driven to his parents' house with his wife and son during the COVID lockdowns. Cummings was so important to the government that he was untouchable, but not for long.

### Symonds Says

IN 2018, AT A TIME WHEN BREXIT STILL appeared immovably obstructed, Johnson and his second wife, Marina Wheeler, separated. When he moved into the official prime ministerial residence at 10 Downing Street the following year, it was with a girlfriend, Carrie Symonds, daughter of a long-time journalist for the *Economist*, Matthew Symonds, who now directs the Larry Ellison Foundation. The couple announced their engagement in February 2020, two months before the birth of their first child, and married in the spring of 2021, two months before the birth of their second.

Carrie was a communications director of the Conservative Party, but she belonged to a different wing of the party from the yahoos who had rallied behind her new husband to “Get Brexit Done.” More importantly she belonged to a different generation. Boris, born in 1964, is pushing 60, and remembers the trade-union-dominated Britain of the 1970s that Margaret Thatcher was brought to power to smash. Carrie, born in 1988, is in her early thirties; by the time she graduated from the University of Warwick, Tony Blair was long gone and Barack Obama already in the White House, impressing then-prime minister David Cameron and other cosmopolitan Tories as a model for their party.

Carrie had worked early on for Zac (now Lord) Goldsmith, the wealthy environmentalist. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals named her a “Person of the Year” in 2020. In the aftermath of last fall's sudden U.S. flight from Afghanistan, she was accused of commandeering space on a military transport plane to evacuate dozens of stray pets. (Now *that's* a “rescue dog.”) At last year's Tory party conference in Manchester she delivered a speech for LGBT+ rights. Her husband's priorities seemed to be changing: in mid-2020 a Michelle-Obama-style strategy against child obesity; in April of this year, the



passage through Parliament of a bill to recognize “animal sentience” under British law.

From almost the moment Johnson was elected, Carrie clashed with his advisers over political matters large and small. In 2020, when Johnson was hospitalized with COVID, she began refurbishing the prime ministerial flat next door to 10 Downing Street, a project that would run over £100,000—against the £30,000 prime ministers are allotted for such refurbishments. Cummings says he warned Johnson that it would be illegal to defray the costs by hitting up political donors. She was said to covet the American title “First Lady,” and *First Lady* is the title of a hostile biography published this spring by the Tory pollster Michael (Lord) Ashcroft. “First Lady” would be a controversial title in Britain, because it describes the wife of the president in his capacity as head of state, not in his capacity as head of government. In that sense, Britain already has a First Lady. Her name is Elizabeth II.

Johnson’s advisers began rolling their eyes at Carrie. They vied to invent invidious or demeaning nicknames, from Carrie Antoinette to Princess Nut Nut. But she had the stronger hand. The winter before last, when Johnson announced the promotion of Cummings’s ally Lee Cain to become his new chief of staff, Carrie reportedly put her foot down.

Cain resigned less than a day later, and shortly thereafter, Cummings did, too.

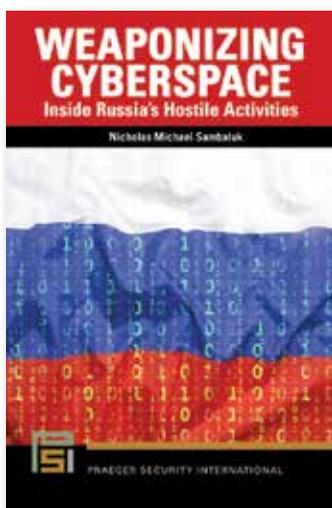
### Black Lives, Red Wall

IT IS A BAD TIME TO BE PICKING FIGHTS with the conservative, pro-Brexit part of the party. In the two years since the George Floyd riots, the ideology known as “wokeness” has spread around the world. Europe’s elites, its old center-Left parties, its administrators, have tended to embrace it. So have its cultural institutions. Walk into the history section of a British bookstore and you will find that a lot of the shelf space that two years ago was devoted to the Blitz and the Long Parliament and Henry VIII’s wives is now given over to Afro-British books: Peter Fryer’s classic *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984), David Olusoga’s *Black and British* (2016), an anthology called *100 Great Black Britons* (2020), Renni Eddo-Lodge’s *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), and volume upon volume about the *HMT Empire Windrush*, the ship that brought the first West Indian settlers to London on June 22, 1948, now commemorated as “Windrush Day.”

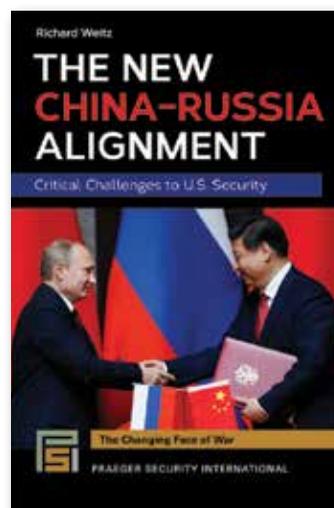
Wokeness is less popular among the working classes, to put it mildly, and Britain had already seen a sea change in the socio-economic

identity of its political parties. The 2019 British elections were a bit like the 2016 American ones. Suddenly the Labour Party represented no laborers at all—at least not those you’d think of as the traditional wool-cap-wearing whites of Britain’s provincial cities. Armed with Cummings’s strategy, Johnson won a landslide among the old working classes convinced, first, that all of the windfall gains from the outsourcing of their jobs had gone into the pockets of the already rich; second, that Brexit was a potential means of restoring balance and justice to Britain’s economy and society; and, third, that only Boris could achieve Brexit. The Tories’ new voters were more and more from England’s northern industrial heartland, not from the financial capital of London. These northern constituencies used to be considered the Labour Party’s “Red Wall”—a bloc so proletarian that no political change could shake it. Their shift to Tories looks like a watershed—perhaps comparable to Democrats’ seizure in 1992 of California, reliably Republican until then. On the night of the Brexit referendum, the moment when it became clear that Britain would indeed leave the European Union came at 1:30 in the morning, when England’s former shipbuilding capital, Sunderland, near Newcastle, voted for Brexit with 61%, and the pound sterling lost 3% of its value in markets across Asia.

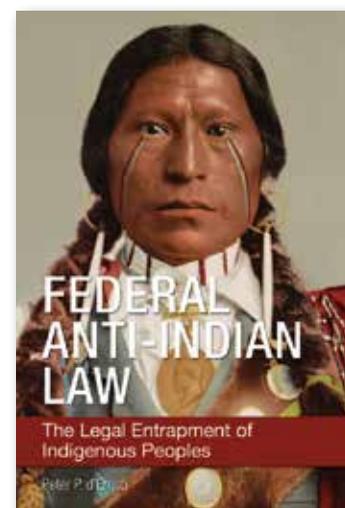
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It is a strange fate for Johnson to be wedded to the northern working classes, for he is the very opposite of a traditional workingman's politician. He was the dashing product of Eton; Balliol College, Oxford; and London daily journalism, a rather dissolute milieu when he started out at the arch-conservative *Daily Telegraph* in the 1980s. Johnson was grand—Princess Diana's brother was one of his best friends. He was also extremely intelligent, excelling at classics, and can still, even today, wow literary festival audiences by reciting long passages of Homer in Attic Greek, and press conferences by singing the "Ode to Joy" in German. His first beat was Brussels, the European Union's capital. His specialty was lampooning the pomposity and regulatory illogic of the continent's bureaucrats. His journalism might be compared to that of Christopher Hitchens—valuable less for its punctilious accuracy than for its literary bravura. It was natural, if not predictable, that he would wind up editor of the conservative weekly the *Spectator* at the turn of the century. He first ran for Parliament as a Tory in 2001. Back then, it was a staple of campaign rhetoric to throw up billboards reading: "You paid your taxes...now where are the hospitals?" The joke around the *Spectator* offices was that Johnson's constituency of Henley, home of the celebrated Oxford-Cambridge regatta, was so posh that he could put up billboards asking: "You paid your taxes...now where are the tennis courts?"

Despite the growing importance of the English north in his electoral base, Johnson has little affinity for the region. As mayor of London in 2012, he made the case for sucking more financial resources out of the working-class hinterland to invest in metropolitan London. "My argument to the Treasury," he said, "is that a pound spent in Croydon [in suburban Kent] is far more of value to the country from a strict utilitarian calculus than a pound spent in Strathclyde [in Scotland]. Indeed, you will generate jobs and growth in Strathclyde far more effectively if you invest in Hackney or Croydon or other parts of London."

There are promising electoral possibilities for Tories in this realignment. Political scientist Matthew Goodwin of the University of Kent has argued that geography is on Johnson's side, since the winners of globalization tend to cluster in cities where their votes disappear into intra-district supermajorities—similar to what happens in America's heavily Democratic states. There are certain interesting Trumpian effects, too, as ethnic minorities have begun to drift into the Tory party, for reasons on which no consensus has emerged.

### Caught in the Pincers

AND YET JOHNSON SUDDENLY FINDS himself at risk of getting caught in the political pincers. British conservatives sometimes refer to the BBC, the publishing houses, the universities, the non-profit foundations, and the rest of the London-based cultural elite as "The Blob." Whatever you choose to call it, this group views Johnson's victory in Brexit as a betrayal for which no atonement will ever be possible. That would not ordinarily be such a problem for him. The Labour Party is in disarray, stands for nothing identifiable, and has scant popular support. The Liberal Democrats last prospered in the wake of the Iraq war and have no middle-class grievance to jolt them back into influence.

Johnson's problem is that his woke young wife has captured the government for transgender rights and "animal sentience" in a way that risks turning off his electoral base. Cummings, in his Substack column and his public appearances, has taken to referring to John-

**Johnson was beginning  
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politician can have:  
bad luck.**

son as "the Trolley," the English word for a shopping cart. The prime minister, according to Cummings, has become a mere receptacle without means of propulsion or guidance, into which Carrie and her trans/tree-hugger/hands-up-don't-shoot friends toss whichever new ideological product provokes their whimsy.

Without the protection of his conservative base, Johnson becomes a tempting target. The Labour functionary Andrew (now Lord) Adonis, a leader of the forces that would like to reverse Brexit and bring Britain back into the European Union, tweeted in January: "If Boris goes, Brexit goes."

That was at the beginning of "Partygate," an opportunistic investigative blitzkrieg meant to topple Johnson. Armed with revelations from Cummings and other ostracized and fallen Tories about the government's conduct at the height of COVID two years ago, Labour politicians began to suggest that Johnson's policies at the time had led him into criminal conduct. At first sight this looked like it would be a hard sell. COVID took its toll in Britain, as elsewhere,

but it occasioned relatively less disruption. Last December Johnson permitted unrestricted travel—partly because the country could survive going home for Christmas, but also surely because his government might not survive a ban on it. His strategy paid off. The lockdowns were never fully restored, COVID has not resurfaced with any particular intensity, and in late February 2022, when urban Americans were still being required to swaddle up almost everywhere, British masking requirements were dropped altogether.

There were other reasons Johnson could expect to be cut some slack on COVID. He himself had caught a nasty case that very nearly killed him in the first days of the epidemic. Britain's Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine was a success, even if the European Union ran a propaganda campaign against it. Rather like the Johnson & Johnson shot in the United States, it was highly effective as a vaccine but sabotaged as a product.

Unsurprisingly, 10 Downing Street was one of the buildings where routines were least disturbed during COVID. At the highest levels of government, people kept working through-out. Johnson's staffers sometimes gathered after work in the back garden. In June 2022 there was a going-away party for a departing staffer, and the following day someone threw a birthday party for Johnson himself. At one party, Johnson was photographed holding a beer. In such events, which took place mostly between May and November 2020, the opposition sees a deplorable lack of rigor in obeying lockdown rules. In fact, it sees grounds for toppling the government.

To anyone outside of Britain, of course, this sounds absurd. But Johnson's foes have managed to rile up a lot of influential people. The lockdowns in Britain were, such people reason, severe. As in many countries, lockdowns limited what people did in their own homes and with whom they could do it. This was an indignity for the liberty-loving British. At the time, Johnson invoked the venerable sacrifices of the Blitz—the rationing, the blackouts—to keep people from grumbling. When people discovered that the government, in a way, had not actually believed in the fears that it was stoking, there was bitterness.

Johnson submitted to an investigation of his parties. Certain disgruntled Tories began to vent their rage at him. Late last winter, former prime minister Theresa May, whose humiliating failure to secure Brexit had brought Johnson to power in the first place, mocked him in Parliament during prime minister's questions.

Leading Tories positioned themselves to replace Johnson should he be ousted. The



chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, was the favorite of younger Tories. Barely 40, the Southampton-born son of Indian immigrants, a prize-winning product of Oxford and Stanford Business School, he was a natural for the post of chancellor, which involves budgeting and wringing taxes out of people. In April, however, it was revealed that his wife, the daughter of a billionaire, had dodged as much as £20 million in taxes by declaring herself a foreign resident, and that Sunak also holds American citizenship.

That cleared the way for a number of other cabinet-level contenders. There was Liz Truss, the foreign secretary. She was not a heavy political hitter and had not been a Brexiter from the outset. Her Norfolk constituency was neither in the powerful southeast nor in the Boris-loving Red Wall up north. But she had a keener understanding than others in the party of who these new Red Wall Tories were—not persuadable left-wingers, but converts to the Right. As the spring wore on and the situation in Ukraine heated up, another candidate to replace Johnson gained favor: Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, a former captain in the Scots Guards, a Brexiter, and a Johnson loyalist.

### Justifying Overreaction

**B**Y THIS POINT, EXCITABLE LABOUR POLITICIANS were rallying behind the idea that any “violation of the law” would be grounds for Johnson’s removal. “Violation of the law” was a usefully vague term for Labour in the same way “weapons of mass destruction” had once been—it was meant to justify an overreaction. The worst “violations” that Johnson’s staff had committed were so minor that they were not even justiciable. They were punishable by a “fixed penalty notice”—a citation of the sort that you get when you double-park. Preposterous, yes, but in mid-winter Labour was drunk with a 9-point lead in the

opinion polls. It now began to toy with the idea of having the *police* remove the government. This was the most interesting constitutional moment of the scandal.

London’s Metropolitan Police have a unique relationship with the national government, because London is the place where modern professional policing was invented—by Home Secretary (later Prime Minister) Sir Robert Peel in the 1820s. Its structure was replicated by city after city, but London’s remained the largest and most advanced. Even today, when large operations involving national security or terrorism or the integrity of political institutions come up, the investigation is led by the Metropolitan Police, which is under the joint control of the Home Office and the Mayor of London. And the mayor of London happens to be the woke machine politician Sadiq Khan, who replaced Johnson as mayor in 2016 and has since accused him of “racism” and “Islamophobia.”

Khan requested an investigation of the 10 Downing Street parties from the police commissioner, Dame Cressida Rose Dick, who had been appointed under Johnson’s predecessor, May. Dick hesitated, evidently reluctant to topple a government without even the intervention of a court. Dick’s enemies now rallied. A horrible rape and murder had been committed by an off-duty police officer in South London during the COVID lockdown. A report on police officers based at Charing Cross had revealed demeaning comments about women, blacks, and gays. Dick, an out-of-the-closet lesbian and a supporter of Khan’s police hiring quota of at least 40% non-whites, might have thought she was unlikely to be accused of failing to take woke matters seriously. But in mid-February Khan announced that Dick had failed to “root out the racism, sexism, homophobia, bullying, discrimination, and misogyny that still exists. I am not satisfied with the commissioner’s response,” he pronounced. “On being informed

of this, Dame Cressida Dick has offered her resignation which I have accepted.”

It was unfair, perhaps, but effective. By late February the table was set for Johnson’s removal. Britain now had a problem that was reminiscent of ancient Rome: unelected groups in the capital claiming a veto on the politics of the national government. But at just this point Johnson benefited from a very Roman kind of reprieve. On February 24, the first reports emerged of Russian tanks rolling into Ukraine, and Johnson—admirer of Winston Churchill, friend to Volodymyr Zelensky—put the government on a war footing. Within a month his Tories recovered about half the support they had lost to Labour.

The reprieve will not last forever. In April, Johnson, Sunak, and other staffers received their “fixed penalty notices.” A BBC journalist soon announced that, at Johnson’s lockdown birthday party, someone had received an award as “sexist of the year.” Obviously the award had been a joke, but the media was now in high enough dudgeon to forget what a joke even was. With this sexism business swirling around, Conservative M.P. Neil Parish, a Remainer, was forced to resign for watching pornography on his cell phone—on the floor of the House of Commons. Johnson was beginning to show distinct signs of the worst possible trait a politician can have: bad luck.

Johnson leads a country that, having recently regained its political sovereignty, is still saddled with a lot of institutions more appropriate to a subunit in a larger federation. Someone needs to reform them. Johnson has the ability. The question is whether he has the inclination. The task will require devoting a bit less attention to animal sentience and a bit more to voter sentience.

*Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).*

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