

Shapeshifters: the evolving politics of modern Conservatism

Ken Spours

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By Ken Spours

About the author:

Ken Spours is Professor of Post-Compulsory Education at UCL Institute of Education. Using 21st century Gramscian Marxism, he has a particular interest in the exploration of alliance building and 'progressive bloc politics'.

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Summary

The 2019 Conservative sweeping general election victory was primarily the result of the rapid transition - the **political shapeshifting** - of the Conservative Party from a relatively broad but fractious church that included 'moderate' pro-Remain Tories to a right-wing Brexit-type party but also one that is already shifting again. While Labour's failings are a major part of this picture, this paper focuses primarily on the remarkable adaptive abilities of the Conservative adversary.

The main achievement of this latest Conservative transitioning was not only to take advantage of the 'Brexit Window', but to have **reframed political life, cultural identities and political affiliations** and then to follow up with the simple but compelling slogan 'Get Brexit Done' to achieve decisive advantage.

In the period running up to the general election, Tory leadership of the Leave vote bloc allowed it to drain the threat of Farage's Brexit Party by absorbing its essential features. In addition, beneath the surface of visible politics it sought to combine an authoritarian Brexit-type populist nationalism with an aggressive neoliberal deregulation agenda. Added into this mix has been a promise of modest public spending on the NHS, policing and schools. Together they are understood here as **Thatcherism 2.0**.

However, in the days following his election victory Johnson has attempted to project a quite different image - of a **new One Nation Conservatism**. To consolidate and even extend its reach into traditional Labour constituencies it is now using narratives of 'security', supported by promises of greater public spending. In addition, it is more than possible that despite the wish to de-align with EU standards and to pivot towards the US, the Conservative Government may be compelled to make significant compromises with the EU to support manufacturing in the UK. If this turns out to be an important **component of Johnsonism**, its aim will be to cut off Labour's path of political recovery by securing the more permanent support of working-class voters who may have 'lent' their vote to the Tories this time round. The danger for the progressive movement is to continue to woefully underestimate the adaptive capacities of modern Conservatism.

A central question, therefore, is '**What is Johnsonism and how might it evolve?**' Is it 'Raging populism or One Nation Toryism?'¹ Here it is suggested that this latest evolutionary form of Conservatism might be understood as a **regressive combinational politics** - an eclectic mix of populist English nationalism and nativism; neoliberal deregulation together with a mild Keynesianism, capable of being steered in differing directions at the same time. The Tories' lack of ideological anchoring, Johnson's adaptability and the Party's desire to both secure power

and extend its political bloc, makes this shapeshifting both possible and inevitable.

This Compass think piece, the third in a series on the adaptive political abilities of the Conservative Party², also re-asks a fundamental question from the position of the Left - **'When you have been defeated on the field of political battle, you not only ask what you have done wrong but what your opponent has done right'**.

As a new political and ideological assemblage, Johnsonism will undoubtedly experience tensions due to its internal contradictions and moral shortcomings. There is also the distinct possibility that a Brexit-fuelled politics will herald an era of further national stagnation and fragmentation. Whether these emerge, however, as **ruptures and failures will depend on the capacities of oppositional forces**.

Here Labour and other forces in the progressive bloc need to not only understand why they fell short in the 2019 general election, but to analyse and appreciate the capacities of the Conservative adversary. Conservative shapeshifting and its reactionary combinational politics will have to be confronted by a broad-based opposition that can create a new climate for transformational change by articulating its **own progressive combinational politics**; a form of political bilingualism that appeals across different social groups and binds them together through the lens of viable change.

Shapeshifters: how the Right adapts politically

Right populist political shapeshifting

Shapeshifting - found in the mythological and natural worlds - describes the ability of a creature to drastically change its appearance. In political life shapeshifting describes the ability of a political force to reshape its policies and personae to suit certain constituencies and conditions.³

The achievement of the Conservative Party under Johnson's leadership is not only to have shifted its policies and political personae, but to have achieved this through reframing the wider political and ideological context. By rapidly morphing into a Brexit-style party the Tories have reaped enormous short-term political benefit. Through a transitioning taking less than six months, they moved from polling less than 10 per cent in the European Parliamentary elections in May to nearly 45 per cent in the December UK general election.

Brexit and the Right reframing of political life

Effective political shapeshifting requires not only an inherent flexibility, but the ability to create a wider environment in which the transition

from one form to another is seen as an act of political modernisation rather than gross opportunism. While there has always been a Eurosceptical tendency in the Tory Party, the achievement of the Right has been to fundamentally reframe the parameters of political debate in the run up to and following the 2016 EU referendum to create the Brexit Era or 'Brexit Window'.⁴ There are also more dramatic interpretations of 'shapeshifting'; notably as a strategy for creating permanent confusion in the electorate as to what is a true or fake world.⁵

The shapeshifting achievement is not the Conservative's alone. It is very much indebted to the persistence of Farage, UKIP and its successor the Brexit Party. What emerged following what was a closely fought EU referendum campaign was the maturing of an English nationalist and nativist project that Farage and UKIP had been fomenting for more than a decade. This political and ideological groundwork was echoed within the Conservative Right which, following the failures of the Theresa May transitional period, allowed it to be swiftly absorbed and become the dominant political tendency under Johnson's leadership.

The reframing also involved deflecting attention away from critical questioning of the causes of the 2008 economic crash and the subsequent self-defeating policy of austerity and towards popular hostility to the EU; its association with mass immigration as an immediate explanation for the deterioration of everyday life, particularly in small towns and the North. In doing so, the Right has remade political identities that articulates 'gaining control' as a popular struggle against remote elites. Brexit has thus become an English expression of the wider global phenomenon of Right populism that shows little sign of abating.

The Brexit Window - the redrawing of the political landscape

In a bitter irony, Right populism preys on the surface grievances of sections of the population most affected by the failures of neoliberalism. Working people, who have seen an erosion of their local economies, social stability and civic pride, have had their attentions focused on a remote Westminster and an even more remote EU. Tapping into a climate of grievance, the Right has promoted an English nationalist agenda that promises control of borders, currency and laws in order to seemingly restore a past world. In reality however, Right populism represents the politics of discontent, division and half-truths while simultaneously undermining the means of resolving the deeper issues that led to the crisis in the first place. Brexit is a key UK project in the Right populist playbook.

Brexit was created by UKIP (now the Brexit Party) and the Right of the Conservative Party. The reframing process termed here as the 'Brexit Window' has brought English nationalism thinking into the mainstream to the point that it is now directing UK political life. The protracted Brexit struggle, that came to a head following the 2016 EU referendum, has principally benefitted Johnson and the Conservative Right in which a rejuvenated but narrower Tory Party has secured political gains by promoting 'Getting Brexit Done'. This smartly tapped into both a human instinct to stop the pain of indecision and the democratic/fairness case that 'we voted for this'.

The reality, of course, will be far more complex due to the negotiation of trade deals that could take years and compromises that Johnson is simply unwilling to talk about. His covert deregulatory/dealignment position risks a no-deal situation as the EU will resist the creation of a low cost/low standards 'pirate ship' off its coast.⁶ As for negotiations with the US and other non-EU states, the painful fact is that the UK will be negotiating from a position of weakness. All of this points, not to Brexit being done, but to a 'Brexit eternity' as the UK finds itself split between alignments with the EU and the US. But even if this is the case, the shapeshifter style of the Tories could allow them to escape a trap of their own making.

Despite building a formidable political hegemony, it has not been plain sailing for the Tory Brexit Project. Not only did the Conservative Right have to win the referendum with powerful forces stacked against them; they had to win the follow-on period with competition from Farage's Brexit Party. In order to survive and thrive the Tories absorbed a UKIP membership and what became the Brexit Party voting base. Johnson then had to create a Hard Brexit platform as a way of keeping the Brexit bloc together. As the result of successive navigations, Johnson and his closest allies won through by translating the Leave Vote into a 45 per cent Tory electoral bloc. These are Johnson's achievements as he executed a third Conservative political evolution.

'Johnsonism' and Thatcherism 2.0

The third Conservative evolution

The latest Conservative shapeshifting is the most dramatic of its recent evolutions over the past two decades. The first was Cameron and Osborne's neoliberal modernisation that sought to make the Conservative Party more socially acceptable. This petered out under the impact of austerity and the nationalist backlash. The second evolution was the period of Theresa May and her 'soft nationalism' that tried to balance different tendencies in the Tory Party following the 2016 EU referendum.⁷ In retrospect, the 'Mayism' period looks essentially like an interregnum from one political form to another in

keeping with the wider realignments on the Right.

Across much of the political spectrum there has been a tendency to under-estimate the political capacities of Boris Johnson. Traditionally seen as a buffoon, he has transitioned into a skilled political and ideological operator, albeit a thoroughly dishonest one. In this metamorphosis he has been guided by his master strategist Dominic Cummings in Number 10.

Over this period the composition of the 'regressive alliance', that comprised the Tory Party, Brexit Party and DUP, has now become concentrated within the Conservative Party. Under Johnson's leadership the Tory Party has transitioned from a relatively broad church, that Theresa May attempted to hold together, into a hard-Right Brexit-type party driven more by resentments than a coherent ideology.⁸ The internal composition of the Party has also changed considerably with the entryism of tens of thousands of UKIP supporters, the expulsion of dozens of one-nation Tory MPs and the movement of the European Research Group (ERG) into the centre of party life. This transition has been conducted at lightning speed, refracted through the Brexit Window.

While Johnson became bogged down in Parliament in the summer of 2019 due to the predominance of both a No-Deal alliance of MPs and second referendum supporters, it did not prevent him from making political and electoral capital out of the stalemate. Repeated parliamentary defeats were eventually overcome by the willingness of the EU to agree a deal just to get the issue off the table for now (these will return in the upcoming trade negotiations) and by Johnson's willingness to compromise with the EU over the Irish backstop, even though he continues to mislead over that particular agreement that involves the redrawing of the economic border of Ireland down the Irish Sea.

Thatcherism 2.0 as a 'Conservative Double Shuffle'

Is there such a thing as Johnsonism given his chameleon-like political character? In exploring this further it may be helpful to make a number of distinctions - between the individual politics of Boris Johnson and the new blend of ideologies of a remade Conservative Party. These include - Brexit English nationalism + Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism + mild Keynesianism + a Right populist communications strategy - that together can be understood as Thatcherism 2.0.

A second distinction concerns the possible stages of Johnsonism as it evolves – political framing, ideological policy and practice. The first stage comprised 'framing'; the creation of a political cultural climate that could secure the Leave vote and win a general election. The second, which began to be articulated during the parliamentary impasse and is now emerging in the post-election period, is the

ideological creation of a new version of Thatcherism fit for the UK's realignment away from continental Europe and towards the US.⁹ This has been referred to as 'Thatcherism on steroids'¹⁰ and here as Thatcherism 2.0.

In this Johnson has been aided by forces outside the Conservative Party with many connections to the Far Right in the US – Dominic Cummings (a Steve Bannon-like figure who is not a member of the Tory Party); the established Right-wing press, notably the Telegraph and Far Right websites; US-based neoliberal think-tanks and political borrowing from the US Republican model.¹¹ It also draws on outputs of members from the Tory front bench (Dominic Raab, Liz Truss, Priti Patel and Kwasi Kwarteng) in 'Britannia Unchained' and that appears to have informed the Tory election slogan 'Get Brexit Done. Unleash Britain's potential'.

The original Thatcherism of the 1980s and early 1990s was a powerful UK variant in the global rise of neoliberalism. Thatcherism 1.0 promoted marketisation, privatisation and the philosophy of new public management. While it was part of a global phenomenon it also changed the social and economic fabric of Britain, with the rise of the City and finance capitalism, the selling off of state assets and the popularising of the idea of a property-owning democracy. These transformations, however, came at a high price including two deep economic recessions; chronic high levels of unemployment in previously industrial areas and the shrinkage of the public realm.

At the heart of Thatcherism 2.0 is a hard Brexit and dealignment with EU regulatory regimes that govern working conditions, consumer and environmental protections. Relaxing standards and allowing US companies to cherry-pick core UK public services is arguably the main basis on which new trade deals could be struck outside that of the EU. At the same time, and in order to appeal to established and new voter blocs (older voters and those in Northern and Midland towns), Johnson has had to promise greater public spending on police, health and education as well as on infrastructure. It is important, however, to note that Conservative public intentions are at best modest and only partial correctives compared to the losses of a decade of austerity.

Johnsonism or Thatcherism 2.0 has yet to settle and when it does it is likely to be a highly unstable organism. At this point, it may be helpful to distinguish between its ideological phase (what we are seeing presently); its policy phase (which remains deliberately sketchy) and its practice phase (upon which we can only speculate about possible practical outcomes). Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate the tensions between its Right populist and One Nation tendencies.

Here it is possible we will see a Conservative 'Double Shuffle' in which Right populism/neoliberalism will be its dominant tendency and One

Nation Conservatism held in a subordinate position.¹² This dominant/subordinate relationship is an important way of understanding Conservative bloc-building combinational politics.

The deep wellsprings of global Right populism – far from exhausted

Johnsonism and its directions also need to be seen in the wider global context of Right populism. Thatcherism 2.0 feeds not only off the dynamics of global neoliberalism, but the populist Right reaction to its breakdown. The politics of disillusion provides deep wellsprings of fracture and disintegration that will be present in the body politic for years to come.¹³ Right populism exploits fears, discontents and lack of control of lives changed by market forces of neoliberalism, deindustrialisation and mass migration. The point is that great crises do not automatically lead to radical Left consciousness but often, in the first instance, to reactionary responses. This is particularly the case when a population, beset by threats and change, has not been sufficiently engaged with viable progressive alternatives and can be ideologically and politically exploited by the Far Right.

Even in areas which could be regarded as natural progressive territory, the threat of the Far Right is ever present. A case in point is the climate emergency. While it is tempting to think that Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion and the School Strikes will lead to mass movements for ecological action, below the surface lurks a dark undercurrent of reaction in the form of 'eco-fascism'. This is a genocidal version of Right populism that in extremis would seek to eliminate whole populations (people of colour) in order to save a section of humanity (the white elite).¹⁴ The point being that Right populism and 21st fascism in which strands of Johnsonism swim should now be regarded as endemic rather than a temporary political spasm.

Thatcherism 2.0 - the ecology of isolation and stagnation

While Johnsonism now dominates the immediate political terrain, it is not hegemonic in the deeper sense. As a combination of worn out neoliberal ideas, nationalist isolationism and with no answers to the climate emergency, Thatcherism 2.0 is itself at odds with important sections of 'liberal' capital and, of course, insurgent political, social and ecological movements propelled by the young and the most economically productive.¹⁵

In contrast to the 1980s in which Thatcherism 1.0 swam in the tides of neoliberal expansion with the concomitant collapse of the Soviet Union and state socialism; the era of global chaos, climate emergency and the promises/threats of AI and rapid technological change

provide for a much more contested terrain. Rather than resembling a new revolution, Thatcherism 2.0 takes on a deeper appearance of 'retrenchment' as a result of its own contradictions and prevailing headwinds. While Right populism and neoliberalism still have the energy to evolve, divide and destroy, there is a whiff of degeneration rather than fresh and creative innovation.

The Johnson/Thatcherism 2.0 project faces several daunting challenges which suggests that it may not be the beginning of a generational shift, but a protracted period of struggle between very different views of national and global development.¹⁶

The Electoral terrain – just how dominant are the Conservatives? On the surface the Tory majority and share of the vote suggests that they will enjoy five years of unfettered power and have possibly already earned another five because of the scale of their win. There is, however, a wider sullen and sceptical mood, particularly in the Tory voter bloc that is incapable of driving change. What we may be dealing with is not a realisable ambition by the Right to transform the economic and social landscape, in contrast to Thatcherism 1.0, but a divisive and nasty politics that feeds disintegration and stagnation.

Alignment/misalignment with types of capitalism – beyond the political terrain, the most fundamental issue facing the Conservatives is their relationship with types of capitalism. While capital always appears to rally to the Conservative cause, the reality is now more complex. Johnsonism is particularly aligned with sections of finance capital and hedge funds and not the productive base of the economy. Moreover, just across the English Channel lies a bloc of 27 countries bound by a web of economic, social and environmental rules. Moving away from these is fraught with difficulty, not least because of the sheer scale of trade with EU countries and 21st century just-in-time production and supply that requires a high degree of border seamlessness. Put another way, the Tories now relate to fractions of free-market Anglo-Saxon Capitalism rather than the more regulatory co-ordinated Capitalism and more economically productive social forces, concentrated in large cities, that are overwhelmingly liberal/progressive in outlook. This was reflected in the Remain vote.

English but not UK-wide – the end of the Union? Thatcherism 1.0 was also essentially English, but not so explicitly as the Tory Brexit bloc. Thatcherism 2.0 and its hard Brexit orientation means that it is not a UK-wide project. Despite unionist rhetoric, it is fuelling forces of separation – Northern Ireland could drift into a United Ireland; Scotland will seek greater distance and possibly independence. Wales will then have to decide where it stands - with England or as a small independent country within the EU. And there could be internal English disintegration with dynamic large cities sensing a separation with small towns. The hard Brexit variant of Johnsonism will, therefore, threaten

the cohesion of the UK as never before.

Alignment with Trump's US – international isolation – the unspoken assumption of Johnsonism is Empire 2.0; referring to the idea of new trade deals led by agreements with Trump's US and Australia and in which the UK becomes 'Singapore-on-Thames'; a low tax, deregulated competitor to the coordinated capitalism of the EU. However, this Brexiteer vision is delusional because the EU will undoubtedly demand a level playing field in exchange for a comprehensive trade deal. The alternative is the UK going it alone with a No Deal scenario, which will leave it completely vulnerable to the predations of the US and that could wreck the economy. Along this path, isolation and economic decline beckons.

The wrong end of new cultural, economic and environmental thinking – the long-term rise of liberal and radical thought. The Brexit project can be seen as an attempt to displace more fundamental shifts in social, economic and environmental thinking that has been taking place particularly amongst the professional middle classes and the young. In this sense it is the boldest of 'dead cat strategies'.¹⁷ However, the problems of late capitalism (post 2008 era) constantly present challenges that the Right bloc will find difficult but not impossible to address – increasing domestic demand through better wages; tackling climate change and developing the public realm and its essential services.

Can Johnson keep the Brexit bloc together? Johnson's Brexit bloc comprises different voter blocs whose interests could be undermined by the Brexit process itself. There is absolutely no appetite for privatisation, particularly in the voting blocs (the old and Northern working class) on which Johnsonism's electoral advantage now depends. Keeping the expanded Tory socio-political bloc together suggests a profound tension between the core ideas of deregulation and new trade deals that underpin Brexit and public investment demanded by the new Northern Tory constituencies that have fuelled Brexit and the Tory revival.¹⁸ Thatcherism 2.0, moving in differing directions simultaneously, could be yet another interpretation of political shapeshifting.

Johnson - the master shapeshifter and the possibility of a fourth evolution

This new Right 'combinational politics' is led by Johnson who, as a high energy chameleon-like political character, can combine and constantly change the complexion of these components when politically required – 'I can be whatever I need to be'. Furthermore, within what will be an extended Brexit Window, Thatcherism 2.0 will be portrayed not as Tory continuity but something new and potentially epochal. 'Political novelty' has helped Johnson to disown both the recent Conservative record of austerity and contrasted to a Labour's narrow state

socialism as a historical throwback.

Moreover, it is becoming clear following the general election that Johnson will try further acts of shapeshifting as a result of winning in traditional Labour seats and the realities of trade talks. Many facets will feature in quick turn - social liberalism, immigrant hostility, mild Keynesianism on One Nation rhetoric. And in order to appease the Far Right, we can also expect an authoritarian security agenda that will include anti-democratic attacks on the BBC and public institutions, together with the gerrymandering of the electoral system.

Shapeshifters - the challenges for Labour and the progressive bloc

Whether these contradictions and fault-lines of Johnsonism are to be exposed will depend not only on the crises that will face the Thatcherism 2.0 and Brexit project as it enters its most difficult phase, but on the capacities of the Labour Party and the component parts of the 'progressive bloc'. Here it is important to recognise not only failings by the Labour Party, but also by the Liberal Democrats promoting what can be now seen as 'Remain Sectarianism'. In fact, all of us in our own ways, are culpable.

The new shapeshifting Conservative extremism has to be confronted, not by the deceptions of another version of shapeshifting, but by a new moral combinational politics that can underpin the rebuilding of a progressive societal alliance. This will not only involve the projection of radical national manifesto policies, but the systematic engagement of the population in arguments about a necessary future, particularly a new green economy, the better jobs that this can bring and ways of leading a 'good life'. This colossal ideological struggle will involve not only the Labour Party, but also other parties and countless civil society organisations who are in the forefront of generating new ideas and practices.

It will also mean building from below, developing a new radical municipalism that has been emerging in diverse places such as Preston and Barking and Dagenham. Building from below will also require new levels of local activist engagement with communities so that disillusioned voters can appreciate that everyday progressive politics is capable of changing lives for the better.

Above all, the blizzard of blame-shifting, half-truths, broken promises and the looming despotism of Johnsonism has to be confronted by a progressive and open democratic culture of 'radical decency'. Here possibly lies the most serious challenge for Labour and the wider progressive Left; to replace the habits of tribalism and top-down politics with those of collaboration, participation and generosity.

But the starting point of any progressive revival is the awareness that our opponent is not just oafish, opportunist and casual with the truth, but ruthless, agile and above all super smart in their ability to escape from every corner they seem to have painted themselves into. This is their game and we cannot beat them at it. But we have to understand it, never underestimate it, think beyond it and beat it with our own agile transformative politics.

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