

Johnson resigns as Conservative leader but will continue as PM until new leader elected



Boris Johnson announcing his resignation as Conservative leader today

Today, speaking in front of the door to 10 Downing St., British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, “It is now clearly the will of the parliamentary conservative party that there should be a new leader of that party and therefore a new Prime Minister and I have agreed with Sir Graham Brady, the chairman of our backbench MPs, that the process of choosing that new leader should begin now and the timetable will be announced next week and I have today appointed a cabinet to serve – as I will – until a new leader is in place....” Holding as it does a substantial majority in the House of Commons – 358 of the 650 seats – the new leader of the Conservative Party, whoever he or she may be, will automatically become the Prime Minister.

The prelude to today’s announcement was the extraordinary wave of resignations this week from the government – five members of the Cabinet, including Rishi Sunak, the chancellor of the exchequer, Sajid Javid, the health secretary, and three others; 25 ministers; 23 parliamentary private secretaries, five trade envoys; in all, more than 50 members of the government – after it became known that Johnson had appointed Chris Pincher as deputy chief whip despite having been informed about a formal complaint about his behavior three years ago, and then had repeatedly misrepresented what others had or had not told him about Pincher’s behavior, the complaint, and the subsequent investigation. In addition to those who resigned, there were an untold number of others who, in the wake of the revelations in regard to the Pincher case, coming as they did on top of the recent “partygate” scandal, declined an invitation to serve in the government.

The more immediate prelude to Johnson’s announcement today was reportedly a decision taken yesterday by the executive of the Conservative Party’s 1922 Committee, which consists of, and conveys to the party leadership the views of, the Conservative Members of Parliament. Yesterday, Sir Graham Brady, the 1922 Committee’s chairman, informed the backbenchers that the Committee Executive was likely to change its leadership rules as early as Monday to allow another vote of confidence (or the lack thereof) in Johnson prior to June 2023. On June 6, Sir Graham had announced that, the minimum required threshold of 15 percent of the party’s MPs having written to him requesting a vote of confidence in Johnson, there would be a vote that day. In the vote, 211 MPs expressed their confidence in Johnson’s leadership of the party and 148 expressed their lack of confidence in his leadership. Under the party rules, another vote cannot take place for a year. Yesterday afternoon, the Executive agreed to accelerate its process for

electing new members so that a new body would be in place by Monday afternoon and could, if it were so inclined, amend the rule prohibiting a second vote of confidence until a year had passed since the previous one. Last night, Sir Graham told Johnson the Executive was likely to amend that rule as early as next Monday.

Given Johnson's announcement today, it's quite likely the new Executive of the 1922 Committee will also announce the timetable and procedure for the election of a new leader next week, possibly as early as Monday. Although it is not required to follow the timetable and procedure used in 2019, after Prime Minister Theresa May resigned as leader, it's quite likely it will follow that procedure. On May 24, 2019, May announced she would resign as party leader on June 7, immediately after the ceremonies commemorating D-Day. On June 4, the 1922 Committee confirmed the rules governing the election of a new leader. Those MPs wishing to stand for election were required to generate at least eight nominations by other MPs by the close of business on June 10. Candidates would be required to obtain the support of at least 5 percent of the Conservative MPs on the first ballot and 10 percent of those MPs on the second ballot in order to remain in the contest. Thereafter, on each subsequent ballot, the candidate with the fewest votes would be eliminated. Once there were only two candidates left, the party rules stipulated that the party members – there were 159,000 in 2019 – would be issued paper ballots to be returned within three days. The first ballot took place on June 13. Johnson received 114 votes, Jeremy Hunt, the foreign secretary, received 43, and the other eight candidates received the remainder. Of those eight, three were eliminated because they received less than the required 5 percent of the 313 votes cast and a fourth withdrew. On June 18, the second ballot took place among the six remaining candidates and one of them (Dominic Raab) was eliminated after failing to get 10 percent of the 313 votes cast. On June 19, the third ballot took place involving the five remaining candidates and the candidate with the lowest vote (Rory Stewart) was eliminated. On June 20, the fourth ballot took place involving the four remaining candidates and the lowest-placed of them (Sajid Javid) was eliminated. Later that same day, the fifth ballot took place involving the three remaining candidates and the lowest-placed of them (Michael Gove) was also eliminated. At that point, the 159,320 party members were asked to choose between Johnson and Hunt. On July 23, the vote was announced. Johnson received 92,153 (66 percent) and Hunt received 46,656 (34 percent). Johnson was thereby elected party leader and hence Prime Minister.

At this point, the race to replace Johnson as party leader, and thus Prime Minister, has just began and is wide open. In a snap YouGov poll conducted today among 716 Conservative party members, 13 percent supported Ben Wallace, the defense secretary; 12 percent supported Penny Mordaunt, the trade minister; 10 percent supported Rishi Sunak, the former chancellor of the exchequer; 8 percent supported Liz Truss, the foreign secretary; 7 percent supported Gove, who was sacked yesterday as the “Levelling Up” minister after telling Johnson he should resign; and 7 percent supported Raab, who is the justice secretary and deputy prime minister (and, as such, the individual who in most countries would be expected to replace Johnson and to do so without a party contest). Among those receiving 5 percent or less in the poll were Hunt, Sajid Javid, the former health secretary; and Priti Patel, the home secretary. Not all of these, it should be noted, have thrown their proverbial hat in the ring; indeed, Gove and Raab are reported to not be interested in running again. And several others not included in the YouGov list have said they *are* interested in leading the party – perhaps, most notably at this point, Suella Braverman, the Attorney General. There is also, it should be noted, some discussion among the MPs about

dropping the ballot of all party members and leaving it entirely to the parliamentary party to decide who will lead the party and country, or streamlining the process in some other way.

There is a good deal of support, not only among the Conservative MPs but many others as well, for the 1922 Committee moving quickly with the election of a new party leader. Former Prime Minister Sir John Major no doubt spoke for many, including many who aren't Conservatives, when he wrote Sir Graham and suggested that either an interim Prime Minister – there is, after all, a highly qualified and experienced Deputy Prime Minister who has already taken himself out of the leadership contest – be appointed or the procedure for electing a new party leader be streamlined: “For the overall wellbeing of the country, Johnson should not remain in Downing Street...for any longer than necessary to effect the smooth transition of government.” And there are no doubt many in the UK, including in the Conservative party and on its backbenches, who would agree with what former health secretary Sajid Javid said in his eloquent resignation speech, “At some point we have to conclude that enough is enough.”

David R. Cameron
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