

Boris Johnson: The moral case for government resignations in July 2022

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Abstract

Although comparatively rare, political resignations are essential for the health of democracy and political institutions. Protagonists risk their political careers when resigning but can hold governments to account and make real the Nolan principles of public life. In July 2022, an unprecedented 62 resignations ended Boris Johnson's time as British prime minister to be replaced first by Liz Truss and then, 44 days later, by Rishi Sunak, the second minister to resign. An inductive, qualitative, content analysis of the resignation letters elucidates the reasons for the resignations and highlights the ethical dilemmas that confronted would be resignees. Events lessened the effectiveness of government, triggered fears for the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party, and separately challenged individuals' personal integrity. Considerations that prevented resignees acting earlier—promises that things would change, competing loyalties, fear of reprisal, love of job, attachment to status and allegiance to ideological faction—may partially explain why much of government remained in post in July.

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For 61 members of the UK government to resign and another to be sacked within the space of 72 hours, as happened between 5th and 7th July 2022, is unprecedented. It was followed by the resignation of Boris Johnson as leader of the ruling Conservative Party although, as a quirk of Britain's informal constitution, not as prime minister. Liz Truss was subsequently elected as leader by Conservative party members in a runoff against Rishi Sunak, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. She was appointed prime minister as one of the last duties performed by the late HM Queen Elizabeth II, but was forced to resign after just 44 days. She was succeeded by Sunak who had been the second cabinet minister to resign on 5th July.

Resignations are a fact of political life but still relatively rare in British politics. In the almost three centuries of cabinet government to 2019, less than 100 cabinet ministers resigned whereas the Johnson cabinet lost five within the space of two days (Barclay, 2019). History suggests that many resignations are inconsequential, arising, for example, from a minister's ill-health or another reason preventing them from continuing in a highly pressurised post. Some are passive, a face-saving way of avoiding being sacked that can provide a glimpse of struggles at the heart of government. Yet others arise from sincere differences over policy where the demands of individual conscience outweigh the constitutional mandate of collective responsibility. Robin Cook's 2003 departure from the Tony Blair's Labour government over Iraq serves as a case in point, albeit it failed to change the policy that, with hindsight, did more than any to tarnish Blair's reputation (Kampfner, 2003).

Sometimes, though, resignation becomes a weapon wielded in the battle for power and influence; Geoffrey Howe's 1990 resignation as deputy prime minister triggered the end of Margaret Thatcher's government. Although powerful, as weapons they risk being suicidal, pyrrhic gestures that come to mark the end of a ministerial career. Dominic Raab and Esther McVey resigned from Theresa May's cabinet over Brexit in November 2018 with McVey subsequently being knocked out in the first round of the 2019 election of May's successor.

For 61 ministers to take such a risk suggests that the stakes were high, no less than the survival of the Conservative Party already reeling from the loss of two parliamentary seats with historically large swings against the government. The future of 'One Nation Toryism' was also at stake having been under sustained attack from the neo-libertarian faction that articulates the inchoate instincts of many rank-and-file party members. Indeed, after 12 years in power, all the predictors of electoral demise for the Conservative Party were in place with concerns about governing competence, abuses of power, leadership credibility, ideological division and, under Sir Kier Starmer, the possibility of an electable Labour government in waiting (Roe-Crines, 2022).

By acting in large numbers, as fish in a shoal, the risks for individuals might be reduced. There is speculation that the resignations were coordinated although this is difficult to orchestrate (Quinn, 2012). The reality seems to be closer to the assertion, made by Boris Johnson in his resignation address, that a herd instinct was in play: once one minister resigned, others followed.

In today's world of social media and personality politics, the resignation letter is not a confidential exchange between minister and prime minister, but a public document published for all to read. Fifty-three ministers released their full resignation letters, one resigned live on television subsequently including a link to the videoed interview on his personal website, while the remainder announced their resignations on social media. These letters provide a rich source of information for scholars, offering a route to better understand the demise of Boris Johnson's government and to appreciate the strengths and limitations of the ministerial resignation as a political device. This article analyses these letters, finding that concerns over the effectiveness of government, the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party, and the personal integrity of individual ministers were the main reason for the wave of resignations.

Context and political resignation

While the focus is on the individual ministerial decision to resign, it is important to recognise that the outcome was the removal of a party leader and prime minister. The trend in Britain in recent years has been to make it more difficult to remove party leaders (Quinn, 2012). This reflects the opening of leadership elections to all party members and the desire to increase leaders' security of tenure. Nevertheless, even before the rapid demise of Johnson and Truss, there had been an upsurge in attempts to unseat leaders and rising numbers of ministerial resignations (Seddon and Nevett, 2022).

The increasingly presidential nature of prime ministers makes them vulnerable if their approval rating drops (McAnulla, 2010). In addition, lower thresholds to instigate votes of confidence, anonymity in voting, and the separation of processes of removal and replacement all weaken a leader's position (Quinn, 2012). The rules in play in 2022 meant that 54 letters sent by Conservative MPs to the 1922 Committee were sufficient to trigger a secret vote of confidence which took place on 6th June. Johnson won this vote – 211 to 148 against – which, according to the extant rules, meant that another vote could not take place until June 2023. Former Conservative leader William Hague's observation that no leader had previously survived non-endorsement by 41 percent of MPs was prescient but, with the Cabinet packed by Johnson loyalists, a Cabinet revolt was impossible, and a backbench rebellion appeared unlikely due to profound ideological differences (Parker and Payne, 2022).

The political atmosphere in July 2022 was febrile - 59 percent of the British electorate, including 42 percent of Conservative Party members, had felt that Johnson should have been removed (Opinium, 2022; YouGov, 2022). There was no clear successor with qualities matching the important Stark (1996) criteria for success – acceptability, electability and competence. Voted into power in 2019 with the manifesto claim that 'We will put you [presumably the public] first', Conservative ministers and MPs were presented with a political and ethical trilemma: to act; how to act; or not to act at all.

The trilemma for ministers should be understood in the context that 'the first rule of British politics is never to resign' and that 'senior politicians rarely give up without a fight' (Barclay, 2019, p. 8). In the US context, Richard Nixon explained why: 'A man is not finished when he's defeated. He's finished when he quits' (Ambrose, 1988). The implication of both statements is that resignation represents failure with the giving up of agency, power and influence. In part, this reflects an historical focus on the resignations of national leaders and senior politicians who ostensibly have the authority to control or shape events. In reality, of course, resignations occur at all levels of government; 41 percent of resignations from the Johnson government were at junior ministerial level with a further 41 percent being from the unpaid position of political private secretary (PPS).

The demise of Johnson's tenure was framed in the mainstream media as being a matter of unethical behaviour. Much of the academic literature on political ethics is only indirectly relevant since it focuses on public opinion and the gap between expectations and practice (Allen and Birch, 2015). Judged against criteria such as independence, fairness and accountability (Thompson, 1995), public judgments as to the behaviour of individual politicians are confounded by perceptions of political system or regime (Easton, 1975; Norris, 1999; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002), while those holding office tend to be required to perform to higher standards than members of the electorate (Philp, 2007). While those resigning from the Johnson government were certainly aware of public opinion, this was only one consideration, one mentioned only occasionally in resignation letters.

While resignation can always be presented as failure in that it entails leaving the task of the office-holder unfinished, Dobel (1999) underlines the ethical importance of the resignation in public life for the individuals involved and the health of the political institutions in which they serve. Resignation can help hold governments to account by drawing attention to unknown policy failures, inefficiencies or malpractice, or, if known, by adding weight to their importance. To be effective, however, the reasons for resignation must be made public and engender sufficient interest and support to initiate change. The silent resignation enables malpractice to continue without the irritant of internal criticism

or external pressure for reform. The independence of the media in determining how to cover a resignation is therefore crucial to determining its impact.

For the individual, resignation can be a manifestation of personal integrity, the person acting on belief and commitment and thereby attaining what the philosopher John Rawls (1971) has termed 'reflective equilibrium' in which actions are consistent with both role and personal expectations. In reaching the decision to resign, the resignee will need to negotiate the temptation to protect their public face by denying knowledge or responsibility; in doing so, they will be aware that resignation will carry real costs involving loss of status, income and possibly influence, while leaving them open to the accusation of betrayal. These personal costs may have increased in the current era of career politicians (Roberts, 2019). For the institutional system, the ability of politicians to resign from ministerial positions gives credence to the belief that in office they will behave according to the seven Nolan principles of public life. Equally, as Aneurin Bevan opined, 'No member ought to accept office in government without a full consciousness that he ought not to resign it for frivolous reasons' (Weisband and Franck, 1975, p. 112).

A case can be made to extend Bevan's injunction to deny personal self-interest and political ambition as legitimate reasons for resignation. Certainly, Barclay's (2019) detailed analysis of the resignations of 26 British cabinet members suggests that, leaving aside departures for reasons of sexual misconduct and corruption, resignation to further political gain is no less frequent than that based on moral rectitude. Boris Johnson's reluctant resignation from Teresa May's government is a case in point. It was precipitated by the resignation of David Davis whose ambition for a 'hard Brexit' - a departure from the European Union that freed Britain from European protocols - appeared to have been ignored in the plan that May had succeeded in negotiating in July 2018. Reputedly having toasted the unity of the Cabinet in supporting the agreement, Johnson spent the morning after Davis resigned calculating what action would best accord with his leadership ambitions. His team spent the afternoon drafting his resignation letter which, without precedent, he was photographed signing (Barclay, 2019).

Dobel (1999, p. 246) constructs the moral case for resignation around three tenets inherent in public office: 'the moral capacity to make and keep promises'; 'the competence to perform duties', and 'effectiveness in actions'. An individual who feels less than frivolously lacking with respect to any of these tenets should resign and, indeed, anyone who is found out to be similarly lacking should be asked to resign. The significance of collective responsibility means that a person holding public office who recognises such failings in their colleagues is morally obliged not to condone them. If private persuasion fails to solicit the resignation of the offending colleague, or at least remedial action by them, it becomes incumbent on them to consider their own resignation as a means of bringing the deficiencies to light. The social pressures in play that might prevent the required 'whistle-blowing' are likely to be substantial—party loyalty, junior status, immediate self-interest—but collective responsibility cannot justify concealment of wrongdoing.

Such considerations lead directly to the circumstances that precipitated the mass resignations from Johnson's government in July 2022. Sajid Javid, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer resigned as cabinet ministers on 5th July and were followed on the same day by Alex Chalk, Solicitor General for England and Wales, and four PPSs. By the end of 6th July, they had been joined by 41 others. Johnson expressed no intention of resigning himself, instead appointing ministers to replace those whom he had lost. However, he resigned as Conservative Party leader at lunchtime on 7th July by which time another 13 members of the government had forwarded their resignations.

Three main considerations fuelled the ministerial resignations. First, social gatherings took place at 10 Downing Street, the prime minister's official residence, that were deemed to be illegal due to Covid-19 social distancing restrictions. Dubbed 'Partygate', Johnson denied knowledge of the multiple events only then to receive a fixed penalty notice from the police for attending one. Secondly, when the then Conservative MP Owen Paterson was suspended from the House of

Commons for breaking paid advocacy rules, Johnson sought to change the rules to protect him. Thirdly, on 4th July 2022, Lord McDonald, a former senior civil servant, wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards explaining that Johnson had been aware of sexual allegations against Chris Pincher when appointing him to the post of deputy chief whip, something that Johnson had previously denied.

While, in accordance with the Nolan principles Johnson might have been expected to resign on account of each of these events, by July his ability to hold on to power was further weakened by other circumstances. The rise in fuel prices and inflation generally were causes of public concern without a coherent policy response being apparent. Public trust and confidence in Johnson were at an all-time low and byelections in Wakefield and Tiverton and Honiton on 23rd June 2022 had been lost with historic swings against the Conservatives. Additional sexual and other scandals had reawakened accusations of ‘Tory sleaze’ (Halliday, 2022), while the apparent willingness of the Johnson administration to ignore precedent, parliamentary procedures and international law was a cause of concern even for some Conservative backbenchers (Wearmouth, 2022).

Although commentators may be largely agreed as to what led to the mass resignations, none has paid detailed attention to the explanations provided by the ministers who resigned, an omission to be rectified below.

Analysing the words of politicians

The 61 letters and statements of resignation provide a rich body of evidence on the motivations and reservations of those resigning from Johnson’s final government. Of course, the resignees’ words cannot be taken at face value (Finlayson, 2021). A public resignation letter is doing more than conveying the fact of resignation to the Prime Minister. All but the most naïve of authors will be conscious that their statement will be read by journalists, their constituents and, possibly most importantly, by political colleagues. If as Chilton (2004, p. 14) argues ‘politics is very largely the use of language’, resignation letters epitomise politics as being an exercise in rhetoric.

There is a small but established literature on resignation speeches (Neshkovska, 2019; Reisigl, 2008; Collins and Clark, 1992). For example, Neshkovska’s 2019 analysis of those of the last three prime ministers, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May, reveals that they all had a performative/illocutionary quality, exemplifying ‘deeds done in words’. The use of short sentences, with a preference for ‘syntactically marked sentences’ (e.g. starting with a conjunction) points to the resignees’ desire to convey a clear, simple and memorable message. In terms of content, the three speeches concentrated on achievements rather than the reasons for resignation and emphasised the presidential ‘I’ rather than the collective ‘we’.

Rather than focus on rhetorical technique, the intention in analysing the resignation letters from Johnson’s government is to understand the motivations and rationales offered by the resignees. In doing so, it was necessary to parse the text, recognising the role of rhetoric but to address the presumed meaning of words. Photographs of the resignation letters were obtained or downloaded directly from the internet, transformed into digitised text and checked against the originals. An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted similar in style to the qualitative analysis of depth interviews with open coding to identify themes, axial coding to specify their content, and relational coding and analysis to understand the reasoning of resignees (Saldana, 2013; Walker, 1985).

Additionally, the incidences of the axial codes were entered into Excel and SPSS files to generate frequencies, and logistic and linear regression (not reported below) used to partial out, for example, the interaction of ministerial status and gender.

Finally, after the qualitative analysis was complete, a confirmatory quantitative content analysis was undertaken including the use of word clouds (Figure 1). Employing the complete corpus of some 15,000 words found in the resignation letters (social media statements were excluded) identified, for example, the prevalent use of the auxiliary verbs ‘can’ and ‘will’, the former used in the sense of ability, the latter used in the future tense, often referring to protestations that resignees would continue to support the Conservative Party and work on behalf of their constituents.

Figure 1

Speaking and concealing truth

Self-evidently the rationale for writing a resignation letter is to inform the recipient—the prime minister in all but one of the July 2022 letters—of the intention to resign and possibly to explain the reasons why. At the time of the resignations, the widely articulated view was that they represented dissatisfaction with Johnson’s leadership as prime minister. The sea change of opinion from 2019, when the Conservatives assumed power with the largest majority since 1987, was generally considered to be due to the cumulative effect of ‘Partygate’ and the multiple occasions when Johnsons’ integrity and judgement were questioned. However, such generalised dissatisfaction translated into some 25 different reasons cited in the resignation letters. It is noteworthy that the resignation letter of Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, ostensibly included no criticism of the Prime Minister, seemingly citing merely differences in policy:

In preparation for our proposed joint speech on the economy next week, it has become clear to me that our approaches are fundamentally too different.

Much, though, turns on the meaning of the word ‘approaches’ which might relate to policy content, priorities or the style of policy making and, indeed, of its presentation. Sunak notes that there was a need to ‘take difficult decisions’ and that ‘our people know that if something is too good to be true then it's not true’.

Forty-two percent of letters, and four of the five personal statements, avoided any direct criticism of Johnson, relying on allusion rather than accusation.

There comes a time when you have to look at your own personal integrity and that time is now. Therefore, given recent events I have no other choice than to resign. Stuart Andrew (Minister)

Unfortunately, recent events have made it clear to me that our great party, for which I have campaigned all of my adult life, has become distracted from its core missions by a relentless focus on questions over leadership. Robin Walker (Minister)

One can only wonder at the reasons for such reticence. Perhaps it was an unwillingness unduly to sour friendships or working relationships, or the difficulty of talking truth to power and/or uncertainty as to the outcome – after all, Michael Gove, cabinet member and previous contestant as leader of the Conservative Party, had been sacked by Johnson for ‘disloyalty’ on 6th July 2022. Equally, given the multiple audiences to be addressed in a published resignation letter, maybe there was a desire not to offend constituents and especially party members who may have favoured Boris’s style if not his morality. Certainly, almost all the resignation letters contained a variably formulaic statement that resignees would always put the interests of their constituents first. Most ministers outside cabinet also thanked civil servants for their support.

Such reticence was less characteristic of female resignees, 75 percent of whom directly criticised Johnson in their resignation letters compared to 49 percent of men.

It is with sadness and regret that I resign as Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice. Values such as integrity, decency, respect and professionalism should matter to us all. I have watched with growing concern as those values have fractured under your leadership, through Patterson, Partygate and Pincher. I have given you the benefit of the doubt at each turn, out of loyalty to you as Prime Minister and to our great Party. Victoria Atkins (Minister)

Victoria Atkins expresses both regret and sadness in her decision to resign. More typically resignees mentioned just one of these emotions with women being somewhat more likely than men (50 percent to 35 percent) to refer to their sadness in resigning rather than regret. Again, one can only speculate as to why. While regret could refer to the personal cost of resigning—loss of influence and income, sadness is more likely to apply to the cause of the resignation and their disappointment in the turn of events and the behaviour of the prime minister. This disappointment was evident in several of the letters written by women.

You have put us in an impossible situation. I am deeply saddened that it has come to this, but as someone who values integrity above all else, I have no choice. Michelle Donelan (Cabinet)

...when leave this job, either of my own will or that of my constituents, I need to be able to do so with my self-respect intact. I am deeply saddened to say that this is incompatible with continuing to serve in a government whose leadership has turned a blind eye to allegations of sexual assault within its own. Ruth Edwards (PPS)

Among the male resignees, George Freeman, the then Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, is perhaps exceptional in the directness and robustness of his criticism of the Prime Minister.

... I'm afraid the culmination of your lack of transparency and candour with Parliament (and willingness to ask your Ministers to mislead Parliament), your removal of key pillars of the Ministerial code, your handling of your appointment of a Deputy Chief Whip who it turns out you knew had a history of sexual abuse allegations, is too much.

Your leadership, the chaos in No 10, breakdown of Cabinet collective responsibility and collapse of public confidence in government represents a constitutional crisis. It is also now seriously undermining our authority in key negotiations on the world stage at a time of urgent international crises. George Freeman

While Freeman had opposed Brexit, he explains on his website how he subsequently explicitly supported Johnson and his ‘track record as Mayor of London’ and his ‘long commitment to liberal Conservatism’, hoping for ‘a good deal’ on Brexit and ‘a bold programme of domestic reforms to tackle the domestic grievances’ (Freeman, 2019). His ministerial position may have emphasized the implications of the failure to resolve the breakdown in relations with Europe and the international distrust caused by Johnson’s willingness to flout international law. In his resignation letter, he refers to the ‘need to resolve our membership of the flagship of the Horizon, Copernicus & Euratom programmes and make serious reforms to establish global UK leadership as a Science Superpower’.

It is at least possible that this international perspective similarly explains why all the five trade envoys for the prime minister felt the need to criticise Johnson’s premiership in very direct terms, albeit only three published their resignation letters. Andrew Murrison, Trade Envoy to Morocco, for example, wrote of ‘the rolling chaos of the past six months’ and that ‘others must square, as best they can, their continuing enjoyment of your patronage with their personal sense of decency, honour and integrity’. Richard Graham, trade envoy to Southeast Asia, spoke of his achievements, saying that there was ‘much more’ that he would like to do but that it was ‘vital to have full confidence in the leadership and integrity of the government that I represent’. Perhaps the trade envoys shared the need to be able to project an unblemished image of British governance, especially adherence to international law. That said, Theo Clarke, the Prime Ministers Trade Envoy to Kenya, explicitly resigned on account of

Johnson's appointment of a deputy chief whip 'whilst in full knowledge of his own wrongdoing' and the 'shock' of seeing 'colleagues defending the Government with assurances that have turned out to be false'.

The position of trade envoy, nominally trade envoy for the prime minister, does not fit within the usual departmental hierarchy of accountability, something that was also true of Bim Afolami's appointment as vice-chair of the Conservative Party for youth. He resigned this position, perhaps to his own surprise, on TalkTV after saying that the Prime Minister no longer had the trust or support of either the Party or the country. It may be that he and trade envoys felt free of departmental coercion to adhere to the position of the relevant Secretary of State and more able to convey their unqualified thoughts.

Speaking to multiple audiences

Bim Afolami was speaking directly to the British public on the day that Rishi Sunak and Sajid Javid resigned and, in publishing their resignation letters, resignees must have been cognisant that this might affect their standing among their constituents and the public. Afolami was invited by TalkTV to respond to the resignations, publicly supported them and a week later was prominent at the launch of Rishi Sunak's campaign to become Party leader. Resignation letters are popular among the media, especially local newspapers since they are inherently controversial and provide free column inches at almost zero cost. A few resignees explicitly stated in their resignation letters and statements that, in resigning, they were responding to the wishes of their constituents, while most MPs emphasised their primary allegiance to their constituents.

I am afraid that you have lost the confidence of my constituents and me. The current situation is untenable.

(On Facebook: Thank you to all of you who have written to me expressing your views. I have read them carefully, and taken them into consideration as part of my decision.

I have, and will always, put the residents of Sevenoaks and Swanley front and centre of my work in Westminster.) Laura Trott (PPS)

Clearly another audience for an open resignation letter comprises parliamentary colleagues some of whom will have a role to play in subsequent cabinet appointments. Hence, the competence and loyalty of resignees are open to scrutiny. Perhaps with this in mind, 39 percent of resignees devoted an average of over a quarter (29 percent) of their letter to documenting their ministerial contribution. Ministers, of course, had more to boast about than unpaid PPSs – one devoted three words out of four to their achievements – and were prone to use 'I' rather than the 'we' favoured by PPSs. Indeed, the relative powerlessness of PPSs crept into the tone of some resignations: 'I know my resignation will carry little weight in the grand scheme of things'.

While many of the resignees swore their loyalty to the Conservative Party, a third pledged their long-term allegiance to Johnston, a fifth of those doing so also stating that they had supported his election while some two-fifths added that they had hitherto publicly supported or defended him. Forty per cent, by way justification, additionally said that they had previously given him the benefit of the doubt.

Loyalty and the benefit of the doubt were key elements in the letters of the resignees who sought to explain the context of their resignation and might help to elucidate why most of the government did not resign when their peers felt compelled to do so. Many reported how difficult their decision to resign had been and how they had had to 'grapple' between conflicting allegiances in reaching the decision to resign; no doubt this was true although emphasising their difficulty may also have served to signal their loyalty and to reduce collateral damage to their political career.

Reaching this decision has been incredibly hard, especially when I consider your tremendous achievement and commitment in making Brexit work, public health decisions during the pandemic and your impeccable leadership as we face Russian aggression in Europe. Mims Davies (Minister)

I am loyal to my constituents and will always put them first. I am also loyal to the Conservative Party, [of sic] which is currently unrecognisable to me. I believe something must change. Nicola Richards (PPS)

A plurality of resignees (some 24 per cent) explicitly mentioned competing loyalties. Of course, resignation is itself an act of disloyalty – appointed and agreeing to complete a ministerial task, resignation leaves the task undone and creates the problem of finding a successor. Each resignation weakens the prime minister (albeit not necessarily by very much ‘in the grand scheme of things’) and undermines the Party by drawing attention to disunity. As such, resignees need to appeal to a ‘higher’ loyalty, be it the country or their conscious.

Loyalty is rightly highly regarded in politics; we succeed as a team. But I can no longer reconcile loyalty to you as Prime Minister with the integrity I have always endeavoured to demonstrate, whether at work, in voluntary roles or in my personal life. Rob Butler (PPS)

The treachery inherent in a political resignation must be of special concern for those with ambitions to lead the Party. Sajid Javid, Health Secretary, the first to resign but whose campaign to succeed Johnson was short-lived, prefaced his assertion of loyalty to the Prime Minister, followed by that to the country, with a checklist of Johnson’s achievements:

It is three years since you entered Downing Street. You will forever be credited with seeing off the threat of Corbynism, and breaking the deadlock on Brexit. You have shone a very welcome light on the regional disparities in our country, an agenda that will continue to define our politics. These are commendable legacies in unprecedented times. But the country needs a strong and principled Conservative Party, and the Party is bigger than any one individual. I served you loyally and as a friend, but we all serve the country first. When made to choose between those loyalties there can only be one answer. Sajid Javid (Cabinet)

Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer and at the time the bookmakers’ favourite to succeed Johnson, mentioned solely his loyalty to Johnson emphasising how he had publicly supported him even when they had privately disagreed.

I have been loyal to you. I backed you to become Leader of our Party and encouraged others to do so. I have served as your Chancellor with gratitude that you entrusted me with stewardship of the nation's economy and finances. Above all, I have respected the powerful mandate given to you by the British people in 2019 and how under your leadership we broke the Brexit deadlock.

That is why I have always tried to compromise in order to deliver the things you want to achieve. On those occasions where I disagreed with you privately, I have supported you publicly. That is the nature of the collective government upon which our system relies. Rishi Sunak. (Cabinet)

The one other resignee who was to stand for Party leader, Kemi Badenoch, adopted the unusual strategy of submitting a joint resignation with four other junior ministers from three government departments which she headed based on alphabetical order. Whether or not Badenoch deliberately chose to resign under the cover of others – she was later supported in her leadership campaign by her former ministerial boss, Michael Gove – the resignation letter, while not pledging loyalty to Johnson, was fulsome in its praise.

You have had the most difficult task in a generation. We hugely admire your fortitude, stamina and enduring optimism. You can be rightly proud of the significant decisions which you have, by common acclamation, got right. Kemi Badenoch, Alex Burghart, Julia Lopez, Neil O'Brien. Lee Rowley.

For many of those resigning, loyalty was an ethical code, central to their understanding of the political process and of personal behaviour. Party loyalty was needed to achieve Conservative goals and loyalty was a test of whether one was a Conservative. In resigning, they were being disloyal to the Prime Minister but not, they felt, to the Party or indeed to the country that they believed was best served by a Conservative government.

I have strived to offer you my loyalty but regrettably it is clear that the party and the country are no longer governable under your tenure. Dr James Davies (PPS)

Indeed, implicit in the action of resigning was the belief that Boris Johnson was no longer a Conservative. This was not necessarily a critique of Johnson's policies, although a small minority were prepared to say that it was, but rather it was a belief that Johnson was no longer putting the Party ahead of his personal interest. In underlining the importance of loyalty, resignees were alluding to Johnson's lack of loyalty to the Party. In their action to resign, they were demonstrating a superior morality to that of their leader.

I have spent many years supporting the Conservative Party at every level, but that loyalty is directed to the party, our values, and ultimately the communities we represent, not any one individual. It is now in the best interest of the Conservative Party and the country for you to Step down. Luke Hall (Minister)

When to pull the trigger

About a third of resignees sought to provide an explanation of the timing of their resignation, often as a form of legitimation or justification. The subtext frequently took the form of implying that they could have resigned earlier—occasionally even that they should have resigned before—but chose not to out of loyalty or for other justifiable reasons.

Like others, I have given you the benefit of the doubt on many occasions. This was in the hope you would gain control of the situation. However, I believe the situation is becoming worse. I have no idea what is happening at Downing Street but it appears you are either badly advised or unable to change or reform the dysfunctional operation at the centre of the government you lead. Virginia Crosbie (PPS)

Sometimes the texts smacked of self-righteousness or even sanctimoniousness, carrying the message that the authors had been monitoring the prime minister's performance for some time, having previously found it wanting. While they had hoped to see signs of improvement, these had not been forthcoming causing them to act even at this late stage. Therefore, if the resignees' drafting had been intended to curry favour with colleagues, or lessen prime ministerial wrath by demonstrating self-restraint, it may have had the opposite effect by conveying a degree of arrogance and suggesting that the words might have been self-serving.

We both know I was particularly upset at the behaviour of the Number Ten team during the Covid restrictions. I backed you in January 2022 because I wanted to see a real change in approach in Number Ten. I have given you ample opportunity to show real change. Sadly, recent events have shown clearly that Government simply cannot function with you in charge. Guy Opperman. (Minister)

Other factors marshalled to legitimate timing included priorities that had previously caused them to defer writing and those that triggered them to put pen to paper (or hit the send key). Among the former was ministerial business to which they were committed and the desire to continue serving the people, sometimes expressed as a matter of duty. The invasion of Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the precarious state of the post-pandemic economy were all cited as reasons for not resigning earlier. Occasionally resignees admitted to enjoying the fulfilling nature of their post and their reluctance to give it up.

I felt duty bound to remain in post given the very challenging circumstances facing the criminal courts. I took the view there had to be some semblance of Government in this crucial arm of our constitution. But the position is clearly untenable. James Cartlidge (Minister)

Other resignees cited similar concerns to explain why they had chosen to act now and not to wait further. With the strategic perspective of a senior minister and future leader, Rishi Sunak merged past and future policy dilemmas in his decision on when to resign.

To leave ministerial office is a serious matter at any time. For me to step down as Chancellor while the world is suffering the economic consequences of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and other serious challenges is a decision that I have not taken lightly.

However, the public rightly expect government to be conducted properly, competently and seriously....

Our country is facing immense challenges. We both want a low-tax, high-growth economy, and world class public services, but this can only be responsibly delivered if we are prepared to work hard, make sacrifices and take difficult decisions. Rishi Sunak (Cabinet)

Three resignees, including George Freeman cited above, wrote explicitly of the accumulation of issues and events that they felt had forced their hand and many others listed the multiple considerations that played in their decision to resign. The most frequently mentioned time-bound event, specifically noted by one in seven resignees, was the handling of Chris Pincher's appointment as deputy chief whip and the admission by the Prime Minister's Office on 4th July that Johnson knew of the sexual allegations that had been made against him. Two resignees were directly involved: Will Quince who was briefed that Johnson knew nothing ahead of the appointment; and Mark Fletcher who had been present at the event in which Pincher is alleged to have groped two men.

Thank you for meeting with me yesterday evening and for your sincere apology regarding the briefings I received from No 10 ahead of Monday's media round, which we now know to be inaccurate.

It is with great sadness and regret that I feel that I have no choice but to tender my resignation as Minister for Children and Families as I accepted and repeated those assurances in good faith. Will Quince (Minister)

.... in our conversation in the tearoom yesterday, you suggested that the events of that night were the fault of the colleagues who were present for allowing him to drink so much.

Such a view seems to me an attempt to absolve Mr Pincher of his actions and, in so doing, to be an apologist for someone who has committed sexual assault. I am unable to accept such a crass and insensitive interpretation of what happened that night.

I have reached the conclusion that any person who suggests that anyone other than Mr Pincher is solely responsible for what happened that night is unfit to lead our country. Mark Fletcher(PPS)

Apart from Bim Afolami answering questions on television, only one resignation letter, that of Robin Walker, Minister of State for School Standards, mentioned other resignations. However, while the presumed sequence of resignations maps onto a logistic curve suggesting contagion effects and the herd instinct that Boris accused his former colleagues of following, it has proved impossible to acquire the minute-by-minute information necessary to model this. There are no discernible associations between the presumed order of resignations and the individual characteristics of resignees.

Stated reasons for resignation

Given the earlier discussion and recognition of the multiple considerations likely to inform the drafting of resignation letters, it would be unwise to take the reasoning offered by resignees at face value. Also, there is a distinction to be drawn between the reasons given for resignation and the outcome that was expected to result from resignation. With respect to the latter, 31 per cent of resignees invited the prime minister to resign, presumably hoping that their own resignation would help to engineer this. The others merely outlined their reasons for resigning.

Altogether 25 discernibly different reasons were offered by resignees with 74 per cent of them providing more than one. Jack Brereton's resignation letter as PPS to the Secretary of State for International Trade was so tentative as to give almost no reason—'the situation has now become untenable'—while Edward Argar, then Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, merely hinted that Johnson lacked the integrity to 'face' the post-pandemic world.

A close reading of all the resignation letters suggests a generalised pattern of reasoning commencing with the high-profile 'revelations' that dogged the Johnson administration from Partygate onwards. The political energy expended to manage the fallout from these revelations or events was seen to be eroding the administration's ability to govern effectively which was, in turn, serving to undermine of the reputation of the Conservative Party with, potentially, catastrophic electoral consequences. In addition, individual members of government were directly or indirectly involved in the crisis management of the allegations and found themselves morally compromised as a result. Taken together, these considerations created a lack of confidence in Johnson or - euphemistically, 'in Number 10' - leading to a belief that Johnson should resign.

It should be stressed that no single resignation letter plotted this precise pattern of causality although that penned by Alex Chalk, the Solicitor General, came close:

The cumulative effect of the Owen Paterson debacle, Partygate and now the handling of the former Deputy Chief Whip's resignation, is that public confidence in the ability of Number 10 to uphold the standards of candour expected of a British Government has irretrievably broken down. I regret that I share that judgement. This comes at a moment of intense challenge for our country, when trust in government can rarely have been more important. I'm afraid the time has therefore come for fresh leadership. Alex Chalk (Ministerial rank)

Most letters contained only a fragment of the plot and a very small number none. Nor, indeed, apart from the joint resignation of five ministers, is there evidence of co-ordinated action plan built on a shared story. The letters were idiosyncratic in the elements that were emphasised.

Among the events identified by commentators, Partygate, Paterson and Pincher, the last was the one most frequently specifically mentioned. It is possible that this was because it was the most recent and may be, as in the case of Andrew Murrison cited above, 'the last straw'.

Equally, though, this would seem to be an eccentric priority given the importance that the public has attached to Partygate. A YouGov Poll conducted in April 2022 indicated that 80 percent of the electorate thought that Johnson lied about the events and that only 17 percent of former Tory voters were convinced that he had not done so (Kirk, 2022). At the end of May, an Ipsos poll indicated that 58 percent of people believed that he should resign because of Partygate and only 46 percent thought that the police investigation had been ‘thorough and independent’ (McKeon, 2022).

The eccentricity may be explained by proximity and even by self-interest. While the Government Whips' Office conjures up ideas of coercion and punishment, the Office has a welfare function for Conservative MPs. Johnson's seeming lack of concern for anyone else but himself was seen to extend to his own colleagues:

I take allegations of sexual misconduct very seriously. To learn that you chose to elevate a colleague to a position of pastoral care for MPs, whilst in full knowledge of his own wrongdoing, shows a severe lack of judgement and care for your parliamentary party. Theo Clarke (Trade envoy)

For Rachel Maclean, Minister for Safeguarding, Johnson's action was a direct affront to her national responsibilities making it impossible, as she explained in her resignation letter, ‘to make progress with this vitally important task’ while he remained in office.

The Pincher affair also seems to have caused resignees to question their own integrity in remaining in post. Indeed, five of the seven MPs who referred directly to personal integrity as a reason for their resignation also mentioned the Pincher debacle. The other principal threat to integrity was the continuing need for Conservative MPs to defend the actions of their leader that they had come to believe were indefensible: ‘You have put us in an impossible situation’ Michelle Donelan wrote in her resignation letter. Some resignees referred to the experience of others - the ‘casual mistreatment of Minister Will Quince’ briefed that Johnson knew nothing of the allegations against Pincher, Michael Gove sacked for telling Johnson the truth, and others resigning for reasons of integrity. Defending the Johnson government made some resignees feel bad about themselves:

Loyalty and unity are traits that I have always endeavoured to provide for our great party. However, I fear I have let these override my judgement recently. Stuart Andrew (Minister)

The third cluster of concerns related to the increasing inability of the Johnson government to govern effectively. This was recognised to be something bad for the country and, leading to the fourth cluster of concerns, bad for the Conservative Party.

There were two distinct lines of argument apparent in the resignation letters that had led resignees to conclude that effective government had ceased. The first, articulated by George Freeman in his letter already cited above, was that the actions of Johnson were directly undermining the government's credibility and ability to govern at home and abroad. Dr James Davies expressed parallel thoughts in a different way that were echoed by others including in the joint letter of five resignees headed by Kemi Badenoch.

...it is clear that the party and the country are no longer governable under your tenure. Integrity and trust must be central to all that we do, but increasingly it has been impossible to defend you in the face of the damaging allegations and perceptions that exist.

Dr James Davies (PPS)

The second argument was that the failure to govern effectively was the result of the political resources being directed to managing the fall-out from the repeated allegations of prime ministerial misconduct:

I believe the government risks becoming so subsumed in continuous firefighting of self-inflicted issues, that it will detract from our ability to deliver on this critically important agenda - and therefore it is time to draw a line. Sara Britcliffe (PPS)

The resignation letters reveal that concern about the impact of events on the Conservative Party took three forms. First, resignees feared personal disrepute through association. They had had to confront this personally but also referred to the implications for Party workers in their constituencies.

The party I love, and this government are now facing continued distraction, scandal, and allegations of cover up. It is not representative of the vast majority of my colleagues. They are hardworking, committed MPs and ministers who care deeply about their constituents and their country. Virginia Crosbie (PPS)

It is our volunteers and local councillors who ultimately take the fury from the public and often end up paying the price for these failures of leadership. ...

Theo Clarke (Trade envoy)

Secondly, resignees were worried about the reputation of the Party, its long-term credibility and its ability to win elections.

Conservatives at their best are seen as hard-headed decision-makers, guided by strong values. We may not have always been popular, but we have been competent in acting in the national interest. Sadly, in the current circumstances, the public are concluding that we are now neither. Sajid Javid (Cabinet)

Finally, some letters, such as that by Robin Walker cited above, hint at divisions within the Party that had been caused or exacerbated by recent events.

In recent weeks and months, we have been relentlessly on the defensive, consumed by introspection and in-fighting. A divided Party cannot win elections. It cannot deliver for those who trusted us with their votes for the first time in 2019. A decent and responsible Government relies on honesty, integrity and mutual respect. Brandon Lewis (Cabinet)

Conclusion: balancing moralities

If Harold MacMillan found events to be his most troubling problem when Conservative prime minister, for Boris Johnson they appear mostly of his own making. Events, culminating in the Pincher affair, challenged the integrity of members of his government, prompted concern about the government's ability to govern and stoked fears that the Party might never be permitted to govern again. Most resignees concluded that Johnson was found to be lacking when judged against Dobel's three principles of public office—moral capacity, competence, and effectiveness—and sought, through resignation, to act with integrity themselves by drawing further attention to Johnson's lack of fitness for office, seeking, in some cases explicitly, to force him to resign. In so doing, they were approaching 'reflective equilibrium', their act of resigning matching both their role and personal expectations (Rawls, 1971).

The isomorphism between the model of the considerations that ministers used to resolve the trilemma over resignation, derived inductively without reference to Dobel's (1999) ethical principles and Stark's (1996) criteria of a successful leader, demonstrates the robustness or, at least, the applicability of the latter two's theorising. What is added is insight into the complex moral trade-offs and practical risks involved in giving up a position of influence, and the performative nature of resignation nuanced with respect to different constituencies.

Few of the 51 resignees would, or could, consider themselves to be morally beyond reproach in resigning. Some would acknowledge that they should have followed others in resigning earlier. Angela Richardson resigned as PPS on 31st January 2022 over Partygate; Lord Wolfson resigned from the Ministry of Justice on 13th April in response to Johnson's refusal to resign after receiving a fixed penalty notice; Paul Holmes resigned as a PPS on 27th May following publication of the Sue Gray report on Partygate; and John Lamont resigned as PPS to vote against Johnson in the 6th June 2022 motion of no confidence.

Apart from good leadership, the Nolan principles of public life demand honesty, integrity, selflessness, openness, objectivity, and accountability. While resignees could argue that they were seeking accountability in trying to persuade Johnson to resign, there was little mention of dishonesty or even of Partygate, while the issue of Johnson's integrity often seemed only to become salient when it impinged on their perception of their own integrity. Likewise, certain resignees only accused Johnson of selfishness when they found themselves placed at risk through Pincher's appointment as deputy chief whip. Pincher aside, reference was more often made to the handling of the revelations and scandals than to their content, justified or not.

Such omissions need to be understood – and perhaps condoned – given the public and performative nature of resignation. Resignees risk their careers, speaking truth or partial truth to power under the eyes of peers, competitors, and adversaries. Numerous letters revealed the struggles that authors had had with competing loyalties and were clearly worded for multiple audiences. Some resignees found it very difficult to articulate any criticism and therefore to justify their actions, while certain letters resembled job applications in listing personal achievements. More women than men were directly accusative.

If 51 members of government considered it morally right to resign, what moral status should be assigned to most of the government that did not? Maybe they lacked agency for the same reasons that caused others to delay their resignation: competing loyalties, fear of reprisals, love of their job, attachment to status, duty to the continuation of government or allegiance to an ideological faction. Maybe some condoned amorality if it meant that the Conservative Party remained in power albeit not governing effectively.

But while resignees might consider those who did not join them to be amoral, could some have resigned for reasons of self-interest? Kemi Badenoch stood unsuccessfully in the subsequent leadership election. Her resignation letter was unusual in being joint and, deliberately or otherwise, bland, and minimally controversial. The former Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, was accused of treachery both by Johnson supporters and later, in the leadership campaign, by those backing Liz Truss. His letter of resignation, though, was unusual in focussing on policy disagreements and avoiding criticism of Johnson. While this drafting might have been strategic, fellow resignee, Andrew Murrison (2022), attests that Sunak had previously refused 'to start an insurgency' out of loyalty to Johnson.

Be that as it may, although supported by a plurality of Conservative MPs, Sunak lost the critical leadership contest among Conservative Party members to Liz Truss who was abroad and silent as other ministers resigned. She opined, during the leadership contest, that Johnson's 'mistakes' had not been 'sufficient' for the Conservative Party to reject him (Duffy, 2022). Ironies abound. Demonstrably not much concerned about Johnson's alleged aversion to truthfulness, her premiership ended when the financial markets discerned that she truly intended to implement the extreme free-market policies that she had promised during her leadership campaign. The catastrophic impact of her tenure on the British economy means that Sunak is unlikely to be able deliver on his policy pledges and, irrespective of motive, my rue the day that he sent his resignation letter.

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Figure 1 Example of a world cloud based on full corpus

