

## We Unhappy Few: The Conservative Party Leadership Race

Written by Russell Foster

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RUSSELL FOSTER, JUN 24 2019

The 2018 dystopian videogame *We Happy Few* takes place in an alternate version of Britain in 1964. A sparsely-detailed plot suggests that twenty years after the Nazi conquest of Britain, the Soviet counter-conquest of Europe, and the collapse of the Empire, 1960s Britain has become a desolate, hopeless land. Consequently the game's setting, the fictional island town of Wellington Wells, has completely isolated itself not only from the wider world but even the remains of the United Kingdom. To cope with dark memories and the bleak desolation of their collapsing dystopia, the citizens of Wellington Wells have psychologically retreated into a land of make-believe. In a collapsing realm with no agriculture, no industry, a media which broadcasts recycled lies and fanciful nostalgia, Wellington Wells' complete isolation from reality is maintained through constant xenophobia towards every nation (including all other Britons not of wealthy, Southern, English descent); and heavily redacted, over-the-top patriotic versions of history in which Britain is not the destitute and forgotten land it has become but that England always was, England still is, and England always will be, the supreme nation on Earth. This delusion, though, is not found only in the fictional Britain of *We Happy Few*.

After three years of Brexhaustion, the political deadlock is about to be broken. At least in name, if not practice. Following Theresa May's repeated failure to pass the Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament and her subsequent resignation, the future of Brexit now rests with approximately 160,000 fee-paying members of the Conservative Party who are offered a choice of Boris Johnson or Jeremy Hunt. Barring the most unlikely of circumstances, Boris Johnson is all but guaranteed to become the next Prime Minister, a position he has been waiting for for at least two years. His victory is assured because, in spite of his unpopularity among Conservative MPs and the widespread contempt in which he is held by swathes of the British population, Boris Johnson is the natural choice of Conservative Party members. Because of their demographics, Conservative Party members are not only highly Eurosceptic but, like the citizens of Wellington Wells, entertain questionable versions of history and exhibit an isolation from the rest of the country.

Brexit was not the result of a single factor. But as many commentators and analysts have indicated, nationalist sentiments and imperial nostalgia, particularly among older sections of an English population who believes that Britain alone won the Second World War (despite there being very few people left alive who were combat-active in a war that ended 74 years ago), were significant motivations. Now that the choice of the Prime Minister who will be in Downing Street when October 31<sup>st</sup> comes, is the choice of 160,000 party members, the demographics of the Conservative Party demonstrate not only why Boris will win, but what awaits Britain after Hard Brexit.

Recent research reveals two significant datasets. First is the demographic composition of the Conservative and Unionist Party. 97% of Conservative members are white. 70% are male. The average age is 57, while 44% of members are over the age of 65. Economically, the vast majority of members are very wealthy homeowners; and geographically, the majority of members are concentrated in rural areas and small towns in the southern shires.

Second is party members' political preferences surrounding Brexit. The party is conservative not only on economic and constitutional matters but on social issues, as evidenced by the party losing 35-40% of its membership over same-sex marriage in 2013. Research from Queen Mary University shows that half of Conservative members

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support bringing back the death penalty, and 84% believe that schools should teach obedience to state authority. The remnants of that shrinkage demonstrate stark preferences on Brexit, as revealed by a recent YouGov poll of party members. The June 18<sup>th</sup> poll revealed that Brexit is so important to party members, they are prepared to initiate the destruction of the party and the fragmentation of the United Kingdom itself, to achieve Brexit. To achieve Brexit, 63% would accept Scotland declaring independence, 61% would accept significant damage to the British economy, 59% would accept Northern Ireland declaring independence or joining the Republic of Ireland, and 54% would accept the destruction of the Conservative Party itself. The only scenario that would cause a razor-thin majority of party members (51%) to abandon Brexit is the prospect of Jeremy Corbyn becoming Prime Minister.

The party membership, significantly, is much wealthier than the average Briton. Hence Boris Johnson's promise to give the super-rich a major tax cut, paid for by raising everyone else's taxes. Economically, Jeremy Hunt's plan to slash corporation tax from 19% to 12.5% would be less undesirable, partly because it would likely attract money into the country as opposed to Boris Johnson's pledge to simply shuffle existing money upwards. In a general election, the Conservatives might have chosen Hunt as party leader over Johnson. But with the future of Britain in the hands of 160,000 party members rather than 45,000,000 eligible voters, Hunt's policies are irrelevant. And policies of economic loyalties are not the only trump cards which Boris holds. For better or for worse, Boris Johnson is a far more charismatic politician and performs well as a quintessentially English character, combining a Churchillian bulldog pantomime act with just the right level of fake bumbling and self-deprecating modesty. To an ageing, wealthy, shrinking party membership who are already prepared to break up the UK and destroy the party in order to deliver what Fintan O'Toole termed "the paranoid fantasy of Brexit", the delusional imagination that England single-handedly defeated Nazism and that the EU represents a new continental evil, Johnson is all but guaranteed to win. The implications for this are significant.

The Bow Group's own research indicates that the Conservative Party is in terminal decline, attracting next to no new members while losing existing members to resignations, lapsed memberships, and death. Significantly, new research on changing political preferences shows that in the age of austerity, Britons are not turning to conservatism in middle age as they used to. Research in 2013, which predicted the Conservatives slipping to third or fourth place in the UK by 2023 due to membership attrition alone, has been proven to be right for the wrong reason. The Conservative Party's disastrous performance in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, and the June 2019 Peterborough by-election, revealed a party that has already slipped into somewhere between third and fifth place; a defeat rendered worse by the six-week-old Brexit party mauling the UK's oldest party. This leaves Parliament in checkmate, incapable of moving in any direction. The Conservatives are still fighting their civil war, but so are Labour. With Labour still licking its wounds from a decisive defeat in the European elections and a Pyrrhic victory in Peterborough, with Jeremy Corbyn still incapable of formulating anything that vaguely resembles a policy on Brexit, and with Labour likely to spend yet another summer dealing with anti-Semitism accusations (this time, in the form of a government enquiry) there is very little chance that support for a second referendum will receive a Parliamentary majority. Neither will support for a No-Deal Brexit. Neither will support for a revived version of Theresa May's thrice-defeated Withdrawal Agreement. This leaves the possibility of Boris Johnson calling a general election, but with the Conservatives fighting a war on four fronts against Labour, the Brexit Party, the Liberal Democrats, and each other, this would be a suicidal option. Meanwhile a stronger EU is in no mood to extend the Brexit negotiations any further. The net result of this is that unless something unforeseen and highly unlikely happens, October 31<sup>st</sup> will quickly arrive with a No-Deal Brexit as the default option, no matter what Parliament wants.

There are other possibilities, as unlikely as they are. Boris Johnson could promise No Deal just long enough to win the support of 160,000 Conservative leavers, then betray them as soon as he gets the keys to Downing Street (unlikely). Boris could end up relying heavily on Conservative ministers who might try to steer him away from Hard Brexit (quite unlikely). Jeremy Corbyn could resign his leadership and make way for a Remainer to lead Labour (very unlikely). Or perhaps a general election could actually produce a majority for a party – any party – which has a clear Leave or Remain stance, and at least break the deadlock in Parliament (most unlikely). Or, something unexpected and unpredictable could happen, such as Boris Johnson becoming the third Conservative Prime Minister to be toppled by Brexit, triggering yet another leadership race or an election in the last days before Brexit. Yet even if a general election in the autumn returns some sort of majority, either for the Tories or Labour (or even the Liberal Democrats, however unlikely that may be), the new Prime Minister will still be faced with a polarised country whose

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faith in politicians, and in British politics itself, has never been lower. With the October 31<sup>st</sup> deadline looming, no Prime Minister will be able to satisfactorily navigate an angry Parliament and a furious electorate. Hard Brexit is the likeliest outcome not only because of a lack of time and appetite for a second referendum, and not only because Parliament is too deadlocked and the EU too fed up with the British to offer another extension, but because it is the desire of the Conservative Party's membership. Even if it means the destruction of their party and the breakup of their country, splendid isolation at any price is the final act of Brexit.

The videogame *We Happy Few* paints a bleak picture of Britain after disaster. In the crumbling wasteland of Wellington Wells the government's and population's desperation to quarantine their town from the outside world, and from their own despair at losing the Empire and losing a war, has resulted in a starving, economically devastated realm teetering on the brink of complete societal collapse. In this defeated dystopia, the grim realities of past, present, and future are glossed over by a shrinking group of citizens who shun reality in favour of manufactured memories, delusions of grandeur, and empty affirmations of quintessentially English (but not British) exceptionalism. With Britain's actual future in the hands of a similarly shrinking group, life will soon imitate this art.

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### **About the author:**

Dr Russell Foster is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in European Studies at King's College London. Prior to this he was a Marie-Curie International Fellow in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Russell studied History at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; International Relations and Human Geography at Newcastle University, UK; and he was a Visiting Scholar in European Studies at Virginia Tech, USA. His research interests include nationalism, identity, the EU as empire, and the emergence of new identities in Europe. His first book, *Mapping European Empire*, was published in 2015. He is currently researching the emergence of the New Right in Europe, the changing nature of white identities and masculinity in the West, the role of symbols and icons in shaping Western identities, and the relationship between politics and fiction. His website is [www.russelldfoster.com](http://www.russelldfoster.com).