

Britain votes for Brexit

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This article is related to General Studies-Paper-II (International Relations)

Indian Express

14 Dec., 2019

"With a thumping win, this is Boris Johnson's opportunity to refashion the U.K. according to his beliefs."

The British election results are the political equivalent of an earthquake. It is an unambiguous signal that in the months and years ahead, the United Kingdom will become a very different country — politically, economically, possibly territorially but certainly in terms of its international standing. After almost a decade of weak or coalition prime ministers, Boris Johnson will be a powerful head of government, strengthened not just by his sizeable majority of 78 but also by the weakest Labour opposition since almost 1935.

The first big change will be Brexit. Britain will leave Europe on January 31, 2020. Yet that will also constitute the first big challenge. Mr. Johnson has 11 months to secure a trade deal not just with the European Union but also with Britain's other significant trading partners such as the United States, Australia, China and India. Can it be done in such a short time? It won't be easy and if he fails the transition period will end with the equivalent of the hard Brexit everyone wants to avoid.

Working class vote

A lot will turn on the political and economic changes Mr. Johnson's victory heralds. With 364 seats and 45% of the vote his Conservatives have achieved their best result since Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1987. In fact, in vote share terms it is the best outcome since 1970. More significantly, the party has made major gains in Labour strongholds in the midlands, north-west and north-east. Tony Blair's Sedgefield has fallen to them. More tellingly, Stoke-on-Trent and Great Grimsby, which have never been won by the Tories, are now in their possession. In Bas-setlaw the swing from Labour to Tories was an astonishing 18%. Even London constituencies such as Kensington, which voted 70% to Remain in 2016, have gone their way. So it is no exaggeration to say the Conservatives have transformed from a party of the shires to one that also represents the working classes and London.

In contrast Labour is diminished. This is the party's worst defeat since 1935. The 203 seats it has won are less than the 209 delivered by Michael Foot in 1983. At the time the party's manifesto was dubbed 'the longest suicide note in history'. Mr. Corbyn's could quite possibly have buried the party.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Corbyn has announced he will not lead Labour into the next elections. Though he wants to continue over the period of reflection that must follow it is hard to believe his party will let him. The truth is Labour was defeated not just by Brexit but also because Britain was not prepared to accept Mr. Corbyn's socialist policies. He cannot shrug off personal responsibility for this debacle.

The Sturgeon factor

It has also been a disappointing election for the Liberal Democrats whose leader, Jo Swinson, lost her seat. The party ended up with just 11 MPs, one less than it had. But across the border in Scotland it was a brilliant outcome for Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish Nationalists. Of the 59 seats to be won her party got 48, increasing its tally by 13 and securing a vote share of 45%. Along with Boris Johnson she is the other champion winner of this election.

Without doubt the Scottish Nationalists will demand a second referendum on independence for Scotland. They believe they have a mandate for it. Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, has already said he will not agree. With both politicians triumphant there's a clear and unavoidable clash looming ahead.

In these circumstances, what sort of prime minister will Mr. Johnson seek to be? First, he is the undisputed leader of his party which, in turn, has a firm and unshakeable grip on Parliament. He can do virtually what he wants. This is his opportunity to refashion the U.K. according to his beliefs.

In terms of political positioning, his victory speech suggests he might move from the right towards the centre. He defined the Conservatives as a "one-nation" party. As he put it, "we must change too". So will he distance himself from Tory right-wingers such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, one of the leaders of the eurosceptic European Research Group? Yesterday, speculation on the BBC suggested this could happen. And, certainly, if Mr. Johnson wants to retain his party's hold on the seats it has won in northern and midland Labour strongholds, this would be necessary.

What next for Labour?

Much the same could also happen to Labour. If the party is to recover from the grim defeat Mr. Corbyn has led it to then it can only be by returning to the centre ground Tony Blair identified in 1997 and which gave the party three consecutive election victories. Of course, a lot depends on who emerges as Labour's new leader. The Momentum lobby might want a younger version of Mr. Corbyn but the parliamentary party will undoubtedly opt for a social democrat who will harken back to Mr. Blair's style and tone.

The paradox is whilst both parties might see virtue in moving politically to the centre, economically Mr. Johnson could incline towards the right. As leader of the Brexit movement in 2016 he made it clear he did not share the protectionism, anti-globalism and even the rigid anti-immigration stand of many Brexiteers. Now, as Prime Minister, he may not subscribe to the Singapore-on-Thames vision of the Brexit hard-wing but his first budget speech in March is likely to introduce radical tax reform, reduce regulation whilst substantially boosting incentives for enterprise and, in particular, The City.

However, this is likely to happen alongside several significant welfare measures. Mr. Johnson's victory speech also committed him to increasing public spending, particularly on infrastructure and health. The National Health Service, which Labour claimed could be in danger in his hands, will be a significant beneficiary.

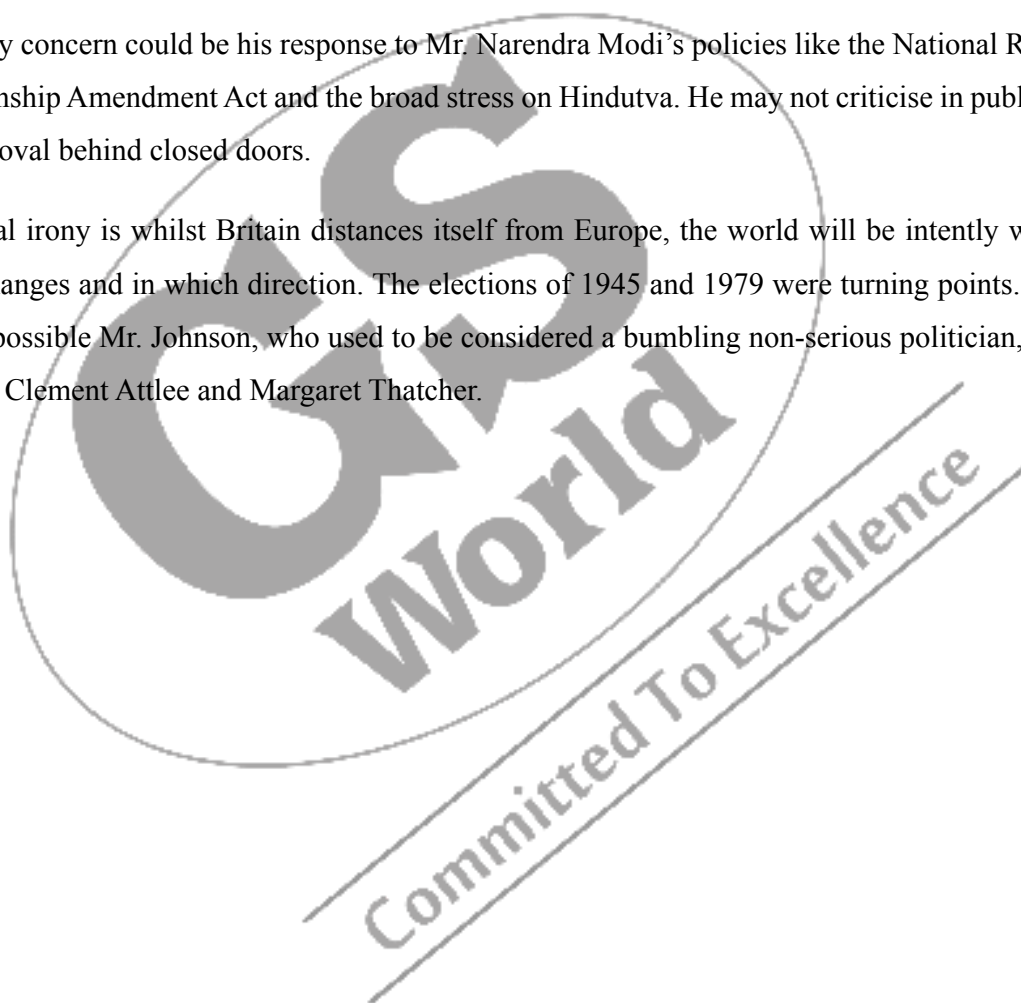
In foreign policy terms Mr. Johnson will forge a close relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump who, anyway, regards him as a friend. But he will be equally conscious of the need to maintain effective ties with Europe. He has repeatedly said he is not anti-European. Little England or British isolationism is not part of his thinking.

For India

We, in India, can expect in Mr. Johnson a British Prime Minister with affection for and a substantive understanding of our country. Though separated from his wife Marina, who is half-Indian, his four children have Indian blood. He is a frequent visitor, including an unpublicised trip to Ranthambore last year.

The only concern could be his response to Mr. Narendra Modi's policies like the National Register of Citizens, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the broad stress on Hindutva. He may not criticise in public but he could express disapproval behind closed doors.

The final irony is whilst Britain distances itself from Europe, the world will be intently watching to see how much it changes and in which direction. The elections of 1945 and 1979 were turning points. This one is no less. It is even possible Mr. Johnson, who used to be considered a bumbling non-serious politician, could one day be compared to Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher.



Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements:-

1. Brexit related to Britain's exit from the European Union.
2. The immigration policy made by the European Union for the countries involved in the European Union.
3. There are a total of 29 countries in the European Union. Britain will be the third country to exit from the European Union.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 and 3 (d) All of the above

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 13 Dec., is 1 (b)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q.** The historic victory of the Conservative Party in the recent elections in Britain will prove to be extremely important politically and geographically for Britain. Do you agree with this statement? In the context of India, also show the impact on relations with Britain. (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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