



### **A Safety-first manifesto**

This weekend Boris Johnson launched the Conservative election manifesto in the marginal seat of Telford, declaring that it was time to “get Brexit done”. In a message that has become familiar in recent months, Mr Johnson argued that by doing so, a Conservative government could then focus on domestic priorities including “the NHS and the cost of living.”

In a confident and energetic address, the Prime Minister promised that a majority Conservative government would mean that the Withdrawal Agreement would be passed by 31 January 2020. Portraying a sense of optimism about the future, he claimed this would bring certainty and “unleash the potential of the country”.

Yet as commentators have pointed out, getting the Withdrawal Agreement Bill through would only be the end of the beginning. The EU are already preparing for the next stage of Brexit, the future relationship. On that the manifesto rules out any extension of the Brexit transition period past December 2020, meaning that the U.K. would have to negotiate that new trading relationship with the EU by then or else leave with no deal.

In drafting this manifesto, the Conservative team have been acutely aware of the way the 2017 manifesto, and in particular the issue of social care, derailed that campaign. With polls suggesting that the Conservative Party is currently on course for a working majority, Boris Johnson’s advisers were determined to ensure that there were no hostages to fortune.

Instead the Conservatives produced a glossy, professional looking, but pared-back manifesto with policies and pledges that have for the most-part already been announced, either at the party conference, in the spending round or the first weeks of this campaign. The one eye-catching new initiative is the promise to hire 50,000 new nurses, re-introducing bursaries removed by David Cameron’s government just a few years ago. The slimmed-down prospectus led the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Director Paul Johnson to comment shortly after the launch: “As a blueprint for five years in government the lack of significant policy action is remarkable.”

None of that will concern the leader’s campaign team. They will argue, with some justification, that a simple message is more likely to cut through with the electorate than a shopping list of policies. Indeed, the manifesto highlights six key domestic pledges, including one not to raise the rate of income tax, VAT or National Insurance, alongside the banner “My Guarantee” and the PM’s signature. Not a pledge card, but an approach straight out of the New Labour playbook nevertheless.

With the Brexit Party sinking in the polls and not contesting seats won by the Conservatives in 2017, Boris Johnson has clearly decided that traditional Conservative voters have nowhere else to go and although there are parts of the manifesto that will please the heartlands, the priority is to go after Labour voters, particularly those who voted to leave the EU.

So out goes the pledge to restore fox hunting, a mainstay of Conservative manifestos since 2005. As does any promise of raising the threshold for the higher rate of tax, despite Mr Johnson's commitment to do so during the Conservative leadership contest. Instead the focus is on raising the living wage and cutting national insurance. Yet although the manifesto says the ultimate ambition is to bring NI thresholds in line with those for income tax, the only firm commitment is to raise the threshold to £9,500 next year, which the IFS has calculated is worth only £1.63 a week.

On Thursday Labour issued a costings document alongside its manifesto and this weekend the Conservatives have followed suit. Although there are clear differences between the parties in respect of proposed capital spending, in annual current spending there is a gulf: under the Conservatives it would rise by £3 billion by 2024, compared with £83 billion for Labour.

Boris Johnson highlighted this difference, arguing the choice "couldn't be starker" and spent almost as much of his launch speech attacking his opponents as promoting his own prospectus. He ridiculed Mr Corbyn's Brexit stance by the put down that "he used to be indecisive – now he's not sure". In an iteration of the closing argument of the 2015 campaign, Mr Johnson warned of the prospects of a Sturgeon/Corbyn "coalition of chaos".

Mr Johnson's advisers know that Conservative candidates face a restless and frustrated electorate, with low levels of trust in politicians and in the Prime Minister himself. They believe the best way to get a majority is to make it a binary choice between Mr Johnson and the even more unpopular Mr Corbyn; and between a Conservative Party with modest ambitions, and a Labour leap in the dark.

## Main policies at a glance

### Brexit and Trade

- Start putting the Brexit deal through Parliament before Christmas and seek to pass it by 31 January 2020
- Negotiate a trade relationship with the EU next year and commit not to extend the implementation period beyond December 2020
- In parallel, legislate to ensure high standards of workers' rights, environmental protection and consumer rights
- Aim to have 80 per cent of UK trade covered by free trade agreements within the next three years, starting with the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan

### Taxation

- No increase in the rates of income tax, National Insurance or VAT over the next 5 years
- Raise the National Insurance threshold to £9,500 next year
- Cancel the planned reduction in corporation tax from 19% to 17%
- Implement the Digital Services Tax
- Review and reform Entrepreneur's Relief
- Stamp duty surcharge on non-UK resident to pay for schemes to tackle rough sleeping

## **Economy and Business**

- Public spending to be limited to 3% of GDP averaged over the five-year parliament, but this target would be reassessed if debt interest reaches 6% of revenue in order to “keep debt under control”
- Fundamental review of the business rates system, with an objective of cutting rates. As a first step, further reduce business rates for retail businesses, as well as extending the discount to grassroots music venues, small cinemas and pubs
- Pledge to almost double research spending to 2.4% of the UK’s GDP
- Reform insolvency rules and the audit regime

## **Immigration**

- Pledge to have “fewer lower-skilled migrants” and reduced immigration overall, but no specific target
- Introduce an Australian-style points-based immigration system
- Bespoke visa schemes for new migrants to fill shortages (including a NHS visa and a start-up visa)

## **Environment and Climate Change**

- Aim to reach net zero by 2050 with investment in clean energy solutions and green infrastructure to reduce carbon emissions and pollution
- A ban on exporting plastic waste outside the OECD and introduction of a levy designed to increase the proportion of recyclable plastic in packaging
- An Office of Environmental Protection, along with new targets, including for air quality
- Maintain the energy price cap and spend £6.3 billion on efficiency measures to cut fuel bills in 2.2 million homes

## **Infrastructure and Transport**

- Intention to bring full fibre broadband to every home and business across the UK by 2025
- A commitment to build “at least” one million new homes over the next five years
- Encourage a new market in long-term fixed rate mortgages
- £2 billion for a new pothole-filling programme
- Build Northern Powerhouse Rail; invest in the Midlands Rail Hub and improve train lines in the South West and East Anglia
- Require that a minimum service operates during transport strikes

## **Health and Social Care**

- 50,000 more nurses, with students receiving a £5,000-£8,000 annual maintenance grant
- 6,000 more doctors in general practice and 6,000 more primary care professionals
- Address the ‘taper problem’ in doctors’ pensions
- End hospital car parking charges by making parking free for certain categories of patients and staff
- Seek a cross-party consensus on social care in order to bring forward the necessary proposals and legislation for long-term reform.

## **Education and childcare**

- £1bn fund to help create more high quality, affordable childcare
- Raise teachers' starting salaries to £30,000
- Take the first steps towards a Right to Retrain with a £3bn for a new National Skills Fund

## **Crime and Justice**

- 20,000 more police officers
- Extension of “stop and search” to crack down on violent crime”
- Introduce tougher sentencing for the worst offenders and end automatic halfway release from prison for serious crimes. For child murderers, life imprisonment without parole.
- More support for victims of rape, extra protections for those suffering from domestic abuse, and introduce a Victims Law to guarantee their rights

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