

Boris's Ceausecu Moment



by Ralph Berry

On Friday, 3 June, Boris Johnson and his wife Carrie came to the steps of St Paul's Cathedral for the Service of Thanksgiving. They were met with sustained booing from the crowd for the brief, 15-second period before they left their car and entered the cathedral. I was at once reminded of the moment when President Ceausecu of Romania was addressing a large crowd in Bucharest's main square. The crowd started booing, and Ceausecu looked puzzled. Surely they weren't booing him? But then it became unmistakable. The TV footage was at once turned off, but the fact of very wide hostility was ineffaceable.

On the following day the Ceausecus fled their Palace and were soon arrested. They were both tried and shot on 25 December 1989. From the crowd warning to execution took four days.

Now consider Boris Johnson. After the Platinum Jubilee had come to its end, the political commentators turned to the

great question, Boris's future. The rules state that a challenge to the leader of the Conservative Party must require the votes of 15% of the Conservative MPs. That meant that 54 MPs must send in a letter to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee, Sir Graham Brady. The members are all backbench Tories and cannot be in Government. Sir Graham has treated all such letters in the strictest of confidence, and has always made it clear that he will say nothing about numbers until the magic number was passed. Though talked about there was no confidence that the Prime Minister would be challenged, and 54 letters is considered a high bar..

Yesterday morning, 6 June, Sir Graham announced that the 54 letters had been received. He notified the Prime Minister on Sunday, 5 June, and they agreed that the election—which is open to all Conservative MPs, whether in Government or not—would take place the same day. The Tories do not hang about when engaged in king-killing. Voting in the secret ballot took place in Westminster between 6 pm and 8 pm, and ten minutes were enough for the count. The result was announced at 9 pm.

This was a nominal victory for the Prime Minister, to nobody's surprise for many voters are on the Government payroll. But the members who voted against the Prime Minister was a staggering 148, far more than any had predicted..

Boris, ever the fighter, said on TV that he would carry on. This cannot be for long. When 148 members of the ruling party say that they do not support their leader, the end of the Government is in sight. Boris Johnson is mortally wounded. It has taken the Tories three days to accomplish what the Romanians did in four.