

All change in the leadership election.

The decision of the 1922 Committee Executive to change the rules of the leadership election has changed its dynamics. We have gone from having a wide range of choices with more candidates likely to come forward, to a narrowing with more candidates likely to drop out even before Nominations close on June 10th. Putting in rising requirements for MP support for Nomination and the first two rounds makes it much more difficult for an outsider or different candidate to start from a small base and grow their support over the early rounds. There has been a mini rush for more MPs to declare for a candidate, creating a premier league of four, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove and Dominic Raab. Two candidates, Kit Malthouse and James Cleverly have already stepped down, with pressure on other candidates to do the same for want of more support. This is now a more traditional election, with growing camps for the main candidates trying to Hoover up more votes and pledges by demonstrating momentum for their candidate.

Nominations close on June 10th. The first round ballot is on 13 June, the second round on 18 June, the third round on 19 June and rounds four and five if needed on 20 June. That would allow for a seven candidate race with just one dropping out at each stage and two winners to go on to the contest amongst the membership or for a more numerous field if more than one drops out between rounds owing to the new thresholds or candidate choice. It is likely we will not need rounds beyond June 20th. It would be worrying if we got to a last two only for the second placed candidate to do a deal to prevent a membership run off. Under the rules the race in the country can be eliminated by candidates colluding or changing their minds, as with the last leadership election.

I have now seen and heard a range of views from members of the Wokingham constituency. 50 came to a reception and others have emailed or spoken to me. There is no one stand out candidate commanding great support, with many members saying they do not know a number of the candidates and do not therefore wish to commit to one particular one at this early stage. Boris Johnson is the best known and attracted the most mentions wanting him on the ballot paper, but his numbers were still in single figures with most do not know.

I have now had the opportunity to talk to Dominic Raab, one of the two candidates in the front runners list who resigned from the government over the Brexit policy being pursued by Mrs May. He took the job of Brexit Secretary knowing the PM's commitment to the Withdrawal Treaty. He voted for the Withdrawal Agreement on the third vote despite having strong reservations about it. He states clearly that as PM he would get us out by October 31 with or without an Agreement. He also says he has a preference for an Agreement and thinks it should be possible to renegotiate it with the EU despite their repeated statements to the contrary. He wants changes to the backstop and some other matters, but seems willing to countenance a two year delay in exit and making further substantial payments to the EU. These views make it difficult for me to vote for him.

Michael Gove has repeated his support for the Withdrawal Agreement, and said he would countenance a further delay in our exit to try to get a better deal. He seems to think he might be able to renegotiate the Treaty, and seems to imply the only really bad feature of it is the Irish backstop which he would like to time limit. These views make it impossible for me to vote for him. Both these candidates have interesting views of a range of other topics, but if we cannot get out of the EU promptly and cleanly the policies we follow post Brexit will be drowned out by disappointment and continuing rows over Brexit. The general view of most of the candidates is in favour of relaxing austerity, with some tax cuts and some spending increases, as recommended regularly on this site.