

# Welcome to the Court of England's New 'Sun King'

***By Dr Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University***

Life under new Prime Minister Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson has been, as expected, far from dull. Johnson's first week has involved a flurry of public appearances intended to indicate his popularity as a 'man of the people' as well demonstrating his commitment to the continuance of the United Kingdom.

These trips have been fascinating in that if Johnson had hoped to be feted in a way Winston Churchill, someone he claims to be a hero, was as PM during the second-world-war, he will probably have been disappointed. Johnson is reputed to be as thin-skinned as American President Donald Trump. The booing that has accompanied Johnson's visits to Scotland and Wales may, should he reflect for a few moments in his break-neck schedule, cause him to think that being PM is not as easy as it may seem.

As is well known, since childhood when asked what he wished to do when he grew up and answered that he wished to be "world king", Johnson has long coveted the role of becoming the PM. This was a role he believed he was destined to inherit. Indeed, resonant with Churchill, who, prior to conflict with the Nazis, was regarded as a failure, but was seen as 'man of the hour' as PM of a national government dedicated to steadfast resistance against Hitler's regime. Johnson appears to believe Brexit is his opportunity to unite the country by finding a glorious solution that eluded his predecessor Theresa May.

Many believe that Johnson is a deeply flawed character. Respected journalist and influential historian Max Hastings said precisely this in a recent *Guardian* article when he explained that as editor, he'd employed Johnson as its 'flamboyant Brussels correspondent for' *The Telegraph*. If Johnson ever needs to apply for a job requiring references from a previous employer, he should find an alternative to Hastings who stated categorically, "he is unfit for national office,

because it seems he cares for no interest save his own fame and gratification.”

Given that Johnson is now the most important politician – the word ‘Prime’ is a clue – what Hastings states about his integrity is, quite frankly, utterly damning in that he “would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade.” But it’s perhaps the following statement by Hastings that has the most profound and worrying consequences about Johnson’s ability to deliver the sort of impartial (fair) and objective stewardship that should be expected of a government:

*“...his graver vice is cowardice, reflected in a willingness to tell any audience, whatever he thinks most likely to please, heedless of the inevitability of its contradiction an hour later.”*

During the campaign for leadership of the Conservative Party, Johnson made various pledges about the way in which he believed that the economy could be stimulated by increased funding and tax cuts. These included an additional £1 billion to recruit 20,000 new police officers and almost £5 billion to attempt to remedy problems in schools caused by cuts in to spending on schools since 2015. Johnson also stated his intention to raise the threshold point, at which 40% tax kicks in from £50,000 to £80,000 and to raise the level at which workers start paying national insurance contributions (NICs) to £12,500 – currently it is £166 per week which is just over £8,600.

Other pledges made by Johnson included free TV licences for over 75s, raising the level of stamp duty so that all house sales under £500,000 are to be exempt, raising the national living wage, nationwide full-fibre broadband by 2025 and the creation of six ‘freeports’. Cynics argue that these pledges were made in order to ensure that those who were voting in the Tory leadership contest, its 160,000 members, almost exclusively white and middle-class, would be swayed in favour of him.

On taking office immediately after having been sworn in by the Queen, Johnson made his much-anticipated statement in which he criticised naysayers and pessimists who he believes not only hold the UK back but have thwarted the will of the people in not ensuring that it

has already left the EU as was the result of the referendum held in June 2016.

This speech contained a number of sweeping statements of the sort of social and economic change Johnson wished to implement. These included ensuring that patients no longer have to wait three weeks to see their doctor for an appointment and that there would be “20 new hospital upgrades and ensuring that the money for the NHS really does get to the front line.” Ambitiously, some would say that given the difficulties, irresponsibly, Johnson made pledges concerning care so that it is not necessary to sell a home to pay for it:

*“And so I am announcing now, on the steps of Downing Street, that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared, to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve.”*

Not content with creating solutions to social care that have proved intractable for previous governments recognising the intractable and phenomenal challenges of an aging population that requires vastly increasing funding for health and social care, Johnson made a commitment to increase wages and higher productivity so “we close the opportunity gap.”

Using his rhetorical trick of employing a mixture of bravado and vague threat, Johnson stated his intention to create a solution to the ‘backstop’ that was conceived as a way to protect the principles contained in the Good Friday Agreement to make the border between Northern Ireland and neighbouring Republic of Ireland all but irrelevant:

*“I say next to our friends in Ireland and in Brussels and around the EU—I am convinced we can do a deal without checks at the Irish border because we refuse under any circumstances to have such checks and yet without that anti-democratic backstop and it is of course vital at the same time that we prepare for the remote possibility that Brussels refuses any further to negotiate and we are forced to come out with no deal.”*

Boris Johnson is engaging in the sort of behaviour that betrays the sort of irresponsibility that the likes of Max Hastings have warned

against. He is attempting to promise what may prove to be so difficult as to be practically impossible or so outrageously expensive that it will bankrupt the country. Those who have suggested that there may be difficulties are condemned as the sort of pessimists he derided on the steps of Downing Street.

Moreover, as some commentators are making clear with respect to the threat of allowing no-deal if the EU refuse to abandon inclusion of the much maligned backstop in the withdrawal agreement, Johnson is contemplating an outcome that would lead to circumstances that will be so devastating as to undermine any possibility of investing in boosting the UK economy.

Johnson's 'reshuffle' has been compared to the scene in *The Godfather: Part One* film in which Michael Corleone, on assuming the mantle of the most powerful Don, engages in widespread assassination of enemies; apparently Johnson's favourite scene from a film. The ability to sack even those who supported him as leader but are seen as not sufficiently willing to proclaim the virtues of a no-deal outcome, was clearly intended to demonstrate Johnson's intention to govern in way that he dominates the agenda.

This sort of steely-determination is regarded many as an essential prerequisite of becoming the PM. Nonetheless, not tolerating the sort of opposition he engaged in when a member of Theresa May's government. On the other hand, it may be seen as hypocrisy.

Some have suggested Boris Johnson's munificence and belief that things can get better if only we all believe in Brexit, is deliberately intended to create a sunny disposition to the latest incarnation of 'Boris'. As such, some have suggested that he is this country's 'Sun King' an expression that emanates from a seventeenth century French monarch Louis XIV who was born September 5<sup>th</sup> 1638.

Though the current Queen Elizabeth II has reigned since 6<sup>th</sup> February 1952, over 67 years, Louis XIV reigned for 72 years and 110 days until his death on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1715. He believed himself to be a direct representative of God having been christened Louis-Dieudonné, meaning 'gift of God' and became king at the age of four upon the death of his father, Louis XIII (1601-1643).

Louis XIV's moniker due to the fact that the sun was his emblem and was cultivated the image of an omniscient and infallible "Roi-Soleil" ("Sun King") around whom the entire realm orbited. He uttered the statement "*L'État, c'est moi*" ("I am the State") and there was made it apparent that his belief in divine right to rule allowed him to wield absolute power.

Intriguingly, Louis XIV is remembered for his love of women and the decadent and outrageous behaviour that occurred in the Palace of Versailles, a hunting lodge 12 miles south-west of Paris he forced all of the nobility to move to from the capital so he could exercise absolute control over them. Aristocrats were expected to be obedient and were expected to compete for the privilege of serving the king.

Given his tendencies for exercising absolute power, it is hardly surprising that Louis XIV was not averse to invasion and a highly aggressive approach to foreign policy, including invasion of the Spanish Netherlands (he claimed as his wife's inheritance) as well as seizing territory from Native American people and sending French citizens to live on their land which he named Louisiana.

Some may argue that making any comparison between Louis XIV's absolutism and Boris Johnson's desire as PM to rule in a more direct way than, for instance, Theresa May is stretching the imagination to the point of incredulity.

Perhaps, with relevance to the backstop and belief that if the opportunity presents itself through a change in the Parliamentary arithmetic, the belief that Boris would happily agree to a revised withdrawal agreement in which, for the purposes of maintaining the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland effectively remains part of the EU may provide a connection to Louis XIV, whose actions incurred the wrath of all Protestants by issuing what is known as the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685.

This edit resulted in destruction of Protestant churches, closure of Protestant schools and expulsion of Protestant clergy. Given that Protestants were prohibited from assembly, marriages were annulled, and that all future baptism and education would be in the Catholic faith, it is hardly surprising that many of the approximately one million Huguenots who lived in France, many being artisans or other types of

skilled workers, fled France to England, Switzerland, Germany and the American colonies, among other places.

Boris Johnson finds himself in a situation of facing multiple dilemmas and contradictions that appear irreconcilable. In the past a combination of luck and bluster based on his ability to charm and humour has allowed him to get through. Now he is in the job he has desired all of his life he will need to create solutions that are based on more than whim and optimism that it will all work in the end.

Theresa May was far from perfect – to say the least – but at least recognised the delicacy of dealing with Ireland. Having cooperation and empathy from Dublin in negotiating the WA she so strenuously supported did not come about by accident.

The fact that, according to rumour, when finding out the Irish *Taoiseach* (PM) is named Varadkar because his father was Indian, Johnson asked in his typically insensitive way, why he wasn't "called Murphy like all the rest of them?" demonstrates that he has a long way to go to be remembered with the fondness that some, though not all, recall Winston Churchill – or that his 'reign' is characterised by future historians as truly sunny.