

Enjoy the Silence...If You Can

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John Lennon, tragically cut down by an assassin's bullet in New York in December 1980 aged only 40, once claimed, "I believe in everything until it's disproved. So, I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it's in your mind. Who's to say that dreams and nightmares aren't as real as the here and now?"

In the fullness of time, I believe, people will question what sort of madness descended on this country in electing Boris Johnson as Prime Minister (PM).

Like a good many others, I'd been predicting that the end Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson's period as PM. However, I harboured doubts about whether we'd see it quite so soon. After all, as fellow Old Etonian and former PM, David Cameron, who notoriously distrusted him, famously said of Johnson, "The greased piglet always escapes."

Back in early June, just prior to the confidence vote against him by his own MPs, when he achieved what was regarded as something of a Pyrrhic victory by gaining the support of 211 of his own MPs (59%) out of a total of 359, Johnson was reported to have told one of his Cabinet colleagues that it would take a "flamethrower" to get him out of No 10 (Walters, 2022).

Those unaware of the origin of the expression 'Pyrrhic victory' may wish to note how apposite it is to Johnson.

Pyrrhus of Epirus (319/318–272 BC), a Greek king of the Hellenistic period, who though having triumphed against the Romans in the Battle of Asculum in Italy in 279 BC, because of the fact that he'd lost so many soldiers in winning this battle, and though the Romans had lost twice as many but could replace, was forced to withdraw to Sicily.

The moral of Pyrrhus' experience is that when you've lost so many foot-soldiers, your ability to carry on fighting is severely compromised.

This was Johnson's fate. He'd 'lost' the confidence of far too many around him, especially some of his key ministers. And whilst it took some persuading, he did eventually agree to resign but, as expected, his speech on Thursday 7th July was presented in his usual bullish manner and considered "resentful and unrepentant" and merely trotted out what he considered to be his major achievements whilst PM (Stewart, 2022).

One of the reasons Johnson is believed to want to remain PM over the summer, rather than handing over control to, for example, deputy PM Dominic Raab, is, it's widely speculated, is so he's been in power longer than predecessor Theresa May. May, because of the nature of her deal with the EU to leave the EU, intended to protect business and peace in Northern Ireland, was undermined by Johnson.

There's little love lost between May and Johnson.

Having rehabilitated Johnson's career by making him Foreign Secretary when she became PM in July 2016 – better to have him 'pissing out of the tent rather than into it' – she made little secret of her disdain for him when he replaced her. May regularly criticised Johnson's policies, approach to government and, most particularly, his disregard of the Northern Ireland Protocol, an international treaty (Parker and Foster, 2022).

Amusingly, that May was seen “dancing to Craig David” whilst attending Henley Festival on the day of Boris Johnson’s resignation may merely be co-incidence (Cooper, 2022). Nonetheless, if she was delighted at the demise of the man who did his utmost to dislodge her so that he could succeed her, she can be forgiven.

Though he remains ‘caretaker’ PM until 5th September when the result of the postal vote of the estimated 200,000 Conservative Party members is announced, Johnson’s tenure as the 55th PM of the United Kingdom will be remembered as one characterised by the personality of a man who is widely acknowledged to have besmirched high office.

Cursory consultation of the source of knowledge for many, Wikipedia, states, “Johnson is a controversial figure in British politics” and critics accuse him of “lying, elitism, cronyism and bigotry” (2022). Sonia Purnell, who worked as deputy journalist to him at the *Telegraph* when he was appointed by then editor, Max Hastings, to be the paper’s Brussels correspondent in 1989, has written a biography of Johnson. She contends the schtick of playing ‘Boris the Clown’ was developed at Eton as a defence against bullying (Purnell, 2011).

Beneath the false bonhomie and jovial exterior, there lies a ruthless operator whose flaws have been exposed by high office and many insider accounts, particularly former chief political advisor Dominic Cummings. Johnson operated his government on a mixture of incompetence, patronage to those expected to support him and malice towards those offering less than wholehearted backing (Buchan, 2022).

Stories concerning Johnson’s character are legion but, notably, his period as Foreign Secretary is universally considered pretty disastrous.

Johnson’s statement in October when, mistakenly, he informed a Parliamentary committee that dual British-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, then serving a five-year sentence on trumped up charges, was “simply teaching people journalism”, resulted in her being detained far longer by the Iranians (Ashmore, 2022).

Johnson’s poorly considered words meant Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe (as well as her family) suffered far longer than she needed to. However, his incompetence has put this country, as well as others, at considerable risk.

After the Novichok attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal by Russian military intelligence officers in Salisbury in March 2018, resulting in the death of Dawn Sturgess, who’d accidentally picked up the container carrying the deadly nerve agent, Johnson, as Foreign Secretary, attended a NATO meeting in Brussels on 27th April to discuss a coordinated response by members. Leaving the meeting he apparently lost the “24/7 security detail on all foreign secretaries” (Cadwalladr, 2022).

Appalling as this would be in isolation, Johnson left Brussels to fly to Italy, at public expense, to attend a party held by his Russian billionaire friend Evgeny Lebedev who he subsequently ennobled in July 2020.

As exposed by a number of journalists, including Carole Cadwalladr (*ibid*) in the months immediately after this trip, and Johnson was forced to admit at a Parliamentary Liaison committee on 6th July, he held a meeting with Evgeny’s father, ex-KGB lieutenant-colonel and associate of Russian President Putin, without being accompanied by security officers or Foreign Office officials (Hayward, 2022).

I'm reminded of what historian Simon Sebag Montefiore claimed in relation to Joseph Stalin in his masterful book, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (2021), that tyrannies tend towards being "virtuoso displays, over many years, of cunning, risk-taking, terror, delusion, narcissism, showmanship, and charm, distilled into a spectacle of total personal control" (2021).

Johnson's supporters would undoubtedly claim that comparison to Stalin, every bit as dreadful as Hitler, is facile. Johnson, they'd typically assert, was popular precisely because he didn't conform to the stereotypical view of politicians who are widely regarded as dull and too obsessed with obeying procedure and rules.

Rules and protocols are things Johnson takes delight in wilfully ignoring. Indeed, as he's claimed in relation to numerous scandals, he conveniently forgets facts which he finds might otherwise curtail his activities.

The 'cheeky chappie' persona only works for as long as people are convinced that, by and large, the person is operating in their collective interest. The reality, as most of those who've ever worked with Johnson attest, is that his personality is utterly focused on him and a sense of entitlement and self-aggrandisement.

As recommended umpteen times in the last three years, reading what Johnson's former boss at the Telegraph, Max Hastings, said about him in his trenchant criticism of his unsuitability for the role of PM, provided a stark warning as to what life under the 'greased piglet' would be like (2019).

As Hastings predicted, Johnson, interested only in himself and his own self-gratification, he claimed, would, if elected by the Conservative Party members in the summer of 2019, "almost certainly reveal a contempt for rules, precedent, order and stability."

For good measure, Hastings added that the only people who considered Johnson to be a "nice guy" were those who did not know the person behind the mask.

Edward Docx in his masterful examination of the way Johnson, the "archetypal clown, with his antic posturing and his refusal to take anything seriously" managed to seize control of his party believed that he'd successfully managed to utilise the image of him being a lovable buffoon to hide so many more character flaws (2021).

What clowns do, Docx explains, is by perfecting the art of performing as a fool, to "remind us of the silliness of things: that the world we have created is ridiculous. They reassure us in this observation by appealing to our innate understanding of the absurd. They relieve the endless tension and trauma of reality" (*ibid*).

As Johnson showed when he took over the party, he wanted to refashion it in the image he believed would align with his purview. Those judged recalcitrant, especially in regard to the approach he wanted to take with the European Union (EU) in terms of the eventual outcome of any withdrawal deal, including a potential no-deal, with all of its potential consequences, were thrown out of the party.

Expelling 21 Conservative MPs including include two ex-chancellors Philip Hammond and elder statesman, Ken Clarke, as well as Theresa May's former justice secretary David Gauke, former attorney general Dominic Grieve, ex-cabinet minister Sir Oliver Letwin, former education secretary Justine Greening, former international development secretary Rory Stewart, set the tone for the sort of administration Johnson would oversee (BBC, 2019).

Equally, illegally as it turned out, proroguing Parliament to get the own way indicated a much more authoritarian approach to government than his rhetoric about using withdrawal from the EU to increase freedom from foreign interference and laws, suggested (Kottasová and Subramaniam, 2022).

Former Conservative leader John Major believes that the behaviour of Johnson and his supporters in cabinet has severely damaged this country's international reputation (Ferguson, 2022).

As the well-worn idiom, 'we are where we are' goes, Johnson has, as widely anticipated, stepped down and, as many hope, we can start to return to a more normal form of government.

Similar to what occurred in the United States when Donald Trump's ludicrous presidency was ended, legally, by the will of the people, there's the worry that Johnson, harbouring a grudge against those who he blames for prematurely ending his premiership, will exact whatever revenge he can muster.

Notably, in the Confidence debate held in Parliament on Monday, former minister Tobias Ellwood, who's also chair of the Defence Committee, and because he was in Moldova and could not return to the UK in time to cast his vote, therefore being recorded as having abstained, was stripped of the Tory whip (Payne, 2022). This move is likely to be seen as "driven purely by the PM's desire to get back at a backbencher who has made little secret of his loathing for him" (Wilcock, 2022).

As such, we see the way in which Johnson, yet to be deprived of power, will continue to wield influence in a way in which his cultivated clown's mask slips exposing a much less pleasant individual lurking beneath. His immediate legacy is an unseemly contest between those wishing to succeed him who were happy to serve in his government.

Many believe promises made by the leadership contenders, are merely intended to appeal to Conservative Party members considered 'male, pale and stale'. It's believed that the total number of members is no more than 200,000 which would represent, approximately, just under a quarter of one percent of all who'd be entitled to vote in a general election.

Worryingly, we can expect to hear more of the importance of a truer, 'harder', Brexit which will further undermine our relationship with the EU. Unfortunately markets for exports on our doorstep will become even harder to access (Parker and Webber, 2022). The logical consequence is that we collectively become poorer.

Despite protestations from those who wish to succeed Johnson being their intention to be radically different, it's probable they won't be due to the financial restraints placed on them when they take office. Indeed, as Money Saving Expert, Martin Lewis warned on Tuesday, because of rapidly rising prices, most especially in energy, whoever becomes the next PM faces a "financial cataclysm" (Nicolson, 2022).

Of course, only time will tell.

In the meantime, I'm reminded of some of the lines of the Depeche Mode song, *Enjoy the Silence*, the title of this blog is partly based on:

"Vows are spoken, To be broken, Feelings are intense, Words are trivial, Pleasures remain, So does the pain, Words are meaningless, And forgettable..."

Perhaps the best we can hope for after in the immediate future, once Parliament goes into recess this week, is a bit of silence from those, especially the current PM, who it must be hoped

permanently disappears from view, so we can 'enjoy' getting on with our lives and coping with the problems we face, many of which are daunting (Wood, 2022).

As we've experienced, the all-too frequent interventions of our politicians to make our lives better have proven to be futile.

In memory of founder of Depeche Mode, Andy 'Fletch' Fletcher, who departed this life far too early on the 26 May 2022. I hope wherever you are, you're making wonderful music.

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