

Another Volte-face in Prospect?

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Trust in political leaders has always been somewhat tenuous. Leaders are, in the normal run of things, expected to do what's believed to be in the best interests of people. We expect them to tell us the truth and we reciprocate by doing what is asked of us. Arguably the best example is Winston Churchill, a leader not lacking in critics, voted 'Greatest Briton' in 2002 as the leader who was absolutely dogmatic in refusing to appease Adolf Hitler.

Churchill is also remembered for stirring speeches and visits to communities affected by the war. This galvanised public opinion. As not entirely accurate film *Darkest Hour* explained, Churchill became Prime Minister (PM) in replacing Neville Chamberlain, who'd been castigated for his appeasement policy, because he was the only leader capable of instilling trust among the all-party coalition government. This coalition included appeasers.

Churchill took over at a time when it looked very bleak. The *blitzkrieg* of German troops has resulted in a Europe under Nazi occupation. France had fallen and there'd been the retreat and evacuation of the British Expeditionary Forces from Dunkirk. Hitler's next intended conquest was undoubtedly this country.

In the month following him becoming PM, Churchill made three key speeches regarded as seminal. The "Blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech of 13th May 1940. The "We shall fight on the beaches" speech of 4th June 1940. The "finest hour" speech made just after France had sought an armistice on the evening of 16th June 1940. The final speech is regarded as a masterpiece of theatrical oratory by Churchill in which he referred to the coming "Battle of Britain" and invoked the need to fight for the survival of "civilisation":

"The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands."

History lesson over and let's consider the here and now.

We have a government led by PM who, it's widely acknowledged, believes himself to be a contemporary Churchill. Boris Johnson's book, [*The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*](#), published in 2014 by Hodder & Stoughton, pretty much says this. John Kampfner in reviewing the book states, the "reader is invited to see the two men as supreme orators, literary masters and slayers of spineless Conservatives and perfidious foreigners."

Given that this review was published in early November 2014, it's fascinating to note that Kampfner examines the character of Johnson who, then, was Mayor of London. Johnson was perceived to be a politician who set out to entertain but whose views were somewhat erratic. As such, Kampfner's final paragraph, written almost six years ago, is intriguingly prescient in identifying the 'touchstone' of Europe as something he appeared to be have difficulty in reconciling his views with those of his hero Churchill.

Prior to becoming a politician, Johnson had been a journalist though one with a questionable track record in reporting the truth. He was sacked from *The Times* in 1988 for fabricating a quote. Johnson then moved to *The Telegraph* as its Brussels correspondent where he was well known for being deliberately provocative. As one former colleague recalls, "Johnson's half-truths created a new

reality ... correspondents witnessed Johnson shaping the narrative that morphed into our present-day populist Euroscepticism.”

Johnson as a purveyor of mistruths is confirmed by Andrew Gimson in his biography, *Boris: The Rise of Boris Johnson* (published in 2006 by Simon & Schuster). Johnson is quoted clearly revelling in his ability to create controversy through what he wrote, “I found was sort of chucking these rocks over the garden wall and I listened to this amazing crash from the greenhouse next door over in England as everything I wrote from Brussels was having this amazing, explosive effect on the Tory party, and it really gave me this I suppose rather weird sense of power.”

Though some may claim Johnson is doing, to use one of his oft-quoted adjectives, a “fantastic” job, it must be suspected those willing to be supportive is dwindling faster than you can say ‘Strong and Stable Government’ the expression trotted out incessantly during the ill-fated 2017 general election campaign. As we see almost on a daily basis, this government is characterised by mistakes, prevarication, mixed messages and inconsistency on a whole range of issues concerned with dealing with Covid-19.

This should come as no surprise. As I have pointed out on a number of occasions in what I have written, as is referred to in the current edition of *Private Eye* (no. 1529), hugely influential historian and former journalist and editor of *The Telegraph*, *Max Hastings*, wrote an excoriating denunciations of the current PM. The subheading, [‘I was Boris Johnson’s boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister’](#) pretty much summarises the contents.

Many of the statements Hastings writes are utterly contemptuous of Johnson. For example, “Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade”. Equally, “he cares for no interest save his own fame and gratification”. In one demining line he states, “Dignity still matters in public office, and Johnson will never have it”.

Increasingly, particularly given Johnson’s reliance on chief political advisor Dominic Cummings, someone who he refused to sack following his bizarre and unbelievable explanation for his trip to Durham and Barnard Castle – when he broke lockdown rules he’d helped to draft – nothing is what it seems.

Everything we are told by the present PM and his government must be viewed through the prism of extreme scepticism. Even something as innocuous as the PM’s holiday is apparently spun with the objective, similar to a magic trick of creating a distraction, suggests that what we’re told is not credible as tweets strongly suggest with respect to ‘tentgate’:

The fiasco of recent examination results and ongoing ramifications is still very much an issue in which the PM appeared to show little interest. That Johnson has not sacked Education Minister Gavin Williamson is believed to be based on his calculated assumption that this distracts from his own shortcomings.

Remember, Johnson is no Churchill in possessing sufficient confidence to allow dissent in his cabinet.

Indeed, it’s asserted, as well as being notably lacking in talent, the current cabinet were appointed precisely on the basis of commitment to Brexit and their lack of willingness to question the PM in the way he did when Foreign Secretary under Theresa May; a role she appointed him to as way of trying to keep him under control.

Johnson's time as Foreign Secretary is not remembered fondly, especially following his statement on the case of [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#). Few would have expected someone so prone to making statements that were untrue to become PM.

Following the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum when backed leave – though famously conflicted – as a calculated strategy to be different to the official stance by PM David Cameron, his rise to power has been based on being committed to fulfilling the will of the people. Once May had been undermined and forced to resign, Johnson won over the membership of the Conservative Party and won an election on claiming that, if elected, he'd, using lines believed to have been developed by Cummings, "Get Brexit Done" on the basis of an "oven-ready" deal.

The conclusion to the 'Free Trade' negotiations between the UK and EU remains uncertain. The 'mood music' from both sides indicates that 'no-deal', what Brexiters have always wanted, is the most likely outcome.

At the weekend, recently-appointed Political Editor of Conservative and, it should be stressed, Johnson-supporting [Sun](#), Harry Cole, published a scoop based on a "leaked document".

Cole describes how the Cabinet Office's EU Transition Task Force presented ministers and officials with a "horror show Powerpoint" suggesting that the threat of a worst-case scenario of no-deal combined with a severe winter of flood, flu and Covid-19 could result in overwhelmed hospitals, power cuts in some parts of Britain and shortages of food, medicines and petrol as a consequence of "8,500 trucks" being delayed at Dover due to the need for customs checks.

Inter alia, other potential scenarios include:

- The navy required to avoid vigilante British fisherman clashing with hundreds of illegal European fishing boat incursions
- One in 20 councils bankrupts due to a second Covid-19 wave "sparking social care chaos"
- Public disorder, shortages and price hikes necessitating troops to assist the police

As to what will actually happen, perhaps we should look at the commitment that Johnson made as to the 'border' down the Irish Sea, something he said would never happen. The deal Johnson agreed with the EU is almost identical to that Theresa May attempted to achieve and which he criticised.

Max Hastings in his 2019 *Guardian* article contends of Johnson that, "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."

Given the mendacious nature of Johnson, should we expect another "magnificent" victory by the UK in the Free Trade negotiations with the EU that is, in fact, another *volte face*.

Though this undoubtedly would incur the wrath of those who supported his rise to power, if [latest rumours about his continuance as PM](#) have any veracity, he may calculate that he no longer needs them. He may equally calculate, the chaos 'no-deal' will exact too high a price for this country in terms of jobs and even greater economic decline not forgetting to mention that it would exacerbate a break-up of the Union.

Let's face it, as many, including Max Hastings, assert, Johnson not doing what he claimed he'd do to Brexiters in his party, would simply continue the *modus operandi* of a man whose while life, professionally and personally, is littered with examples of disloyalty to those in whom he expected unquestioning devotion.

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