

## **Adventures in Peppa Pig World**

### **Dr. Steven McCabe**

Watching Boris Johnson's speech to the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) on Monday must rank as a classic example of a 'car crash speech' as you are likely to hear a senior politician make. Though not the first time this has occurred.

Who could forget Diane Abbot's infamous radio interview in 2017 when, as Shadow Home Secretary, when asked about the cost of employing additional 10,000 police officers, provided costs ranging from £300,000 to £80 million (Stone, 2017). A couple of years previously, the then leader of the Greens, Natalie Bennett, endured what she admitted was an "absolutely excruciating" radio interview with LBC's Nick Ferrari (Mctague and Gohen, 2015).

The difference was that they were not the serving Prime Minister. What's strangest about Johnson's speech was that he would be presumed to have been fully aware of its contents and fully conversant with its key messages. Whether it was an attempt to do what he's famed for – radically departing from the script to entertain his audience – is hotly debated.

Nonetheless, even for Johnson, this speech ranks as outright bizarre. His questions to the audience, senior members of the business community as to whether they had ever visited Peppa Pig World, as he had done the previous day with his wife and son Wilfred, felt embarrassing to attendees.

If this was as bad as it got, this speech might quickly have been forgotten. However, as well as making an impression of a car, he compared himself to Moses in telling his officials about his pledges to achieve a greener economy through investment in wind power and hydrogen technologies.

To make matters even worse he lost his place in his speech and subjected his audience to 21 seconds of fumbling, paper shuffling and apologies.

It's little wonder that many, including within his own party, are asking whether the PM is undergoing some sort of breakdown. That a journalist, immediately after the speech asked him, "Is everything OK?", certainly suggests that the pressures of being 'first among equals' may be taking its toll.

Though there are many who criticise the PM as being self-serving and displaying what would appear to be clear narcissistic tendencies, this would hardly be unprecedented for the person who becomes PM. British political history is replete with examples of individuals whose character traits would mean they might be considered wholly inappropriate for public office.

Boris Johnson is arguably the most extreme version of a celebrity politician who has managed to grasp the opportunities offered to him. Though every person elected to Parliament may secretly wish they could become PM, in each generation, quite literally, only a handful will have any realistic prospect of attaining the most senior political position.

What's significant is that Johnson, who was 57 in June, is not especially old for the job. Equally, though it's not unusual for a sitting PM to have children, he's somewhat different to most others in the fact that he has at his age, started another family with his latest wife to add to those from his previous marriage to Marina, all of whom are grown up.

Whether the stresses of fatherhood at a relatively late age – there is another child due in the next month or so – is a reason why Johnson is under pressure is entirely possible. Let's face it, the living arrangements in the 'goldfish bowl' that is 10 Downing Street, can hardly be conducive to a normal family life or to ensuring the mental well-being of its occupants.

There can be little argument that the last couple of weeks will have been pretty miserable for a PM who'd staked so much on attempting to extract a close colleague, Owen Paterson, from a mess of his own making and which had resulted in him being condemned by the Commons' Standards Committee.

Many believe that having been roundly criticised for trying to save Paterson's skin, and in the process whipping MPs, and then having to reverse such support, the experience has taken more out of the normally ebullient Johnson than would have been anticipated.

To be seen to have failed in such a high-profile manner would have been testing for any individual though, of course, Johnson will surely have been aware it goes with the territory. After all, he made life particularly miserable for his predecessor during her travails in attempting to achieve Parliament's agreement for a deal to would allow the UK to leave the EU to fulfil the outcome of the June 2016 referendum.

Johnson was able to replace Theresa May and become PM quite precisely because he promised that he would be able to do what had bested her, achieving Brexit. That he did so by winning a stunning election victory following his illegal proroguing of Parliament and the expulsion of a number of senior Tories, added to the sense that by selecting Johnson to become the leader of the Conservatives, members were proven to be correct.

However, in retrospect, it now seems that agreeing what has turned out to be a poor economic deal for the UK with the EU, including the Northern Ireland Protocol, meaning this part remains within the Single Market in order to protect the Good Friday Agreement, may have been the easy bit. Johnson, who's previously displayed a notorious reluctance to immersing himself in the detail of policy and their potential implications, may be discovering that statecraft is an arduous and painstaking business.

Making rash promises, as Johnson has shown himself be somewhat enthusiastic in doing, have a habit of coming back to bite you.

Brexit, regardless of what its advocates may suggest, has undermined the British economy in a way that, as the Office for Budget Responsibility suggested recently, is likely to do twice as much damage as suffered due to the pandemic and lead to a cut in GDP of 4% (PA Media, 2021).

What this means is that the financial 'firepower' that will be essential to fulfil promises such as 'levelling up' of regions outside the south-east will be extremely difficult. The announcement of cutting back on the Leeds leg of HS2 though driven by political expediency of attempting to show some progress before the next general election, is also a recognition that spending commitments are going to be squeezed.

As Boris Johnson will know, fighting the next general election, whenever it takes place (likely to be 2023 or mid 2024), will be far more challenging than last time when he merely parroted a number of alterative slogans. The notion that Brexit still remains a project to be completed may not seem such an alluring prospect for voters.

Indeed, a profusion of problems, including inflation, are already besetting a government which has stated that, following departure from the EU, there would be a 'Brexit bounce' by which those whose wages had fallen in real terms would experience something of an uplift. Though wages may currently be rising, any gain will be wiped out by increase in costs for, most notably, energy and food.

If Boris Johnson recognises the immense challenges that are likely to confront his government in coming months, he may be forgiven for feeling intense pressure. Moreover, knowing his two immediate predecessors, freed of the strains of the top office, are able to earn serious money may mean his mind is turning to what he too will be able to enjoy when the time is right.

Perhaps, Johnson is concluding, being PM isn't as much fun as he thought it would be. Playing with Wilfred on the sit-on cars in Peppa Pig World may have provided a much-needed distraction from the vicissitudes and intense pressures of high office.

Moreover, his speech to the CBI on Monday, may have been a very conscious attempt to entice others to do what he seems may be incapable of doing himself. Namely to put him out of the misery he's currently experiencing and, freed of the burdens of running the country, allowing him to enjoy more adventures in Peppa Pig World.

Though it's likely Johnson, still regarded by many as most potent weapon the Conservative Party possesses, may be allowed to continue, it's highly likely that, having been consumed with his personal ambitions during the childhood of his previous children, he does not wish to miss out this time around.

It's also entirely possible that, approaching his 60s in a couple of years, Johnson's aware of the Latin phrase *memento mori*, "Remember that you must die."

Whatever his critics may think about him, they'd surely understand the desire to spend more time with his latest children.

If that were the outcome, and not for the first time, who'd bet against British politics taking another dramatic turn.

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## References

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