

Who is 'Chatty Rat and Other Existential Questions?

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Charles W. Pickering's maxim, healthy democracy requires that we're "honourable, generous, tolerant and respectful" is not, unfortunately, always achieved. Healthy democracy frequently feels secondary to the milieu of 'characters' who exhort us to do what's good for us but behave according to their own rules.

Though not a new phenomenon, the more colourful and enigmatic a politician, the more they attract interest from the media. Being distinctive and able to entertain seems essential. It's hardly a coincidence that the current PM, Boris Johnson, occupies this office because he possesses such qualities in abundance.

When considering the 'theatre' that's characteristic of politics, it's worth recalling dramatist Bertold Brecht's observation that "theatre's business to entertain people ... it needs no other passport than fun." And Johnson has carefully cultivated an image of a politician dedicated to achieving the best of times for all.

'BoJo the lovable clown' is a persona that's worked extremely well. Having won scholarships to Eton followed by Oxford where he studied Classics, his intelligence would appear unquestionable. Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, born in New York, and who'd experienced a somewhat dysfunctional and peripatetic upbringing, because of bullying at Eton, chose to become Boris and adopt mannerisms of quirkiness and buffoonery that have been his shtick for 40 years.

Though there's no shortage of stories of Johnson's absolute self-belief, selfishness, indolence and fecklessness, he undisputedly possesses what Napoleon supposedly said, but didn't, concerning selection of his generals; they should be lucky. Johnson's rise to power is replete with mishaps and allegations of inability to comply with accepted norms and, critically, to tell the truth.

For lesser personalities than Johnson, even one of his many mistakes would have been sufficient to be career-ending. Who can forget what seminal historian and right-wing commutator, and former editor of the *Telegraph*, wrote about him in the [Guardian](#) prior to becoming leader; 'I was Boris Johnson's boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister'.

However, as even the luckiest gambler will know, good luck doesn't last forever. This is the dread of every successful politician. Eventually they must confront events which conspire against them to make them less appealing.

Though it's far from certain that Johnson is about to face a moment of reckoning, there's little argument his brand has taken something of pounding over the last week. Being accused of stating his willingness to see "bodies pile high" rather than approve a third lockdown before Christmas was bad enough. Combined with mounting questions over the cost of redecorating the Downing Street flat shared with partner and mother of his latest child, Carrie Symonds, are putting him under pressure.

Whether Johnson will weather this storm in the way he's managed in the past will be proven in coming weeks and months. Johnson is a man who, whether you like him or despise him, is a survivor. Indeed, with resonance to hero Sir Winston Churchill, Johnson, as his tutor wrote to his father Stanley in the early 80s, considers himself not bound by rules applying to others.

However, what we've witnessed in the last week are allegations in a coordinated way by individuals who've broken ranks in a way intended to inflict maximum damage.

Though having reasons for his intended resignation at the Despatch Box in Parliament, superseded by being "sacked by text", former veterans minister Johnny Mercer's outburst in an interview on Times Radio, last week was incendiary. Describing Johnson's government as a "cesspit" and "the most distrustful, awful environment I've ever worked in" indicates intense anger at failed promises made by the man whose government, until last week at least, he was happy to be part of.

Mercer, a former army captain, is angry at the failure of Johnson's government to deliver a promise made during his campaign to become leader in 2019 to end "vexatious historical investigations" of veterans who'd served in Northern Ireland. This is a controversial issue among the families of those killed unlawfully by soldiers during the conflict.

The wounds of Northern Ireland are, as we have seen in recent weeks, very raw and, as anyone with a modicum of understanding of the conflict which occurred there between 1969 and 1998 will stress, extreme care is needed in any statements made by leading politicians.

This was emphasised in the many chapters written by experts contained in the 2019 book I coedited, [*Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion*](#). The delicate balance of sensitivities upon which peace has been achieved. Only someone with little or no ability to appreciate the vital importance of sensitivities would make rash statements concerning Northern Ireland.

As Johnson demonstrated during his quest to achieve Brexit, making promises as to consequences of departure from the EU for Northern Ireland, particularly in terms of any border for customs purposes was, to say the least, ill-judged. To her credit, Theresa May, though belatedly for someone who'd claimed a "bad Brexit" would be worse than no deal, recognised the inherent dangers. Her proposed the Chequers Plan attempted to avoid problems caused by a border by remaining part of the customs union.

Johnson, who served as foreign secretary under May, claimed this was a sell-out and resigned over this deal. To boot, he claimed government ministers were "saying one thing to the EU about what we are really doing and pretending another to the electorate".

Such a statement might seem somewhat hypocritical to those well-aware of Johnson's previous form for departing from the truth when it suited his purpose.

However, as we've seen in the period since becoming leader and PM, Johnson is more than happy to engage in making statements intended to please the crowd but which, he's surely aware, cannot be achieved. Sacking senior Conservatives and illegally proroguing Parliament cemented the view of many that, as his Eton tutor observed, this is a man believing normal rules appear do not to apply to him.

Mercer's statement, "Almost nobody tells the truth is what I've worked out over the last 36 hours" must be balanced what we've witnessed under Johnson as PM. Mercer presumably ignored whatever he witnessed in the presumed belief that the ends justified the means.

Which brings us to 'Chatty Rat'.

This is the sobriquet given to the person who, following a Cabinet meeting in late October, leaked to various newspapers the intention of government to introduce a second lockdown in November. Such a lockdown, similar to the "circuit breaker" that'd been introduced in Wales, and supported by

Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer, essential in dealing with rapidly rising infections, had been rejected in Parliament by Johnson.

There have been investigations into who leaked this information, including by MI5, and though no person has been proven to have done so, many believed 'Chatty Rat' was former Chief Political Advisor to Johnson, Dominic Cummings. The justification, it's argued, is that Cummings, a supporter of a second lockdown, wanted to 'bounce' the PM who, as reported, was somewhat equivocal about closing the economy again to deal with a second wave of covid-19.

Some six months on, having experienced two lockdowns needed to deal with exponentially rising infections and deaths in December, proving worse than the first wave of the pandemic between March and July, the identity of who leaked back in October, might have seemed irrelevant.

Beyond the critical issue of trust, always vital to government, if indeed Cummings had been the leaker, his dismissal in November for, it was alleged, briefing against PM, might have seemed like an end to discovering the identity of 'Chatty Rat'. That Cummings was believed to have a poor relationship with Johnson's partner, Carrie Symonds, being [reported](#) to refer to her as 'Princess Nut Nut' was probably welcome for a PM effectively caught in the crossfire of having not one, but two consiglieres!

However, the leaking to the BBC of texts between Johnson and uber-Brexiter and billionaire James Dyson, in which he promised to "fix" a tax issue as well as leaking to the *Daily Mail* of texts from Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman to the PM of damage should his government not to "correct" the Premier League's decision not to allow a £300m takeover of Newcastle United last year, has reignited the issue of 'Chatty Rat'.

Clearly not believing the advice of letting sleeping dogs lie, Johnson, incensed by what he considers reactivation of 'Chatty Rat' used coordinated briefings by "No 10 sources" last week to three newspapers, supportive of the government, to allege Cummings was responsible for "systematic leaking".

Johnson, whose judgment has long been questioned, might have thought more carefully about picking a fight with 'Dastardly Dom' on whom, he was, until he sacked him, so reliant for looking after the detail of government and developing strategic thinking. Indeed, it can be argued, had it not been for Cummings, whose influence was crucial to leave winning the referendum on continued EU membership, Johnson, a pivotal figurehead of leave, might never have achieved his long-cherished ambition of becoming PM.

Unsurprisingly, purveyor of the art of well-placed media intervention, Cummings hit back. Using a personal blog, he denied being 'Chatty Rat'. Instead, he blamed Henry Newman, a special adviser in No 10 and close personal friend of Johnson's partner Carrie Symonds.

Significantly, Cummings wrote, there had been a meeting in which he was exonerated by cabinet secretary, Simon Case, who stated that "all the evidence definitely" pointed to Newman.

For good measure, Cummings' allegation that Newman's involvement as 'Chatty Rat' would, if proven, mean dismissal, and would cause the PM "very serious problems" with his partner which meant he wished any leak inquiry be quashed was clearly intended as a blow to Johnson's credibility.

As Cummings intended, calling off any inquiry into the identity of the leaker known as 'Chatty Rat', because of the danger of implicating a friend of the PM's partner, would be "mad and totally

unethical” is to call into question Johnson’s integrity and inability to separate political decision-making from his personal life.

As criticism goes it doesn’t come much more direct than that.

Cummings, whose judgement in the Castle Barnard ‘episode’ during the first lockdown led to national opprobrium (see my chapter ‘The Curious Role of ‘Despicable Genius’ Dominic Cummings’, in [Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?](#) edited by J. Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, 2020, is not without enemies.

We appear to be witnessing a what might be regarded as a coordinated assault on the PM which brings into question who benefits and what is the end game? For reference, one of the papers most vocal in criticising Johnson is the Daily Mail for which, Sarah Vine, partner of Michael Gove is employed. What Gove said about Johnson about being unfit for office scuppered his bid to become PM in 2016.

As I conclude in a chapter I’ve just written, ‘Al Promised You a Miracle – Life Under ‘Greased Piglet’ Johnson’ (see below for publication details), there has been a sense the public have allowed themselves to be seduced by his loveable rogue persona dedicated to giving the British people what they want:

“Will his explicit use of populism begin to wear thin among those who discover there will be no miracles for them?”

However, like all great entertainers or magicians, the distraction is becoming not just clichéd but patently false.

Recent events suggest that, maybe, we’re being exposed to the real Boris Johnson; a narcissist whose personality traits he hides. As such, Bojo the ‘lovable’ Clown morphs into ‘AJ the fibber’ and, as a consequence, becomes an election liability.

Should that be the case, Johnson’s time as PM may not be as long as envisaged when, it’s [alleged](#), he and partner Carrie Symonds spent as much as £200,000 refurbishing the flat above 11 Downing they share with their child.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). His latest co-edited book, *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenges and Benefits*, will be published in early Summer. Additionally, ‘Al Promised You a Miracle – Life Under ‘Greased Piglet’ Johnson’, will be included as a chapter in a forthcoming book, *Populism and the Media*, to be published by Abrams Academic Publishing in June.