

Welcome the cult of personality: Borisism, Starmerism and the deification of politics

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In getting to grips with life in lockdown, I have become unhealthily obsessed with Susie Dent's word-of-the day. Outside of her day job shaming our mere mortal vocabularies on C4's Countdown, Britain's most notorious lexicographer has taken to enhancing our collective lexicon with a succession of unfamiliar and noteworthy words. This week saw the turn of ipsedixitism; an unfounded, false and dogmatic assertion.

Ipsedixitism seems to me an appropriate word for the times in which we dwell. Waiting patiently for the uncertainties of leaving both lockdown and the EU, positions taken on a dogmatic belief rather than some evidence-based insight have become commonplace. The barriers to trading relationships presented by a no-deal Brexit will be ironed out swiftly by the ineffable wisdom of the free market, just as the effects of coronavirus will be suppressed by those strong enough to fend it off.

It seems uncharacteristic how willing people are to resort to faith-based decision making considering generally how secular the British have become of late. At the last Census in 2011, 32% of the population defined themselves as of no religion, whilst a 2014 British Social Attitude Survey put this figure at almost 51%. Only 13% were in regular attendance at religious services. In its place it seems has emerged a tendency to subvert the personal agency given by this rejection of organised religion in favour of a growing cult of personality.

The cult of personality is of course no stranger in contemporary political discourse. Its techniques of manipulation via mass media propaganda, the repetition of lies, and forms of cultural indoctrination have been used by authoritarian leaders for centuries. But what is interesting here is the need to consolidate momentum and faith through individuals rather than look more broadly at collective action, communities and movements.

Nigel Farage perhaps epitomises this tendency. As the leader of UKIP, he oversaw their evolution from a fringe party populated by lunatics to a potent political force. Throughout this progress he referred to UKIP supporters as a 'people's army'. The moment he moved on from the party however, any form of momentum was lost. Between the 2015 and the 2017 General Election, UKIP's share of the vote fell from 12.6% to 1.8%. I'm not sure what Paul Nuttall is up to these days....

We do however see this tendency moving from fringe parties into mainstream politics. And no more so than in the deification of Boris Johnson by the right-wing press. Here, he is seen as an almost religious figure capable of not only uniting divisions in the British public through his bully and bluster, but is able to reinforce his commitment as a man for the people by catching a virus.

The substance behind this is largely irrelevant. Whilst Thatcherism was founded on a belief of markets replacing community dependence, Blairism on the effectiveness of free markets via nudge mechanisms, and Cameronism on the unfettering of social forces curtailed by the big state, Boris-ism has no such coherent principles. Instead we see a broad rhetoric using empty metaphors of heroism to gaslight us back into an imperialist mentality where simply being British is enough to determine it 'apparent success' despite evidence to the contrary.

Here however we cannot solely point the finger at Johnson, the Conservatives, or the right-leaning media. Exactly the same thing occurred with Jeremy Corbyn; a man so convinced by his own agenda the shedding of two million voters did not sway his fanaticism. A few years ago at a Billy Bragg concert, I recall the singer praising Corbyn and assuring us this was no cult of personality and that as a committed socialist, the Labour leader knew full well the collective was more influential than the figurehead. And yet what ensued was a fundamental failure of grassroots action and leadership dissuading as many constituents from voting as facilitating their desertion to other parties. Still, 'ooh, Jeremy Corbyn'...

I raise this issue as the same form of deification seems to have started already around Keir Starmer. I will admit that I find Starmer convincing, although he is pretty much alone in the field of mundanity that is Westminster these days. Applying the honed skills developed as a QC,

clips of Starmer forensically dissecting Raab and Johnson at PMQs have become hits on Twitter. Accompanying these has been the question of how long Johnson's Government can survive in the face of such scrutiny.

The answer of course is five years. It will take a lot more than detailed questioning to collapse such a significant majority. And whilst Starmer is impressive, considering the unmitigating disaster the response to CV19 has been in the UK, I imagine most of us could train a monkey to unpick Johnson's logic. We do of course have time on our hands at present.

It is early days to make any judgement on Starmer. And he himself cannot be held responsible for this inchoate deification emerging through the Twittersphere to the same extent that Johnson has cynically created the cult of Borisism through the patronage of his Fleet Street coterie. It just seems in a period when the British have been desperately crying out for a people's politics and the breaking down of elites, that we instead resort to seeking figureheads we then endow carte blanche to interpret and manifest our interests. And is similarly a further reinforcement of the principal issue which brought us to our current situation; the notion of removing power and autonomy at both individual and collective levels for the benefit of said elites.

In a nation which has the highest level of centralisation in national government at the cost of sub-national decision making – a monopoly temporarily addressed by the regional agenda forced on the UK by the EU – this deification of political leaders hardly seems the way to go about any form of redistribution of power.