Boris Johnson's Conservatism: an insurrection against political reason?

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Boris Johnson's newly adopted persona as embodiment of the people's will represents another step along the road towards a very English populism

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> The disorderly thrust of political events disturbs the symmetry of political analysis.
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> Stuart Hall, 1957

Since 2016, a position of intransigent dedication to realising 'the will of the people' as expressed in the Brexit referendum has served not only to stiffen the sinews of the faithful but also to disorganise the opposition. Commitment to the popular will trips off the tongue, easily proclaimed by the newly minted tribunes of the people - most of whom, in their previous incarnations, have appeared to countenance little but disdain for the desires of the multitude. How the world changes. This is the point at which Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg enter the frame as self-styled tribunes.

It's become clear that countering this reflex recourse to the 'will of the people' requires nuance and respect for thought, but neither of these thrives spontaneously

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in the given mediaworlds we inhabit. Nor do even level-headed warnings of the possibility of the rising tempo of material deprivation do much to neutralise the potency of this invocation to the people. It appears to bestow on the dispossessed exactly what eludes them: a place in the democratic scheme of things. Alternative notions of democratic process are struggling to find ways to counter this narrative.

David Cameron's fateful gamble, for party-political reasons, to opt for a referendum on EU membership has incrementally thrown the Westminster system into turmoil. The crisis of the state continues apace. Over the past years the established political parties have drawn ever further away from those whom they seek to represent. What was inconceivable yesterday speedily settles to become today's norm. The executive is in running battle with the legislature. The rupture between those with an appetite for direct democracy and those attuned to the disciplines of representative democracy sharpens. If a bank of rumour is to be believed, great swathes of the civil service are in despair, subject to the crazed whims of an administration out of control: given the drive for the single, absolute political objective, the daily management of the state appears only as an irrelevance or distraction. The judiciary and the monarchy, which strive to present themselves as operating outside the force-field of political power, find themselves dragged into the public spotlight. The radioactive fallout from this crisis of the state settles on the everyday habits of civil society, the collective psychodrama entering our lives. We, as citizens, are all demeaned.

The political logjam brings with it pressing dangers. Britain's historic regard for 'democracy' and 'liberty' (insofar as this has ever held) increasingly feels like a reverie from a distant age. Johnson's arrival in Number Ten has raised the stakes, transporting his new-found populist commitments into the lifeblood of the British state. The September 2019 indictment of Johnson and his government by the Supreme Court nullified Johnson's most extreme move, the proroguing of Parliament, and in so doing unleashed an explosion of anger towards the executive's disregard of existing norms. Even the most temperate of pundits have declared that the inherited constitutional sanctity of Westminster must be overhauled - the hallowed virtues of precedent need greater codification, for all to see; and some even argued that the time has come for a first-past-the-post system to be no longer regarded as the arbiter of democratic decision-making.

Peter Hennessy - a cross-bench peer, historian with a winning sense of the ironies of history, and Westminster expert - has argued that the Court's ruling signalled the

death and burial of the inherited 'Good Chaps' conception of Britain's state. The cads and bullies, he implied, are now running the show, Flashman usurping the pieties of Tom Brown, Bullingdon the rectilinear persona of the vicar's daughter.

But the events run deeper than this. The seriousness of the current collapse derives from the fact that the principal agent dedicated to eviscerating the institutions of the state is located inside the Conservative Party. It's as if Edmund Burke had crossed the river of fire and chosen to agitate with the sans-culotte rabble, all of a sudden dazzled by the 'will of the people', and, turning himself inside-out, embracing in the process a self-righteous Jacobin purity.

We know that Johnson himself, personally, relishes the enticements of destruction. He's told us so. For him this has now become an end in itself. Reflecting on his time as the *Telegraph*'s Brussels correspondent, which allowed him to concoct a litany of highly-strung fabrications about the EU, he has been insightful about the subjective intoxications of power:

> everything I wrote from Brussels 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 (*Desert Island Discs*, October 2005).

In this he was following a long line of upper-class men drawn to the erotics of taking apart the social system they'd long been tutored to conserve, and allying themselves to the perversities of power.

At the same time, Johnson imagines his accession to high office - or as he likes to think of it, 'being in charge' - as a natural fact decreed by right of birth. This was visible in the condescension he has shown towards his immediate Conservative predecessors as prime minister, May and Cameron. His high-handedness is at least partly based in ancient ruling-class custom and tradition.

A disregard for due process has also been evident in Johnson's approach to the technicalities of Brexit. He gives every impression that the details of its implementation bore him. Even as he signed up to Leave in the referendum

campaign he didn't imagine for a moment that he'd be on the winning side, and in all probability it was far from what he wished. This is the 'Fuck business' Johnson.

What Brexit means to Johnson in the larger sense, however, is altogether another matter. In earlier days, the fact that no-one really agrees what it means, and no consensus seems possible, would have been deemed a serious disability. Yet the very intractability of its specification provides Johnson and his allies with their political genie. It allows all manner of uncompromising and heart-felt, if random, fantasies to fill the vacuum. It underwrites the making of the unlikely coalition between the posh-boy Eton/Oxford axis of the Brexit camp and their allies the 'left behind', who feel compelled to voice their despair while their frustrations accumulate.

And, against all the odds, this oligarchic Jacobinism seems to be finding resonance with the wider electorate, a meeting of opposites in which class hatreds reverberate with class deference. For many, Johnson really is championing the will of the people.

The Conservative Party response

In June, a YouGov poll revealed that over half of Conservatives believed that, if the cost of achieving Brexit required the destruction of the Conservative Party, that would be a price well paid. And just as the party could be jettisoned, so too could the Union. In the blink of an eye, consequences of this magnitude could be accommodated for the sake of an amorphous greater good marshalled under the banner of 'Brexit'. These sentiments now possess a powerful phalanx of Tory MPs. Jumpy at the prospect of the Brexit Party breathing down their necks, they have resolved to do Nigel Farage's work for him, arriving at the impossibilist conclusion that if Conservatism is to have a future, the Conservative Party itself must be destroyed.

Nevertheless, it's apparent that only a minority of Johnson's backbenchers actually identify with this mission. It is those who are ready to model themselves as 'The Spartans', largely drawn from the European Research Group, who constitute the principal cadre, the true-believers.

Behind Johnson is the figure of Dominic Cummings, never drawn to either the idea or the reality of Conservatism, and now anointed as the lord of misrule in the pay of the state; and behind Cummings, deeper in the shadows, lies a clutch of hedge-fund managers, grown fat on the fallout from the global collapse of 2008, of whom the most

visible is Crispin Odey, who has been benevolent in bankrolling Johnson and Brexit. Odey, Johnson, Rees-Mogg and Cummings: all were nurtured in the upper reaches of Old England, before they chose to about-turn. Even before Johnson was elected Conservative leader, Odey was on record claiming that Johnson meant business, that he had it in him to destroy the old political class and that, furthermore, this was something to be pursued. He recognised in Johnson what few had fully discerned: that the joking and self-deprecating, stuttering buffoon disguised an interior fury, a pugilist dedicated to all that an uncompromising Brexit entailed.

Johnson has attracted strong support from a younger, head-banger generation of up-and-coming Conservatives inspired by a vision of wholesale deregulation, of 'Britannia Unchained' - the wonderfully charged title of the 2012 manifesto of these wannabee Spartans. Co-authors Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab, Chris Skidmore and Liz Truss were animated by their dream that the stalled renovations of the past could now be fulfilled. The time had come, they determined, for Margaret Thatcher's legacy to be honoured. Early on in their manifesto they admonished the workshy and the deficient, summoning the spectre of an early twenty-first century social residuum: 'Too many people in Britain, we argue, prefer a lie-in to hard work'. This sounds ominously like the common sense of the current cabinet: Mrs Thatcher is dead! Long live Mrs Thatcher!! But their appeal is to a phantom Thatcher: it works only as incantation, a lazy cry for help, signifying nothing.

Nonetheless, there are some things that never change in the Conservative Party. Its foot-soldiers in the parliamentary party have historically subscribed to the habit that, when danger arises, they pull together. To what degree this is an impulse motivated by self-preservation, or has within it a regard for higher things, remains an open matter. But it has been a notable feature of the operations of the Conservative Party throughout its existence, and it holds, too, even as the current Tory leadership - since the arrival of Johnson - has been hell-bent on dismembering the 'Good Chaps' practice of governance.

The primary purpose of the Good Chaps story has been to indicate that the ruling caste was no such thing at all: that, to be precise, it could never be construed as a ruling caste. In this view of things, the Good Chaps didn't find themselves at the apex of the state due to a vulgar desire for power, but solely as a consequence of their responsibility for keeping the show on the road. If Cummings represents anything, however, it is his unabashed commitment to the imperatives of power. He's the blood and guts of Tory

Brexit, following in the tradition of Richard Nixon's presidential campaign of 1968 - which his advisers predicated on the principle of 'Who hates whom'.

The majority of MPs remain committed to the old practices, and are at best sceptical of Johnson and what he has come to represent. But in the leadership election they held their noses and voted for him, in the conviction that, electorally, he was a winner. They believed in their bones that he was the Tory who would defeat Jeremy Corbyn. He could even destroy Labour with both hands tied behind his back. The day he was elected, barring the handful of the usual-suspect malcontents, the overwhelming majority of his party abided by the tradition and duly fell into line. Johnson was the man of the moment, flanked - fleetingly, as it turned out - by a loyal brother and sister. True, within a matter of weeks Johnson felt obliged to purge a score or so of the principal dissidents, one-nation Tories all, within the ranks of the party. But this was evidently pour encourager les autres - and it seems to have worked.

We, as spectators, may have been surprised by what followed. Johnson has yet to win a vote in the House of Commons. The Supreme Court has condemned his politics as unlawful. Daily, the media buzzes with revelations which call into question his probity. Yet so long as he radiates the prospect that he can win, his fate in the party is secure. What he does matters less than who he is. He has a free run. His security on this front is abetted by the belief that no-one else in his party is on hand, capable of managing the chaos - notwithstanding the fact that entire dimensions of the crisis are self-inflicted. The speed with which Tory MPs have signed up to this new regime of obedience is breath-taking. Weighty condemnations, publicly aired by his adversaries the day before yesterday, evaporate in the ether (step up, Nicky Morgan), giving way to the rote repetition of the reigning mantra: 'Get Brexit Done'. It's unnerving that Nicholas Soames, the Good Chap Supremo, and one of those recently expelled from the party by administrative fiat, continues to believe that 'underneath it all' Johnson remains a one-nation Tory.

After the judgement: the embrace of outrage

On 25 September, the day following the Court ruling against him, it chilled the blood to see Johnson's backbenchers braying their support in the Commons and rising to offer him an ovation. What those who orchestrated this collective act of

fealty think of their leader is on record. The occasion marked a tsunami of bad faith, graphically confirming that Tory MPs had, in the clear light of day, chosen to embark upon a momentous abnegation of democratic responsibility.

Johnson had little going for him that day. For all his grandstanding and confidence in his own bluster, the Commons is not Johnson's political arena of choice. Prime minister's questions, notably, can too easily shade into a tribunal, allowing awkward issues to keep on intruding. In response he usually relies on his Oxford Union one-liners, which generally - although not always - work to deflect attention from the matter in hand, generating mirth on his own backbenches. But this might not be enough on this occasion. The political establishment, in the widest meaning of the term, was in febrile mood, the shockwaves continuing to reverberate. It's hard to think of an occasion in the past decades when the political capital of a prime minister has been so immediately exposed: probably not since January 1986, when Thatcher's dominance was imperilled by the Westland crisis, and she escaped only because of Neil Kinnock's failure to deliver a final blow. Could Johnson withstand this assault?

Johnson and his office had devised a clear strategy: no regrets admitted, no apology forthcoming, while endeavouring to turn the tables such that the legal judgement against him would, with a sprinkle of magic stardust, be transformed into an asset. His job was to re-manufacture the Supreme Court decision as the latest instalment in the determination of those who manage the state, in cahoots with 'Brussels', to override the will of the people: the enemies of the people were - it followed - 'within', going about their nefarious business in the highest institutions of the state. This was the significance of the judicial indictment. It was the smoking gun, proof of the enormity of the forces ranged against the prime minister himself, and by the same token against the nation. Rhetorically, if not in fact, his purpose was to mobilise the people against their political leaders, who, in this scenario, were contriving to sell their fellow citizens down the river.

This narrative should be understood as part of a wider shift to the rhetoric of right-wing populism. Since the referendum of 2016, with first UKIP and then the Brexit Party emerging as dangerous electoral contenders, Johnson has not been alone in his growing receptiveness to the gravitational pull from the right. For many years his journalism has been peppered with racial provocations, and since his resignation from May's cabinet in July 2018 these commitments are becoming more heavily

accentuated. His rhetorical extravagance is calculated, fashioned in order to address the ghost in the psephological machine: the Brexit Party voter. Within days of freeing himself from May's tutelage, he employed the argot of Britain's populist xenophobia to condemn the burqa and those who choose to wear it. Such tactics have now become habitual, sending up into the night-sky volleys of tracer-bullets to test his new-found allegiance to the xenophobia which stalks Britain's by-ways. This is not a manifestation of a 'casual' racism. It's strategic.

On 25 September the impatience and frustration on the opposition benches were mounting. Female MP after female MP, one after the other, called on Johnson to curb the stridency of his language, attesting to the lines of connection binding the acts of symbolic violence in the mouths of politicians to the acts of actual violence in Westminster and beyond. They spoke of the death threats which they'd received. The murder of Jo Cox MP by Thomas Mair, who'd been conscripted into the mental world of the far right, was identified as a portent of what could happen if the gradients of political speech continued to escalate, driven by a toxic compound of high-proof misogyny and psychic dissociation. Johnson was having none of it. 'Humbug' was his response.

Maybe this was just another instance of his playing to the crowd, as he has learned to do throughout his public life. It was just 'Boris' hamming it up. But it didn't feel like that. It felt as if a line had been crossed. It revealed a prime minister unconcerned by the violence gathering in the streets, and unconcerned, too, by the need to reflect on his own responsibilities, however they might be judged. It was as if the matter was of no concern to him personally, nor of any concern to the nation's legislature. To witness this in real time, flashing across the computer screen, was a shock, stilling for a split second the usual hullaballoo of the Commons.

'Humbug' is not a word which historically signifies malevolence or violence. On the contrary it's a tepid term, straight from the jovial, comic universe of Billy Bunter or Bertie Wooster, in which nothing is to be taken seriously, and redolent of the persona Johnson has alighted upon to aid him in navigating his social world. Yet a task of a comprehensive politics is to supply new meanings to old words, bending language and taking it in hitherto untried directions. If we follow this line of reasoning, we might ask if 'humbug' has now lost its innocence, and whether it can be read as symptomatic of the larger political caesura personified by the populist recreation of Boris Johnson.

Soundings

George Orwell, alongside his dreamy desire to catch the sentiments of England, was on occasion obliged also to deploy surer, more incisive reflection. In the extended global crisis through which he lived, he was assailed by the question of what possibilities were present for an English authoritarianism, and what it would look and feel like were it to arrive. Due to the circumstances of his times, he inevitably posed the question not in the terms we have here, but in terms of fascism. He believed it a delusion to assume that if a rebellion of the right were to be mobilised in England, the iconography of the new regime would be conspicuous in its attachment to jackboots, swastikas and goose-stepping. That's not how things would be. The emergent political order would require a mode of address more homely than that, native to its domestic circumstances and already embryonically alive in popular life. It would draw from the existing codes of England, the mythic memories of England's past; it would play upon the nation's providential exceptionalism; the romance of the Crown; the everyday ducking and weaving of Cockney geezers, good blokes all. These would be reassembled alongside other elements of popular Englishness to signal drastically new meanings and values. My feeling is that Billy Bunter or Bertie Wooster would not, in themselves, be immune to such political revisions. The springs of authoritarianism crystallise in unlikely - in otherwise unexceptional, if uncannily familiar - locales.

Within twenty-four hours of the drama of the legal findings, the intervention of the Supreme Court had slipped from the headlines. Temporarily Johnson had indeed turned the tables. The voices of the opposition, still steadfast and still exposing the fabrications perpetrated by the modern-day Spartans, appeared to carry less leverage on the organisation of the daily flow of news, even while the nation was palpably as divided as ever. By 28 September, the impact of the law notwithstanding, the popularity of the Conservatives had dipped by just a single point, while Labour had increased its tally by three. Even so, in the aftermath of Johnson's torrid week the Tories continued to maintain a significant lead over Labour, untouched by the evident disrepair of Johnson's reputation. Amongst those already won to his cause, the greater the outrages he conducted the more invulnerable his popular support. This carries us to the mental labyrinth of 'fake news', the normalisation of mendacity, and to the current mind-bending epistemic insurrection against political reason - which is subverting the possibilities of politics itself.

And what of the opposition?

At the time of writing Johnson has established his hold on the Conservative Party - he is formally endorsed by both the MPs and the larger (if minuscule) membership. It's more than probable that the Conservatives could win a general election. This alone should concentrate the mind. But the party can only survive by an unwavering, mono-logical dedication to high-risk gaming - inventing as it does so a new venture: hedge-fund politics. Johnson is perpetually one move away from calamity. He has ahead of him the job of realising what he has repeatedly declared: that, come hell or high water, or 'dying in the ditch', Britain will leave the EU by 31 October. At the same time, this has - somehow - to be reconciled with his less emphatic assurances that he'll observe what is now the law, ensuring that the UK's exit without a deal won't happen. Outside the delirium of his inner circle, no-one knows how both can be achieved without the government's mendacity being ramped up, erecting a new wall of lies behind which they'll operate. Build the wall! Build it higher! The recklessness grips tight.

This is the situation, as I understand it, of the governing party. What follows?

While Johnson in the Commons traduced his female critics, Corbyn was addressing his party conference in Brighton. The bulk of the electorate pays little heed to the set-piece speeches of the leaders at the annual party conferences - putatively the star turn - unless they score high on the scale of comic incompetence, reducing politics to a grubby game-show. The evidence suggests, moreover, that Corbyn is not a natural or compelling orator.

Yet to switch from the TV footage of Johnson to Corbyn, as I discovered, was telling. In contrast to Johnson, Corbyn's presence was relaxed, measured and rational. The common, lazy conflation of the two, on the ill-conceived grounds of a shared populism, has zero purchase. He had the stage to himself. He was on home territory. It was his to lose. In the event, he persuasively conveyed his attachment to the elementary values of social democracy, broadly indicating the priorities for their implementation. The unexcitable tone of John McDonnell was not far away. There were no fireworks. I found it heartening to listen to an uncompromising defence of social equality. It made me realise how infrequently in public this now happens, how attuned I've become to the relentless cacophony of contrary voices, and how welcome it is to hear restated simple ethical truths.

Of course, to elevate a single occasion in this way is like assessing twelve months of a life by admiring a one-off holiday snapshot, all sun, smiles and margaritas. We know the catalogue of reservations (at best) which lead voters, democratically spirited voters included, to arrive at the conclusion that they're unable to back Labour because, precisely, of the person of Corbyn.

Whatever one makes of this, it's undeniably the fact that on many fronts the democratic deficit of the Labour Party is for real. It cuts deep, abetting the disorganisation of the many who have no time for Spartan Conservatism. In recent times I doubt I've had a political conversation which at some point hasn't found Corbyn's leadership wanting. Since his mythical appearance on stage at Glastonbury, where he had little to do but wave, the frustrations have been building: in spite of his early declarations on the inviolability of democracy, the reflexes of historic labourism are still alive in Corbyn's Labour Party, as they are in Corbyn himself, and, disastrously, in his office. This deficit sits uneasily alongside the paramountcy of the democratic imperative to defeat Johnson.

Like many others, I favour the creation of the broadest possible coalition of forces, inside Westminster and beyond, to oppose the Conservatives: the idea that the Labour Party is alone the vehicle for attaining social emancipation, or even for its initial approximation, produces a deleterious narrowing of political horizons. This go-it-alone position means, for example, that Labour endorsing a national programme of tactical voting is not going to happen - although it could well occur haphazardly from below. A further problem is Corbyn's apparent decision to duck out of the limelight: this may have a strategic rationale, but it feeds the impression that the opposition has gone to sleep.

Even so, and as in May 1940, the Labour Party is, necessarily, the decisive agent in the making of the democratic opposition. Its refusal to endorse an election until the threat of no-deal had passed, in conjunction with its emergent accommodation with a people's vote, provides the basis for effective alliances. How far these could reach must remain an open matter until detailed negotiations are underway. The extent of the political capaciousness of any coalition poised to counter a hard Brexit will inevitably be the cause of unending contention, requiring an astute combination of principle and historic compromise. As I see it, the question of who should lead any future alliance - despite the palpable dangers - is secondary.

The longer project is to overcome the mantra, heard daily, that Brexit is the

embodiment of the will of the people, its alpha and omega, and that Brexit stands as the verification of democracy.

There is plenty of active, live and transformative evidence to the contrary, in every corner of civil society. And we should not forget that when Corbyn's arrival signalled the termination of New Labour, half a million people joined the Labour Party, an astonishing, unprecedented historical experience, working to undo the neoliberal nostrum that markets had liquidated the value of politics.

As new political domains arise, the field of politics itself is recast and expanded. This is a moment when the authority of the divide between representative and direct democracy is weakening. Spartan Conservatism stands as the antithesis of democracy, but there is an alternative. The will of the people is more generous and more plural than the Spartans could ever conceive. There's everything to fight for.

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