

# **Borisconi**

*Just Boris*

Sonia Purnell

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**B**oris Johnson is the most popular politician, indeed the only popular politician, in Britain today. He is regarded by many commentators as by far the strongest contender to be the next leader of the Conservative Party, a prospect that most senior Conservatives regard with horror. He might well be our first pantomime prime minister. How has this British Berlusconi, this peculiar amalgam of Benny Hill and Mussolini, achieved such stardom? The Benny Hill aspect of his character has dominated so far, but there is every reason to believe that if he ever gets near real power we will see the Mussolini aspect coming to the fore. Johnson apparently has a ferocious temper in private and never forgives a slight. This makes Sonia Purnell's *Just Boris* all the more timely.

She provides a really quite incredible history of privilege, dishonesty, misjudgement and disaster. To be fair, he did spend his gap year in Africa, teaching orphaned children in the slums of Lagos. Only joking! He spent it teaching privileged children at Australia's equivalent of Eton. He was sacked from his first job as a journalist on *The Times* for inventing an interview, only to move straight over to the *Telegraph*, where presumably such things were not considered so important. The question that inevitably comes to mind as one reads Purnell's book is: how on earth does he get away with it? Certainly, his carefully constructed comical toff persona is an important factor. He has succeeded in identifying himself as one of Lord Snooty's pals out of the *Beano*. Not to be taken too seriously no matter how disloyal, despicable or outrageous his conduct because after all it's only Boris and he either did not know what he was doing or did not mean it.

Purnell's biography makes clear that this is all put on. He takes great care to muss his hair before any public appearance, for example. What emerges from her account is

an extremely intelligent if erratic politician a man of great ruthlessness who is encumbered by very few beliefs or convictions beyond a general commitment to the right and to the interests of the rich and privileged. Even his Euroscepticism is largely a pose because, in reality, she suggests, he doesn't actually care and is only really interested in self-advertisement. He is determined to become prime Minister but more to satisfy his own overpowering ego than out of any mundanely political considerations. The fear of many senior Conservatives is that it would never occur to Johnson that he should ever make any sacrifices for the benefit of the Party but that he would certainly not hesitate to sacrifice the Party for the benefit of Boris.

One particular incident in Johnson's rise to stardom is worth considering. On 14 October 2006, the *Spectator* carried an article attacking the people of Liverpool for their 'peculiar and deeply unattractive psyche', their 'excessive predilection for welfarism' and their wallowing in 'victimhood'. The death of 'more than 50' fans at Hillsborough was a great tragedy, 'but that is no excuse for Liverpool's failure to acknowledge, even to this day, the part played in the disaster by drunken fans'.

This piece was actually written by Simon Heffer, a sort of upmarket Kelvin Mackenzie, but the editor who took the decision to run it was Johnson. It is worth making the point that while the extent of police cover-up was not known at the time, it had already been established that drunken fans had absolutely not been a cause of the disaster. Facts should not be allowed to get in the way of abusing northerners, especially working class northerners. What made the display of casual contempt all the more transparent was the failure to even bother to get the number of fatalities correct. It was 96. At the time, Johnson was shadow arts minister. Incredibly, he was not asked to resign, but was instead sent to Liverpool to apologise, a visit that predictably degenerated into farce.

What was to bring his career to a temporary halt at this point was his long-term affair with Petronella Wyatt becoming known. She had actually gone into hospital three days before his Liverpool trip to abort her second Johnson pregnancy.

Disappointed at his failure to leave his wife, she went public, producing the Berlusconi-style headline in the *News of the World*, 'BONKING BORIS MADE ME PREGNANT'. He had denied the affair and was asked to resign as shadow arts minister for having lied. He refused and was sacked. According to Purnell, when it comes to mistresses, Johnson always 'goes for a certain upmarket type' and there were usually 'at least one or two well-bred Oxbridge women in short skirts starting out in journalism' whom he would invite to the *Spectator* so he could give them 'advice'. One young woman described his technique: 'He invades your personal space, gets really close to you, and then with those slightly popping blue eyes of his says intently in a deep voice: "You really must come and write for me at the *Spectator*."' If the object of his attentions seemed unreceptive, he moved on to someone else. Johnson justifies his affairs on the grounds that he is 'bursting with spunk'. All of this scandal that would normally have resulted in career death merely slowed him down.

What of the future? Johnson has used his position as Mayor of London as a vehicle to undermine David Cameron and to campaign for the leadership of the Conservative Party. The office has provided him with endless opportunities for self-advertisement from appearing in *East Enders* to hijacking the Olympics. Is he unstoppable? In an obvious attempt to embarrass the Government, he recently called for the top rate of tax to be cut to 40%, massaging the fantasies of the Tory right with the possibility that his popularity is such that he, unlike Osborne, might actually be able to get away with such a massive handout to the rich during a recession. Many hardline right-wing Tories cannot understand why the Tea Party phenomenon has never taken off in Britain and see Johnson as a potential one-man Tea Party. In fact, his popularity rests on his comic persona, on his not being taken seriously, rather than on his politics. He is more Mad Hatter than Tea Party. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that people will be considerably less sympathetic to a caricature Old Etonian who actually tries in practice to redistribute wealth to the rich in such an open fashion while everyone else is suffering a cut in

their living standards. He would not be able to pass this off as a joke.

This has happened before. In 2006, in another exercise in self-advertisement, he stood for the Rectorship of Edinburgh University and was thought to be the certain winner. He was believed to be so popular, especially with students, that no one could stop him. His support for tuition fees led to his coming third. The Green candidate won.

One last cloud on Johnson's horizon is his relationship with Rupert Murdoch. He was every bit as close to News International as Cameron and, according to Purnell, actually had to pull out of a trip to a Take That concert with Rebekah Brooks and her husband, Charlie, an old school friend, when the 'Hacking scandal' went toxic. Whereas Cameron felt obliged to permanently distance himself from News International, Johnson very deliberately decided to publicly associate himself with Murdoch, dismissing the 'Hacking scandal' as 'codswallop' and a Labour stunt. He very publicly invited Murdoch to be his guest at the Olympics. Without much doubt his thinking is that Murdoch will ride out the 'Hacking scandal' and Leveson, and that it will be more than useful to have the backing of the *Sun* and *The Times* when he stands for the leadership of the Conservative Party.

What might cause him problems are allegations that the Mayor's office actually tried to interfere with the 'Hacking' inquiry, allegations that don't seem likely to go away. Purnell herself raises serious concerns about Johnson's earlier possible interference in policing matters, and this is certainly one of the most disturbing parts of her book. She provides the best account of the Damian Green episode so far. Johnson's close relationship with Murdoch might well backfire. We shall see.

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