

The Assault on Truth:

Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism

Peter Osborne

London: Simon and Schuster, 2021, £12.99, p/b

John Newsinger

When I read Peter Osborne's *The Rise of Political Lying* more than fifteen years ago, I was full of admiration for its exposure of New Labour's dishonesty. This was tempered, however, by the fact that I found it difficult to square this concern for political honesty and the truth with Osborne working at the *Daily Mail*, of all papers. My suspicion was that, once New Labour had been replaced by a Conservative government, Osborne would inevitably be put to the test, a test that he was likely to fail. Would he judge a Conservative government by the same standard that he had judged the Blair government? I hoped he would, but in fact it seemed to me that he dropped the ball. The Cameron government and the Johnson mayoralty were not subjected to anything like the same critical scrutiny as Blair and co. had been. Now Osborne has published a new book subjecting Boris Johnson to forensic examination, bracketing him with Donald Trump, and judging both men to be compulsive liars for whom the very idea of the truth means nothing.

The Assault on Truth is certainly a compelling read but in some respects it is an unsatisfactory book. It feels too much like a work in progress. The book has unresolved contradictions – presumably because Osborne has not really sorted out his politics yet. He certainly provides a devastating critique of Boris Johnson's serial dishonesty, of the way that the man routinely lies about matters large and small. He cannot help himself: if he was a stick of rock, LIAR would be written right through him. In normal times such a record of compulsive public dishonesty would have disqualified him from high office; and Osborne makes it clear that he considers him completely unfit for the position of Prime Minister. Under Johnson, 'political deceit has become not just commonplace but automatic'. (p. 3) Our Prime Minister, we are told, 'lies habitually, with impunity, and without conscience'; 'his dishonesty [. . .] is epic by British standards'. (p. 47) In fact, Johnson often seems to lie 'for the sheer hell of it'. (p. 162) So many are the man's lies, Osborne tells his readers, that he has had to be very selective regarding them because to have chronicled them all would have resulted in much too long a book.

Let us start with one of the minor but nevertheless telling examples he provides: in November 2019, while visiting a hospital, Johnson told doctors that he had given up alcohol. In fact, he was filmed the day before the visit drinking whisky and the day after drinking beer. As Osborne argues, this shows 'that he would lie about anything at all' – and for no apparent reason. (p. 18) Dishonesty is just second nature to him. More seriously, Johnson insisted during the 2019 election campaign that he planned to build forty new NHS hospitals – a complete fabrication. The actual number was four. Similarly, he was absolutely adamant on a number of occasions that his Brexit deal would not result in customs checks between Britain and Northern Ireland. He was telling a barefaced lie. It would and he knew it would. Johnson's routine and serial dishonesty has corrupted the whole government so that 'lying, cupidity and lack of integrity have become essential qualities for ambitious ministers'; indeed, it 'has become all but impossible for an honest politician to survive, let alone flourish, in Boris Johnson's government'. (p. 6) And this judgement comes from someone who once thought highly of the man and who, incredibly, still seems to have some residual regard for him, even though his lying incompetence has cost the lives of tens of thousands of people, mainly black, poor and old, during the current covid pandemic. To be fair, Osborne does provide an excellent discussion of the Johnson government's encounter with the pandemic that is essential, if shocking, reading. (pp. 67-89) And, as well as condemning Johnson, Osborne goes on to condemn the right-wing press for indulging him, for not holding him to account.

To his credit, Osborne also spends some time detailing the lies that Johnson and his people told about the then Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, a politician who actually is an honest man. It is also worth noticing here Osborne's devastating review of Tom Bower's appalling attack dog biography of Corbyn.¹ But the Tory press maligning the Labour Party is nothing new. One has only to call to mind the Zinoviev Letter to appreciate what they will do to damage Labour and to hold on to power. It is also worth remembering Churchill's 1945 claim that an Attlee government would set up its own Gestapo – an allegation enthusiastically amplified by the Tory press. And one of the more recent Labour leaders who got the most unscrupulous treatment from the Tory press, in particular from the Murdoch press, was Neil Kinnock, a man who was hardly a threat to British capitalism.

As well as indicting Johnson for his dishonesty in the most uncompromising fashion, Osborne also praises him! Johnson was apparently 'the most brilliant political journalist of his generation, with a talent that at

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/dqm6tpx9>> or <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/tom-bower-book-dangerous-hero-jeremy-corbyn-labour-leader-truth>>

times crossed over the line to genius'. (p. 61) When Osborne worked for him at the *Spectator*, Johnson 'was a joy to work for, a fine editor and a loyal colleague with the quickest mind I've ever encountered'. He praises his 'sophisticated understanding of politics'. (pp. 135-136) And there is more: Johnson 'had been one of the most brilliant journalists of his time, destined to become a famous editor'. (pp. 115-116) It seems clear that Osborne has not successfully thought through his argument here and is guilty of a glaring contradiction. He praises Johnson as a brilliant journalist and in the same breath acknowledges that, after being sacked by *The Times* for making up a quotation, he went on to invent 'a new form of journalism' at the *Telegraph*. His sustained campaign against the European Union, which showed no discernible concern with fairness or the truth, made his name. Thirty years later his new form of journalism would 'become famous as fake news'. (pp. 54-55) So, Johnson is to be both credited with having invented fake news *and* to be regarded as one of the great journalists of his generation. Osborne's commitment to the truth seems to have got a bit lost. Indeed, one of his criticisms of Johnson as Prime Minister is that he brought into Downing Street the media world's 'readiness to distort, misrepresent, smear and fabricate'. (p. 116) Johnson, he admits, had a reputation as a journalist for being 'a liar, charlatan and cheat' and, while apparently this was not incompatible with being a truly great journalist and potentially a truly great newspaper editor, it was not what we needed in a Prime Minister! This is really pretty amazing. It does not seem to occur to Osborne that the media world's readiness to 'distort, misrepresent, smear and fabricate' might well be a factor in its failure to hold Johnson to account for his lies and dishonesty in Downing Street.

How to explain this contradiction and Osborne's failure to resolve it? It does seem that Osborne actually had no objection to Johnson until he turned on the so-called 'One Nation' Conservatives. He was a perfectly acceptable frontman, lies and all, until it became clear that he had abandoned Osborne's own brand of traditional conservatism to become the frontman for a hard-line, right-wing conservatism to which Osborne was unsympathetic. To some extent, Osborne blames Dominic Cummings for what he sees as a transformation in Johnson's political style and objectives; but this will just not do. When he brackets Johnson with Trump, the implication is that both men have embraced a variety of right-wing 'populism'. While this is certainly true of Trump, it is not true of Johnson. Johnson was elected leader of the Conservative Party because he could do a good comedic *impression* of a right-wing populist, which was seen as necessary in order to see off the real populist challenge posed by the Brexit Party. Had the Brexit Party challenge not been dealt with, it might have cost the Conservatives enough votes to have put Labour into office and Jeremy Corbyn would have become Prime Minister. Johnson's commitment was to a

hard-line, right-wing Conservatism that was intent on transforming Britain post-Brexit. This seeks a low wage, off-shore tax haven; a welfare state that has been effectively dismantled after austerity; and the global super rich made welcome on their new island paradise.

Osborne does go some way to chronicle his own disillusion. The first episode concerned the leaking of the so-called 'Yellowhammer' Treasury dossier in August 2019. The government claimed it was an old document, out-of-date, that had been leaked by a former minister. The Tory press, guided by anonymous government sources, pointed the finger at ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond. As Osborne points out, this was all lies and distraction, because 'Yellowhammer' was not an old document, so Hammond would never have had access to it. As Osborne puts it, what this 'sorry story of the smear' shows is 'how Boris Johnson's media operation operates through deceit, and how it relies on a compliant media to cooperate with that deceit'. (p. 124) One cannot help feeling that his highlighting of this particular episode was because the victim was a 'decent' Tory.

The other episode was the claim that the government was investigating the connection that Dominic Grieve, Oliver Letwin and Hilary Benn had with foreign governments who were funding their activities. This story first appeared in the *Mail on Sunday* on 29 September 2019 and the following day was taken up by the rest of the Tory press. Johnson himself gave the story credibility in a TV interview. When Osborne checked the background to the story he found that Grieve, Letwin and Benn had never been subject to any such investigation. The whole affair was entirely made up – as a distraction intended to discredit Johnson's opponents. Osborne labels Johnson's personal role in this as 'repellent': Johnson knew the story was a lie and should have squashed it, but instead 'he fuelled the smear'. (p. 130) Osborne was outraged at the way that the *Mail on Sunday* 'had entered into something like a conspiracy with Downing Street to mislead its readers into thinking that three honourable British politicians were conniving with a foreign power'. Benn seems to have been accorded the status of honorary Tory here.

Osborne wrote his weekly column for the *Daily Mail* exposing how 'Boris Johnson was debauching Downing Street by using the power of his office to spread propaganda and fake news'. The column was politely declined and he was asked to write something else. He then offered the column to the *Spectator* but they were not interested. Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme showed interest, only to change their mind. In the end, it was the openDemocracy website that gave him a platform.² This 'marked the end of

² <<https://tinyurl.com/1o8dxt5j>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/british-journalists-have-become-part-of-johnsons-fake-news-machine/>>

[his] thirty-year-long career as a writer and broadcaster in the mainstream British press and media'. (pp. 127-132) While Osborne's stand is admirable – indeed we are all in his debt – one cannot help feeling that what alerted him to the danger that Johnson poses was that he was going after 'decent traditional Tories' (once again Benn has honorary Tory status here).

How does Osborne explain Johnson's rise to power and the acceptance of his methods and conduct as routine, as the new 'normal'? At one point, he seriously suggests that the Left is somehow to blame, that it is *their* dishonesty that has somehow contaminated the British political landscape. For the Left the truth was only important 'insofar as it confirmed their view of the world or the needs of some particular "progressive" cause'. He cites both support for the Vietnamese resistance to the United States in the late sixties and early seventies and Blair's 'weapons of mass destruction' lies as examples of Leftist dishonesty. The vector for this contamination was apparently Dominic Cummings, a man much influenced by the example of the Comintern agent Willi Munzenberg! This is just so much special pleading, of course. And while not defending Blair, it is worth remembering that the invasion of Iraq had a worthy predecessor in the attempt to oust President Nasser in 1956. That decent traditional Tory, Anthony Eden, had covertly conspired with the French and the Israelis to launch an unprovoked attack on Egypt. The only reason this invasion did not descend into a bloody, protracted quagmire was that on this occasion the United States forced the aggressors to retreat. Moreover, as far as most people on the left were concerned, when he joined the United States in invading Iraq, Blair was actually behaving like a traditional Tory Imperialist!

Much more telling is Osborne's comparison of our contemporary situation with the Old Corruption of the eighteenth century. (p. 3) The political and social order that has been coming into existence in this country since the Thatcher years can be quite accurately described as the New Corruption. Thatcher began the process, Blair consolidated it in place and Cameron saved it from collapse after the 2008 economic crisis by imposing his Austerity regime. This ensured that ordinary people, both working class and middle class, paid the price for the bankers' greed. The result is Food Bank Britain.

Since Thatcher, the rich have got richer and richer, a political and social order has been put in place that attracts the global super rich – particularly Russians for some reason – and dramatically increasing levels of social inequality go relatively unchallenged. The political influence of the rich and super rich has become overwhelming in a way that has not been seen since the eighteenth century. One consequence of this is that the British governmental system is today openly corrupt, characterised by blatant, unashamed cronyism, and this is covered up by lies, with the willing complicity of the

media. It is this that has made it possible for someone like Johnson to become Prime Minister. And the process is ongoing. Not only has Rupert Murdoch's position as a press lord never been seriously challenged in this country, under Blair, it is worth remembering, he was given what amounted to a veto over legislation. The Johnson government looks set to allow him to start a British Fox News, with all the benefits that it has brought for democracy in the United States. Watch out for News UK TV. What Johnson is hoping for is for a TV channel that will support him in the same dangerous, lying, unscrupulous, often astonishing way that Fox News (at least until recently) supported Trump. The new channel is likely to start out restrained but, once it is securely established, will undoubtedly contribute significantly to the ongoing development of the New Corruption. Murdoch truly is the syphilis that has infected an already seriously diseased media world, both here and in the United States – with serious consequences for the body politic.

Osborne is part of the way there, but has not yet got the whole way. Having said all this, let me recommend his *The Assault on Truth*. All his books have been worth reading, both for what one learns from them and from the way they stimulate one's thinking. He raises important questions – whether or not you think he provides adequate answers.

John Newsinger is a retired academic.

His latest book is Chosen by God: Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism, published by Bookmarks.

<<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>