

Whatever Happened to Tommy the Red?

Dangerous Hero:

Corbyn's Ruthless Plot for Power

Tom Bower

London: William Collins, 2019

Boris Johnson: The Gambler

Tom Bower

London: W H Allen, 2020

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Tom Bower's 'biography' of Jeremy Corbyn is one of the most contemptible books that I have ever read. It comes across as if it was written by a particularly stupid *Daily Mail* leader writer on speed, so eager – indeed so desperate – is it to get its Red Scare message across. When I first read it, I could scarcely believe that it was actually written by *the* Tom Bower. But perhaps I had always misunderstood where the great investigative reporter was coming from; perhaps he had always been a hatchet-man for the hard right of the Conservative Party? I decided to re-read his tremendous *Blind Eye to Murder*, published back in 1981, and actually bought a second hand copy. It only served to remind me of what he had once been before his sad decline, as evidenced by the appalling Corbyn volume. And this was before his 500+ page perverted love letter to Boris Johnson was published.

The Red Scare

In his assault on Corbyn, Bower portrays him as being both a ruthless determined Trotskyist conspirator – out to destroy everything decent about British society – *and* someone wholly incompetent, incapable of organising anything, not really to be taken seriously. In the end, the Red Scare motif comes out on top. For those who are only familiar with the past forty years of neo-liberal Britain, with the country being quite openly

and unashamedly run for the benefit of the rich and super rich, he sets out to remind his readers of the dark years when socialist revolution was apparently very much on the agenda, way back in the 1960s and 1970s. Then the country was in the grip of 'industrial anarchy organised by communist conspirators' (p. xvi). This might seem somewhat perverse as he also considers Britain at this time to have had a 'socialist economy imposed by Labour governments since 1945'. (p. 15) But there you go. One of the great advantages of the classic Red Scare is that it does not have to even pretend to be consistent – just so long as it evokes conspiracies, violence and fear and feeds prejudice. Any argument, no matter how stupid, is acceptable as long as it contributes to this end; and as we shall see, Bower has embraced stupidity – there's no other word for it – with a vengeance.

Criticising Edward Heath for being only half-hearted in his attempt at dismantling Britain's socialist economy in the 1970s, he conveniently forgets that Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas Home – all Tories – had held the office of Prime Minister throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s without apparently realising that their governments were running a socialist Britain. But this is to mistake Bower's purpose. His intention is to elevate and celebrate Margaret Thatcher's greatness and Heath is the ideal foil for this: the man the miners defeated contrasted with the woman who defeated the miners. It was Thatcher, after all, who began the neo-liberal reshaping of Britain. This was a wholly good thing because, as Bower argues, privatisation was to show that 'public-owned industries were largely run for the benefit of their employees'. (p. 15) Bower really does not like public sector workers, whom he seems to regard as some sort of abomination. He is particularly hostile to teachers and their unions.

Not only that: some of the union leaders who were busy 'sabotaging the economy' in order to bring Heath down in the 1970s were, he reveals, 'on Russia's payroll'. (p. 15) He repeats this slander regularly. Obviously it is one of the great disappointments of the readers of the *Daily Mail* that the 'exposing' of the trade union movement as being under the control of Russian agents did not have the seismic impact they hoped for. But Bower evidently considers the story as still being of use. Harold Wilson, we are told, had been warned by MI5 that 'a raft of British trade union leaders were being paid by Moscow to advance communism in Britain'. One of the most important of these Russian agents was Jack Jones, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, who had been 'identified as a paid Soviet agent since the mid-1930s'. (p. 40) For some reason, Bower lets Michael Foot, or agent 'Boot' as he was known to *Daily Mail* readers,

off the hook. And he does not mention MI5 suspicions of Wilson himself. Still, Wilson did allow Trotskyist infiltration of the Labour Party to run riot so that 'more and more communists were elected as Labour MPs' and the Labour election manifesto in 1974 was dangerously leftwing, promising

'to extend nationalisation, prevent Britons taking money abroad, impose a rent freeze, enforce price controls on private business, finance widespread food subsidies, and push through a "large-scale redistribution of Britain's income and wealth"'.

This was, as far as the young Corbyn was concerned, the first step towards the realisation of the 'Marxist ideal'. (p 16)

In his biography of Johnson, Bower tells his readers that Wilson had 'imposed socialism on Britain' after he came to power in 1964. (p. 30) So we have Bower arguing that Britain became socialist after 1945, then after 1964 and that Wilson was still apparently set on introducing socialism after 1974. Still, when you are feeding prejudice, consistency is hardly necessary.

Not only were the unions controlled by Moscow, they were also determined to damage the real interests of their members. Derek Robinson, for example, was a 'Marxist shop steward who apparently delighted in furthering the ruin of Britain's motor industry'. (*Dangerous Hero* p. 29) This is pure *Daily Mail* drivel. Even more perverse is the revelation that Arthur Scargill was 'uninterested in the barbaric working conditions endured by the miners, most of whom ended their careers with painful injuries or chronic medical conditions, or died prematurely from incurable illnesses'. Apparently it was Margaret Thatcher who was really concerned about the miners' wellbeing. What clinches the case for Bower was that Thatcher was going to shut this 'perilous' industry down, thereby rescuing the miners from the appalling conditions that successive Labour governments had insisted they work under. (p. 87) Yes, he seriously argues this. It is yet another example of his peculiarly self-satisfied stupidity. For Bower, it was Thatcher who was the great saviour of the British working class. She recognised that 'Britain was ruled by the unions, the majority of which were controlled by committed Marxists and agents of Moscow', and was prepared to take them on. It was she who heroically defeated the Enemy Within and set the working class free. (p. 33)

But what of Corbyn himself? Bower throws the Red Scare around with considerable abandon. Fenner Brockway, we are assured, was 'a paid Soviet agent'; Eric Heffer was 'a bullying Trotskyite'; even Neil Kinnock was 'leftwing' and so on and on. (pp. 67, 83) The danger they posed was

nothing compared to the threat from 'Corbyn and his fellow Trotskyists, including John McDonnell, Len McCluskey, Diane Abbott and Seamus Milne'. Corbyn and comrades 'made no effort to conceal their Trotskyist agenda'. (p. 46) He was out to impose a 'Marxist-Trotskyist government' on Britain. (pp. xvi-xvii) This was a somewhat peculiar Trotskyism, however, because it did not stop Corbyn from being 'a communist fellow-traveller'. (p. 37) Bower does his level best to assemble evidence that Corbyn was working for Czech intelligence in the late 1980s. They gave him the codename 'COB', presumably short for Corbyn and considered him a 'potential collaborator'. But in the end Bower has to admit that he 'was neither a paid agent nor a source of secrets, but he was a genuine sympathiser'. (p. 97)

Bower claims considerable insight into the intricacies of Trotskyist politics because, as he puts it, 'I have spent my life and career among the hard left'. Indeed, he was actually known as 'Tommy the Red' when he was a student. (pp. xiv, xvii) Taking him at his word, he would certainly know that the Trotskyism he accuses Corbyn of is not compatible with being a communist fellow traveller. And, as for Seamus Milne being a Trotskyist, Bower certainly knows that this is just so much rubbish, as elsewhere he describes him as a 'Tankie'. (p. 177) This is of no concern, however, because the object is to smear Corbyn and his comrades and allegations of Trotskyism are apparently particularly potent at the moment.

While Bower is obviously focussed on Corbyn, he also spares some time for John McDonnell who has a 'self-proclaimed "fondness for violence"' that even influenced the conduct of the Miners' Strike in 1984-85. (p. 87) Once again, here, Bower's stupidity is something to marvel at. McDonnell was, he insists, a 'firebrand' who openly advocated violence. Still, who would have thought McDonnell was responsible for the violence that accompanied this great class battle! Bower asks whether McDonnell has ever been involved in violence himself or has just cheered others on. He leaves the question open because 'All evidence about his time in Great Yarmouth and Burnley [before he moved to London in 1976] had disappeared.' What clinches the case for McDonnell's predilection for violence, however, is 'moderate' Labour MPs telling Bower that McDonnell would have 'no problem signing death warrants for people he disliked'. And Corbyn would, he says, have 'no doubt' gone along with this. (pp. 148-149)

It was Thatcher who turned the tide and saved Britain. She 'was committed to unravelling the monopoly of state socialism' that was

wrecking the country and successfully routed the revolutionary Red Menace both within and without. Not only were the miners crushed, but Rupert Murdoch, with Thatcher's blessing, staged his 'audacious coup' at Wapping. Murdoch's long-standing pernicious influence on British politics through the Thatcher, Blair and Cameron years does not seem to even interest – let alone trouble – our intrepid investigative reporter. What does upset him though is the fact that Jeremy Corbyn, to his great credit, was on the Wapping picket line, standing alongside the sacked print workers, 'every morning for nine months'. (p. 94)

Bower does not have that much to say about Blair and Brown, although it is worth noticing his explanation for the great financial crash. Gordon Brown, we are told, 'borrowed excessive amounts so he could distribute welfare benefits, some to questionable claimants'. This was what socialism was all about after all. Those people who blamed the crash on greedy bankers had no idea of what was going on. It was the greedy poor!

Under David Cameron, Brown's 'socialism' was all rolled back. Bower is insistent that the Austerity regime initiated under Cameron has also been seriously misunderstood (poor Nick Clegg does not get so much as a mention). Under Austerity, 'the beneficiaries . . . were the poor' with George Osborne's cuts targeting 'the work-shy'. Indeed, under the Austerity regime, the British people had 'never been healthier, richer or more equal'. (pp. 163, 164, 172, 174)

Food Bank Britain seems to have altogether passed Bower by. The grim fact that tens of thousands of people, many of them in work, cannot afford to feed their families is not worthy of notice. Whereas in the dark days of the 1960s and 1970s this would have been regarded as a crisis that demanded urgent action by the government, today it is 'normal'. Nowadays, the poor going hungry is not something to be remedied but rather something to be publicly regretted (but privately celebrated) by contemporary Thatcherites. The working class have been set free from the chains of welfarism and now have to stand on their own two feet. Hunger is a necessary incentive under the regime of financial capitalism. And, of course, the Tories cannot resist anything with 'Bank' in the title. In Bower's universe, far from unrestrained financial capitalism being for the benefit of the rich and super rich, it was really for the benefit of the working class. With Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party all this was at risk – which is presumably why he wrote this appalling book.

Two of Bower's other revelations are worth noting. First, his response to the Grenfell Tower disaster: he praises the Tory council for their

'outstanding response' to the fire and condemns the media who 'conjured up an image of rich politicians trampling on the traumatised poor'. He singles out Jon Snow and Kirsty Wark as two of the main culprits here. As for the number of dead and injured, that was all the fault of 'incompetently led firefighters'. (p. 318) This is positively obscene, but as we shall see, Bower feels strongly enough about the gross injustice done to both the Tory government and Tory local council to return to it in his Johnson book. The second Of Bower's revelations is his account of the junior doctors' strikes (which were provoked by Jeremy Hunt in 2016). The villain here was 'the doctors' trade union', the British Medical Association; and he says the strike was actually run by the Corbynite Momentum organisation. Yes, this is what Bower claims. Indeed, it was all part of a great Trotskyist plot to bring down the May government. The plot saw the junior doctors linking up with the Trotskyists who were running the National Union of Teachers (Christine Blower, the NUT's general secretary was 'a Trotskyist agitator') and militant rail workers. (p. 230) This is Bower completely immersed in his Red Scare fantasy world – the BMA being part of a Trotskyist plot indeed! One cannot help thinking that even the average *Daily Mail* reader might believe that Bower had finally lost it.

What, though, of the Great Corbyn Anti-Semitism Scam? How does Bower integrate this into his account? He does deal with it, although this reader got the impression that it had been tacked on to what was primarily a Red Scare narrative. Let us be clear: the Great Anti-Semitism Scam that was unleashed against Corbyn makes the Zinoviev Letter look like the work of half-hearted amateurs. While it was primarily motivated by the fear that someone who was sympathetic to the Palestinian cause might be elected Prime Minister, it was quickly taken up by the Labour Right as a cudgel with which to beat the Left more generally. Even though Corbyn's domestic programme would have been regarded as a bit timid by Harold Wilson back in the 1960s, British politics have moved so far to the Right that it was completely unacceptable to most Labour MPs and, of course, to the *Guardian*. Allegations of anti-Semitism were seized upon as a decisive weapon in the subsequent Blairite recapture of the Labour leadership. What is particularly interesting is that the faked concern regarding the prevalence of anti-Semitism inside the Labour Party only materialised/was invented after the advance made by the party under Corbyn in the 2017 general election. And Bower would have it those advances were made with the help of 'troll factories based in Russia'. (p.

He traces Corbyn's anti-Semitism back to when he worked for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. Here he saw the 'exploitive Jewish employers of sweatshop labour' at work and this was 'the original source of his anti-Semitism'. (p. 19) This is just so much rubbish, not least because most of the employees of these Jewish employers would have themselves been Jewish. But, if you cannot find actual evidence to support your smear, then resort to broad generalisations. The fact is that anti-Semitism 'was deeply ingrained among the far left', something that derived from Marx himself having been 'a self-hating Jew'. The Left's long history of fighting anti-Semitism is completely suppressed, removed – it never happened. Instead, the Left is inherently anti-Semitic. And that is that. End of argument. Bower goes on: 'Marxist-Trotskyists like Corbyn imbibed Marx's sentiment without explicitly acknowledging its anti-Semitism, but the virus influenced Corbyn's language so that he automatically challenged the right of Israel to exist'. And all the time, 'the anti-Zionists' language had become increasingly anti-Semitic'. (pp. 129, 132). Indeed, as far as Corbyn was concerned 'Jews were automatically assumed to be rich capitalist financiers and bankers . . . and were all undoubted swindlers [. . .] the enemy of the working class'. There is no evidence to support this claim and considerable evidence to contradict it. To be blunt, it is a barefaced lie. Mind you, Corbyn was not as bad as Seamus Milne, whose body language sometimes 'visibly changed' in the presence of Jews. (p. 240) And Corbyn was also sympathetic to Muslims!

The sheer viciousness of the Great Corbyn Anti-Semitism Scam is still hard to get to grips with, but Bower incorporates it into his attack without any difficulty. The Scam will undoubtedly come to be seen as one of the Great Scares of modern British political history, one that was remarkably successful in destroying the reputation of the most anti-racist leader the Labour Party has ever had, a man with a long record of fighting anti-Semitism.

The Chancer

Bower's Corbyn volume was undoubtedly prompted by fears that, after Labour's comparative success in the June 2017 general election, he might actually succeed in becoming Prime Minister. Given the massive

¹ In Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh's 500+ page study of that general election, *The British General Election of 2017* (London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2018), anti-Semitism does not even appear in the index. Their study of the 2019 general election will, one suspects, be very different in this respect.

propaganda assault mounted on Corbyn from all sides, one can safely assume that the book played only a very small part in preventing that outcome. To save themselves from defeat, however, the Conservative Party turned to Boris Johnson: one of the most contemptible individuals to ever hold high office in Britain – an accolade for which there is a lot of competition. He was the celebrity politician who would see off the Brexit Party and keep the Tories in power. Bower has followed up his Corbyn volume with a biography of Boris Johnson that successfully destroys whatever shreds of reputation the earlier book had left him.

For a start, his subtitle is *The Gambler*. Now Johnson is not a gambler. A gambler puts up a stake and is prepared to lose that stake if the bet goes the wrong way. That is certainly not Johnson. We have pretty conclusive proof of this from when he bet Max Hastings £1,000 that the Tories would win a majority in the 2010 general election. He lost the bet and sent Hastings a letter saying that a cheque was enclosed. It wasn't. He was, in Hastings' words a 'welsher'. This is one of those anecdotes that effectively sum up Johnson's cheating, lying, dishonest character to perfection. (p. 202) Even more telling is the time Petronella Wyatt, with whom he had a four year affair, told him she was carrying his child and he advised her 'she should have an affair with someone else and say it was their child'. Instead, when she had an abortion, absolutely predictably Johnson refused to make any contribution to the cost.² There are not really any polite words available to describe someone like Johnson. Clearly he is not a Gambler.

He is in fact a classic Chancer. He is someone who will tell any lie and break any promise in order to get what he wants, someone who accepts no responsibility for any of his actions and walks away without any concern whatsoever for those damaged by his conduct. They are just so much collateral damage. His own children are included in this category. This is how he has always conducted himself in both his personal and his political life. He is completely without any sense of shame. The best way to regard him is as a posh conman selling extremely dodgy goods – that is selling himself. Such is the dire state of British politics that he has been astonishingly successful.

How does Bower approach celebrating this man and his genius? How does he attempt to persuade his readers that Johnson is the Man of the Hour come to save Britain? Essentially, he adopts Johnson's own strategy of admitting that he is a 'cad', but arguing that such weaknesses count for

² Sonia Purnell, *Just Boris: The Irresistible Rise of a Political Celebrity* (London: Aurum Press, 2011) p. 261

nothing when measured against both his greatness and the country's urgent need for a new Churchill. Bower acknowledges Johnson's personal conduct; indeed is often quite brutal about it. The man certainly is an irresponsible liar who does not believe that any of the normal rules of conduct apply to him. This includes his relationships with women, in both the treatment of his previous wives and his succession of affairs. Johnson is, in fact, extremely proud of how many notches he has on his bedpost and seems to regard this as one of the marks of greatness. Bower puts this conduct down to his upbringing, blaming it all on his father, Stanley, and the appalling example he set young Johnson. According to Bower, Stanley Johnson was a wife-beater. This was why his wife, Charlotte, left him after fifteen years: 'the violence was the tipping point [. . . .] Stanley's violence has forever haunted Johnson'. (p. 22) Indeed, Johnson has actually blamed his father for his own conduct, on one occasion, telling his second wife, Marina, after she had thrown him out, 'his innermost secret'. He had seen his father 'hit Charlotte. So much about Boris was explained by that experience'. (p. 92) Both she and Bower seem to have fallen for this story. It remains to be seen if Carrie Symonds will be as gullible. But this is not the only factor as far as Johnson's relationships with women are concerned. They found him irresistible. Women just threw themselves at him. It was not his fault. When his pseudo-biography of Churchill was published in 2014 and he went on tour to promote it, he was besieged by women seeking his attention. As an admiring Bower puts it: 'Even *Guardian* women were attracted by his animal magnetism'. (p. 230)

Bower is determined to place Johnson the Cad in the context of Johnson the Great Man. This involves both the big and the small. We are told, for example, that he reads Greek poetry in the original Greek every night before he goes to bed. (p. 117) Who cannot but be impressed by that? Now, given that nothing Johnson says can be trusted because he lies about everything, one can in fact safely dismiss this claim as a rather futile attempt to give this incredibly shallow individual some depth. Interestingly, Bower does not explore Johnson's motoring journalism for *GQ* magazine in any depth, even though this actually provides considerable evidence of the character of the man that we can all access.³ Much of this output was just so much embarrassingly juvenile masturbatory garbage. But one contribution is worth noticing and it comes from Johnson's own collection of automotive journalism. (For a

³ On which see <<https://tinyurl.com/y62hwech>> or <<https://www.carkeys.co.uk/news/boris-johnson-was-once-the-world-s-worst-car-journalist>>

brief stint in his career, before taking up 'serious' politics, he was a peripatetic car reviewer.) In his own account, Johnson was overtaken by a 'beautiful blonde' driving 'a poxy little Citroen or Peugeot thing' while he was out driving an Alfa Romeo. As our current Prime Minister eloquently put it:

'Because if there is one thing calculated to make the testosterone sloosh in your ears like the echoing sea and the red mist of war descend over your eyes, its being treated as though you were an old woman by a young woman'.

Our Prime Minister watched 'her rear waggle ahead of me' and 'with her bobbing number plate now in my sights, the whole endocrine orchestra said: "Go. Take."' He pursued her, scattering cyclists in his wake. There is something about the Alfa, he confessed, that makes 'the seminal vesicles writhe like a bag of ferrets', and his 'Alfa took her from behind'. But the tale does not end well. He stalled and she drove off: 'her rump wiggled for the last time'. He still might have caught up with her but 'just then, without warning, my five-year-old child vomited all over the back seat'.⁴

He was in his late thirties when he wrote this particular masterpiece. I especially like the child being sick in the back of the car, although presumably it reads even better in the Greek.

Another occasion where Bower tries to give Johnson intellectual status is in his discussion of his pseudo-biography of Churchill.⁵ This is a truly appalling volume but Bower informs his readers that 'Boris was assured of a global bestseller translated into thirty-six languages'. The earnings from this book boosted his income in 2014 to £612,583, a sum that was 'enough to excite considerable envy'. And this is how Bower conveniently explains away the many hostile reviews the book received. He singles out the historian Richard Evans in particular. As he points out, 'unlike Boris's book, Evans's own works did not sell 160,000 hardbacks in Britain in just six months'. (pp. 230-231) Now this is yet another glaring example of how Bower has enthusiastically embraced stupidity. This is not just an insult, but rather a serious observation regarding the quality of his argument. Richard Evans has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of modern German history and of the history of the Third

⁴ Boris Johnson, *Life in the Fast Lane*, (London: HarperCollins, 2007) pp. 26-31

⁵ *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014) See my review in *Lobster 78* at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster78/lob78-churchill-factor.pdf>>

Reich in particular.⁶ But Evans' response to Johnson's book was apparently motivated by 'envy'.⁷ Seriously! One suspects that it was rather disbelief and despair. Firstly, disbelief that a reputable publisher would actually publish Johnson's garbage; and secondly, despair that so many people read it and were presumably taken in by his semi-literate reinvention of Churchill as a version of himself. Johnson's contribution in each and every one of his books has been to mislead, misinform and trivialise. It is worth remembering that the first time he was sacked for lying was for making up a historian's quotation.⁸

But *The Churchill Factor* was not written to advance our understanding of Churchill and his times. It was written to make money, to enhance Johnson's celebrity status and to convince as many *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* readers as possible that you could be both morally repugnant, a turncoat, a liar and a cad and – at the same time – a Great Man. This was true of Churchill *and* it is also true of Boris Johnson, so support him for the leadership of the Conservative Party. The book is a determined effort to show that Churchill was a deeply flawed individual but that he still saved Britain in its hour of need. Johnson wants his readers to believe that he is the man who can save Britain today! And Bower even quotes Johnson optimistically proclaiming that 'I'll be the next Churchill'. (p. 230) In his own eyes, Johnson actually has one advantage over Churchill, because while Churchill was not 'some sort of asexual Edward Heath-like character', he still did not have the enormous sexual appetite that Johnson seems to think goes with greatness, whereas Johnson himself of course . . .⁹

Johnson's biography does its best to 'Johnsonise' Churchill, but it really is an uphill struggle. In the years before he became Prime Minister,

⁶ His *In Defence of History* (1997) is a book that I recommended to hundreds of students over the years. His publications range from *The Feminist Movement in Germany 1894-1933* (1976), to *The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History* (1988), to *Telling Lies About Hitler: The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial* (2002) and on to his three volume history of the Third Reich: *The Coming of the Third Reich* (2003), *The Third Reich in Power 1933-1939* (2005) and *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (2008).

⁷ Evans' review of Johnson's Churchill book is at <<https://tinyurl.com/ycglpnbk>> or <<https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2014/11/one-man-who-made-history-another-who-seems-just-make-it-boris-churchill>>.

⁸ See <<https://tinyurl.com/yxwywv63>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-lies-conservative-leader-candidate-list-times-banana-brexit-bus-a8929076.html>>.

⁹ See my review of *The Churchill Factor* in *Lobster* 78 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster78/lob78-churchill-factor.pdf>>.

Churchill had held a number of senior government positions, including both Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Whatever you think of his politics, he had a solid political career behind him. Johnson, however, is just a celebrity politician whose only real achievement is the successful construction of a popular comedic persona. He has nothing in common with Churchill whatsoever. A good example of the difference between the two men is shown by Johnson being unable to accept that Churchill really was concerned about India and the British Empire in the 1930s. As far as Johnson is concerned, he was just 'positioning' himself in order to challenge for the leadership of the Conservative Party. He is completely unable to believe that Churchill had any principles that he would adhere to at the expense of his own political advancement. The very idea is completely alien to Johnson's notion of greatness. A great man is someone who always puts himself first; and this is absolutely legitimate because he is, after all, a great man, the country needs him, so it is his duty to always put himself first. Johnson seems to believe that Churchill had the same attitude towards India as Johnson, himself, had towards the European Union. It was merely a means to an end. One can safely assume that, if Johnson had been campaigning to remain Mayor of London at the time of the EU referendum, he would have been a fervent Remainer because that would have been to his personal advantage. But as he was after the leadership of the Conservative Party, he concluded that supporting Leave was to his personal advantage and threw himself into the Leave campaign. It was inevitably all about him. Everyone around him knows this, but the remarkable success of his comedic persona has made him electorally useful. Shocking though it is, Johnson was the best a Conservative Party, in thrall to the bankers, financiers, hedge-fund managers and PR men, could come up with in 2019, a point to which we will now turn.

According to Bower, it was Veronica Wadley, the then editor of the *Evening Standard*, who pushed for Johnson to be the Conservative candidate for London Mayor in 2007, arguing that they needed a celebrity candidate if they were to beat Ken Livingstone. She had known him since the late 1980s. Coincidentally, Veronica Wadley just happens to be married to Tom Bower; and, moreover, she went on to become a senior adviser to Johnson once he had been elected Mayor and was recently

given a peerage.¹⁰ What is interesting though is that Bower himself reveals that having helped secure his nomination, Wadley was appalled by how useless he was, on one occasion, telling him to his face that he was 'pathetic'. His campaign, at least in part at her insistence, had to be taken out of his hands and his role limited to that of the popular comedic frontman. (pp. 104-105) And this has been his role ever since.

Far from being a Great Man, a concept central to Conservative mythology, he is someone who excels at doing a comedy turn as a Great Man. That comedy turn has proved to be extremely popular and certainly played a part in winning the 2019 general election for the Conservatives. He is a Pretend Great Man, a Pretend Great Man with the common touch. This common touch is a vital part of the persona that this Old Etonian toff and Bullingdon hooligan has constructed for himself. He has himself continually filmed pretending to be doing ordinary everyday jobs alongside ordinary people and is apparently never happier than when he is wearing a high-visibility jacket and safety helmet. Even during the 2019 general election, he had himself filmed delivering milk and just about every week since he has been filmed laying bricks, painting and decorating, teaching kids and even helping out in hospital laboratories. In real life, of course, someone with his record for serial dishonesty and habitual unreliability would never be allowed to do any of these jobs. The very idea of people having to rely on someone like Johnson to deliver their milk or an employer trusting him to collect payment is hilarious. The only jobs where his peculiar qualities are a positive asset are right-wing journalism and Conservative politics.

However, rather than acknowledging this, Bower insists on trying to present Johnson as if he is the real thing. Everything that goes wrong on his watch, whether as Mayor of London, as Foreign Secretary or as Prime Minister, is the fault of other people who have either let him down or tried to sabotage him. And his achievements have largely gone unsung because of the 'Boris-haters' who have done their best to use his character – i.e. his dishonesty, his irresponsibility, his unreliability, his selfishness – to discredit him. The BBC, the *Guardian* and Polly Toynbee are particularly guilty in this regard; but Matthew Parris and Max Hastings on the right get a mention as well. They were wilfully 'deaf to his compassionate, cosmopolitan Conservatism' and refused to acknowledge

¹⁰ Bower is insistent that although Johnson has visited their home on a number of times, his biography was written without any input from either his wife, now known as Baroness Fleet, or from Johnson himself. It is worth noticing one interesting difference between his two biographies: in the Johnson biography, his subject is referred to throughout as Boris, while in the Corbyn volume he is invariably Corbyn.

that he was 'a Heseltine Tory'. (pp. 189, 212) This particular version of Conservatism that he temporarily adopted was tailored to win votes in London and Johnson had no scruples about abandoning it for a more aggressively right-wing version when it was to his advantage. He regularly proclaimed his undying devotion to Thatcher and Thatcherism.

A good example of this political promiscuity is Johnson's history of casual racism. When it is to his advantage he insists, not only that he is not a racist, but is indeed 'absolutely 100 per cent anti-racist. I despise and loathe racism'. (p. 110) As for some of his casual throwaway racist remarks, Bower thinks the Johnson 'would claim he was just satirising neocolonialism'. (p. 68) This is just so much nonsense. When it suits him, Johnson will make casual racist remarks as a way of demonstrating to the average *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* reader that he shares their prejudices. Even more damaging is the fact that when he was editor of the *Spectator* he was quite happy to let his columnist, Taki Theodoracopulos, publish racist and anti-Semitic columns.¹¹ On one occasion, even the *Spectator's* proprietor, Conrad Black protested that a column was openly anti-Semitic. But Johnson was apparently unmoved. What we see here is that Johnson has no problem with winning the support of racists, will deny being a racist himself when it is convenient, but has done nothing to actively fight racism and, both as Mayor of London and as a member of Theresa May's government, was party to the racist Hostile Environment policy. As far as Bower is concerned, accusations of racism are just another way of distracting attention from his achievements.

One thing that has to be acknowledged, however, is that hostility towards trade unions is one of the few constants in his politics. When he was Mayor he pressed the Cameron government to introduce more anti-trade union legislation and during one dispute on the railways actually asked the people running London for him, 'Can't we fire them all?' Inevitably Bob Crow was 'the Marxist leader of the RMT'. (p. 173)¹²

What Bower attempts to show is that Johnson's great successes as Mayor of London have gone unacknowledged by political commentators. They have tried to distract people by focussing, for example, on his affair

¹¹ Taki, as he is generally known, can be usefully seen as a precursor of the Alt-Right. The US fascist militia organisation, the Proud Boys, was actually launched in his US online magazine, *Taki's Magazine*, in 2016.

¹² Of course, when Bob Crow suddenly died of a heart attack in 2014, Johnson lauded Crow as a man who 'unquestionably helped to drive through huge progress on London Underground, and he leaves a massive legacy behind.' See <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-26527325>>.

with Jennifer Arcuri and have ignored how under his stewardship London and Londoners prospered as never before. But ordinary people loved him. Indeed, as Johnson proclaimed, Britain under Cameron's Austerity regime was 'a paradise'. (p. 201) As Bower puts it, London was 'booming With more billionaires than any other European city Britain was creating more new jobs . . . not least because living on welfare had become harder; and London had become a haven for the non-tax paying plutocrats benefitting from the fall of average wages'. (p. 228) A paradise indeed!

Food Bank Britain and the Britain of the Hostile Environment are also nowhere to be found in Bower's universe. The reality is that under Johnson the reshaping of London as a city designed for the convenience of the rich and super rich continued, with him playing very little part in the actual running of affairs, focussing instead on stunts and projects – on distractions. Bower has nothing to say about how London became a centre for money laundering, something that would once have proven irresistible to his investigative instincts. He is also completely unmoved by the Russian oligarch, Alexander Lebedev, a former KGB colonel and one-time dollar billionaire, being allowed to buy the *Evening Standard* in 2009. Britain is, it is fair to say, the only liberal democracy where it would be considered acceptable for a former KGB colonel to become the proprietor of the capital city's only daily newspaper. His acquisition of the paper took place with hardly any comment. Money, vast sums of money, talked considerably louder in Austerity Britain than elsewhere.

To be fair, Bower does note that Johnson was warned that it was not advisable to have too close a relationship with either Alexander or his son Evgeny.¹³ Obviously he ignored this advice and instead was flown in a private jet owned by Lebedev senior to Perugia for two nights of 'luxurious fun' partying courtesy of Lebedev junior. Johnson found this '[f]ree hospitality was an irresistible attraction'. (p. 203) Most famously, in 2018, when he was Foreign Secretary, Johnson was seen at the airport on his way back from a Lebedev party, looking like he had slept in his clothes and unable to walk in a straight line. He had apparently lost his team of bodyguards. Attendance at these parties became a regular event and Johnson has repaid his host, Evgeny, by giving him a peerage – making

¹³ According to some people, there were serious concerns about Johnson's relationship with the Lebedevs within the British security establishment. See Otto English, 'Spooking the Spooks: Media Complicity and Security Concerns over Lebedev and Johnson', *Byline Times* 25 October 2019 at <<https://tinyurl.com/y6llkqoe>> or <<https://bylinetimes.com/2019/10/25/spooking-the-spooks-media-complicity-and-security-concerns-over-lebedev-and-johnson/>>.

him, it is worth remembering, a lifetime member of the British legislature. This could only happen in Britain. In an incredibly open and shameless act of political nepotism, Johnson also gave his brother, Jo, a peerage!

While support for inequality, privilege and the rich is really Johnson's overriding political principle, Bower does try to show him as having some kind of real concern for the poor. This goes back to when he had just left university and got a job with the *Times*. He was sent to work on a local newspaper in Wolverhampton for three months in 1987-1988 and it was here that he first embraced Thatcherism. What he saw in the city convinced this wholly selfish, self-entitled young toff that the British working class 'lacked ambition and relied on benefits. Margaret Thatcher's glory was to destroy the poisonous welfarism of the 1970s and she became his hero'. (p. 43) It is particularly impressive that Johnson realised how welfarism oppressed the working class and held them down after only a few weeks in Wolverhampton, whereas it took Bower years to come to this conclusion. One can safely put this down to the advantages of Johnson's public school education. Of course, Johnson has invented other episodes when he was converted to Thatcherism, for example, during the 1984-1985 miners strike when he was asked to contribute to a collection for 'these blasted strikers'. It was this that provoked 'my first spasm of savage right-wing indignation'. Fortunately, the miners were defeated which proved to be 'a disaster for trade unionism [. . .] and membership has been on a steady downward path ever since'.¹⁴ One can confidently expect that he will invent other moments of conversion if and when it suits him.

But what of his time as Mayor of London? As far as Bower is concerned, Johnson's many achievements have not been recognised. The Garden Bridge, for example, should have been a monument to his time as Mayor, but Sadiq Khan abandoned the project, 'despite adequate finance'. (p. 310) Johnson was desperate to leave a legacy that would be written in stone and would be forever remembered by future generations, monuments to his Greatness. And, as for his much ridiculed purchase of water cannon, this was really nothing to do with him and was all the responsibility of Cameron and May who pressured him into buying them; and then May refused to licence their use, leaving him high and dry. (pp. 227-228)

Nevertheless, Johnson has left a monument behind that will undoubtedly come to be seen as exemplifying his time as Mayor and the

¹⁴ Boris Johnson, *Have I Got Views For You*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2006) pp. 116, 118.

enormous social inequality he presided over, indeed championed and celebrated: the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. The ferocity of Bower's response to this disaster suggests that he is very much aware of this. He had already dealt with this in his biography of Corbyn, but he is even more determined to blame the firefighters, the Left and sections of the media in his Johnson volume. We are confidently told that 'Incompetent firefighters inadvertently allowed the flames to take hold in the new cladding'. Prime Minister May showed how useless she was in her response to the fire and effectively allowed 'the left to weaponise the Grenfell disaster', aided and abetted by the BBC and Channel 4 who 'presented the tragedy as a capitalist conspiracy against downtrodden workers'. Across London, 'Trotskyist agitators spread the message that the dispossessed should grab power' with Jeremy Corbyn calling for 'a general strike, and revolution'. (pp. 326-327) This is really the most shameful part of the whole book. The level of social inequality in Kensington and Chelsea is ignored, the still unfolding scandal regarding the cladding is not so much as mentioned and the cutbacks to the fire service under the Austerity regime are forgotten. And, of course, far from being intent on revolution, Corbyn was wholly committed to the parliamentary road to Socialism.

Considering Johnson's character and history how did he ever become leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister? The majority of Conservative MPs positively despised and distrusted the man, many Conservative commentators loathed him and considered him completely unfit for just about any government post – let alone that of Prime Minister. But those same people turned to him because he was popular; and they saw the popularity as a way of seeing off the challenge from the Brexit Party which might have handed Labour electoral victory. It is worth making the point here that a majority of Labour MPs at this time also preferred a Johnson victory to having Corbyn become Prime Minister. He was the frontman, there to rally support and garner votes, with the business of government left to others. The expectation was that Johnson would successfully endow Brexit with the Battle of Britain spirit and would then preside over a new regime of lower wages, worsening working conditions, more welfare cuts, more privatisation and outsourcing, more homelessness and deteriorating housing conditions for ordinary people. Alongside this, the country would be further reshaped into a paradise for the rich and super rich, an off-shore tax haven. He would provide the distraction while the government went about its real business.

Instead what we have seen is the coronavirus pandemic expose a government characterised by historic levels of incompetence and unprecedented levels of blatant, unashamed corruption. As far as the

present government is concerned the state seems to be little more than an outsourcing agency, with lucrative contracts being distributed to their 'chums'. It is worth emphasising here that, if Corbyn had won the 2019 general election and Labour had formed the government, then thousands of people would not have died because of the Johnson government's ideologically driven incompetence and wholesale corruption. Bower is oblivious to any of this. Certainly there have been mistakes, but nothing is Johnson's fault. Incidentally, readers hoping that the great investigative reporter will shed some welcome light on Dominic Cummings will be sadly disappointed. Instead, Bower ends his 500+ page love letter to Johnson by praising him as 'an intelligent patriot' but worried about whether or not he will be able to 're-convince the nation of his vision to build a prosperous, united society'. (p. 526) At the time of writing, it seems as if Bower has attached himself to a lost cause, thrown his reputation away by celebrating Boris Johnson of all people. And this at a time when more and more people are recognising Johnson for the enormous fraud that he is, that nothing he says can be relied upon and that his government is wholly incompetent. We can be confident that once his electoral usefulness has come to an end, Johnson will be dispensed with.

This is what happened to Tommy the Red!

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