

A fantasy Johnson

Johnson at 10

The Inside Story

Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell

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Anthony Seldon begins his previous book on the history of the office of Prime Minister, *The Impossible Office*, with an imaginary discussion between Robert Walpole and Boris Johnson – the first and, at the time of the book’s publication, the most recent politician to occupy the position. When I first read this I could not help feeling that Seldon, a former public school headmaster and Vice Chancellor of the private Buckingham University, was somehow rubbing in the fact that Britain had always been governed by public schoolboys and hopefully always would be. Walpole was at Eton from 1690 until 1696 and Johnson from 1977 until 1982; and in between no less than eighteen other Old Etonians were also Prime Minister. Of the 57 Prime Ministers that we have had in this country, 47 were privately educated. The current PM, Rishi Sunak, was head boy at Winchester. This tells us a lot about British society and British politics, but society would seem to think it is best hidden away and so it is seldom if ever discussed. And Seldon has over the years contributed to this cover-up. He is the author/editor of some fifty books, many of them substantial volumes chronicling the story of the politicians who rule over us.¹ What do he and his co-author Raymond Newell make of Boris Johnson?

According to Seldon and Newell, Johnson was ‘Britain’s most iconoclastic and outlandish Prime Minister since David Lloyd George’. Both men were apparently keen ‘to spread opportunity more equally across the country’, committed to ‘levelling up’ and they both ‘lit up the room, were beguiling orators and giants among their peers’. (pp. 1-2) And so on. This is just so

¹ The book under review here is the latest in a series of volumes that started with *Brown at 10* (2010) and continued with *Cameron at 10* (2015), *May at 10* (2019) and now *Johnson at 10*. Will the next volume have to combine the premierships of Truss and Sunak? It is worth noticing here that he has certainly not neglected Tony Blair, having published edited volumes, *The Blair Effect* in 2001 (with a new edition in 2005), *Blair’s Britain* in 2007, and single authored volumes, *Blair Unbound* in 2008 and *Blair* in 2014.

much rubbish that sets the tone for the rest of this volume. They are desperately attempting to give Johnson and his government some historical credibility, even though they seem to know that the exercise is futile. There has never been a Prime Minister remotely like Johnson and the fact that such a contemptible individual could hold the post is not explained by attempting to incorporate him into the pantheon, but rather by identifying the changes in British society and politics that made him possible. We shall return to this point. To be fair, they do make the point that Lloyd George 'held to a seriousness in his objectives, a trait absent in Johnson'. But even this is a massive understatement, and they actually go on to describe their volume as at least 'in part a cautionary tale which highlights individual and institutional failure'. (pp. 3,5) They proceed to identify 'three core character traits' that Johnson possesses.

First there is his

'charisma and humour [. . .] his larger than life persona [. . .] he could be extraordinarily kind, agreeable and thoughtful about individuals and people at large, lovable even, with a more inclusive vision of contemporary society than many in the Conservative Party'.

Second, his

'all-consuming self-absorption and self-belief that impelled him to be the most important and visible person He had no interest or understanding of how organizations work or the jobs people need to perform within them, nor any interest in finding out'.

And lastly, he had a

'lack of moral seriousness not mitigated by his razor-sharp intellect and beguiling rhetorical skills. Causes, commitments, colleagues as well as pledges, policies and partners were regarded as merely transitory and transactional. Any could be picked up only to be jettisoned when they no longer served his interests or pleasure'. (p. 11).

The first of these 'core character traits' we can obviously dismiss as a fantasy, but the second and third do seem to hit the target and, one might think, would normally disqualify someone from high office. And what of his (unmentioned) fourth 'core characteristic', his serial dishonesty and compulsive lying? Johnson, it will be the contention here, was not just someone with serious flaws: he *was* a serious flaw.

Despite their criticisms, Seldon and Newell are much too generous to the man. Far from having any regard for the common man or woman, Johnson has held to two abiding beliefs throughout his life: a belief in the necessity of privilege and inequality and a belief in the 'Great Man' school of History. He is

uncompromising in his support for the rich and super rich, and in his desire to be of service to them and hopefully become one of them; and he absolutely believes that he is a 'Great Man', destined to leave his mark on history and be forever remembered as his country's saviour, a contemporary Winston Churchill. Everything else is all about positioning. One of the mistakes that Seldon and Newell make is that they take him too seriously, despite all their damning caveats. Most of what he says and most of the stands that he has taken actually mean nothing to him. They acknowledge that and then go on to take seriously his commitment to 'levelling up', so that apparently, 'Johnson's personal passion for levelling up was honed as Mayor'. (p. 165). As we shall see, they later attribute it to a revelation during the referendum campaign. Anyone who believes for a moment that he was serious about 'levelling up' will believe anything and has been conned. Seldon and Newell, however, actually seem to believe that when he was Mayor of London, he really believed the liberal sentiments that he sometimes felt obliged to mimic. In fact, his time as Mayor was solely about positioning himself to win the leadership of the Conservative Party. His focus was on building up his celebrity status and, at the same time, hopefully finding some way to leave a permanent monument to his having been Mayor. The actual running of the Mayor's office was left to others. It was of no interest to him. And he presided over increasing levels of inequality in the capital which was, as far as possible, to be made into a magnet for the international super rich. As for his monument, well it was the Grenfell Fire.

Most famously, his lack of political principles was shown by his decision to side with the 'Leave' camp in the EU referendum. Johnson thought this would best position him to challenge for the leadership, was not really committed to the cause and was confident that it did not matter anyway because 'Remain' were bound to win. Seldon and Newell record his response to the result: 'Holy shit, fuck, what have we done?'. (p. 28) And then he suffered the great betrayal when his leadership ambitions were, at least temporarily, sabotaged by Michael Gove. The betrayal 'scarred him', indeed reduced him to tears, actually made him cry, poor chap! (p. 32) Our authors seem completely oblivious to the irony of Johnson the Great Betrayer being so distraught at being betrayed himself. This seems to have begun the process, as far as they are concerned, of turning the liberal Johnson into something else, a process that continued once he was appointed Foreign Secretary by Theresa May. 'Frivolity and evasion of responsibility were never far away', but more important while he was at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, his 'easy-going attitude and liberal openness to the views of others was being gradually supplanted by a vindictive dismissiveness, always lurking below the surface'.

(p. 43). What we see here seems to be a certain tension that runs through the whole book with one of our authors believing that Johnson was always a lying, dishonest, incompetent charlatan and the other prepared to time and again give him the benefit of the doubt. One of them is impressed by his 'liberal openness' while the other was always aware of the 'vindictive dismissiveness. . . lurking below the surface'. The result is unfortunately a Fantasy Johnson.

Once he was installed in Downing Street, the government seems to have been run for all practical purposes by Dominic Cummings – until Johnson's wife, Carrie, insisted on his removal! Johnson's role was largely symbolic, in particular preparing the way for the 2019 general election; although he had to be kept away from any media scrutiny as much as possible in case he said something momentarily facile, yet fatal – so unreliable and out of control was he. Seldon and Newell's discussion of the Conservative's 2019 victory is interesting. They make the point that they won 130,000 fewer votes than John Major received in 1992 'with a smaller electorate'; and that Labour's defeat was down more to their voters either voting LibDem or abstaining than defecting to the Tories. The Labour vote fell by 2.6 million. The conclusion they draw from this is that Johnson's popularity was exaggerated. (p. 137)

What they do not do is adequately consider the reasons for Jeremy Corbyn's defeat. He was the victim of an unprecedented media campaign of abuse and vilification in which, moreover, many Labour MPs joined. Indeed, much of the Parliamentary Labour Party made perfectly clear that they preferred a Johnson government to a Corbyn government. Crucial here was the Great Corbyn Anti-Semitism Scam which made the Zinoviev Letter of 1924 look like the work of rank amateurs. It is worth briefly considering here how the Conservative press would have treated any Labour leader with even a fraction of Johnson's history. Imagine, for example, a Labour leader who had been a motoring correspondent and sometimes wrote his appalling masturbatory reviews without ever having driven the car. Such an individual would have been relentlessly pilloried as unfit for office, someone not to be trusted. Or imagine if Keir Starmer had been involved in a conspiracy with one Darius Guppy to have a journalist beaten up and had denied it right up until a tape recording was played proving he had.² He would be clearly unfit for office and the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and the *Sun* would go after him without let up. But not with Johnson. When the Darius Guppy scandal broke it did not even lead to his sacking from the *Telegraph* and soon after he was adopted as a parliamentary candidate. One cannot help feeling that the

² See, for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/nk7uy6j9>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/14/journalist-stuart-collier-boris-johnson-phone-call-darius-guppy-demands-apology>>.

only two professions where someone with Johnson character would be employable are journalism and politics! As it was, in 2019 the Johnson government was returned with a majority of 80. Surely not even a lying, incompetent, self-centred buffoon like him could mess that up?

Looking at his time in office, Seldon and Newell seriously argue that Johnson 'aspired to altruism'. Really! And it was a combination of 'circumstances and his ineptitude at knowing how to deliver it through the system' that apparently 'propelled him into egotism and mayhem'. (p. 143) They are once again much too generous. They even quote one top Johnson aide to the effect that Johnson would 'be the champion of the underdog, the voice of the silent, always incredibly kind'. (p. 142) They take seriously the 'passion' with which he spoke of 'levelling up to produce a fairer country'. (p. 151) Apparently, he had 'good intentions'. Indeed he was not a Thatcherite at all, he had just pretended to be one. In fact supported 'an interventionist large-state'. (p. 153). Johnson actually had no 'set Conservative beliefs' and 'he could not be placed on a left/right barometer'. (p. 174) And, according to Seldon and Newell, his passion for 'levelling up' derived from the closest he had come 'to a Road to Damascus experience' while touring the North during the referendum campaign. Here 'he encountered a new swathe of voters with impassioned stories of neglect by Westminster'. (p. 166) One can, of course, take all this with a pinch of salt. Because he has made up Damascus moments before and will undoubtedly make new ones up in the future. Far from being the 'champion of the underdog', Johnson was, as always, the creature of the rich and super rich, useful for being able to pose as the 'champion of the underdog' when it suited.

Our authors sometimes get really carried away. Apparently, Johnson's 'levelling up and infrastructure' concerns were 'emblematic of his desire to rebuild the country and be a Prime Minister in the mould of Presidents Roosevelt or Reagan'. Leaving aside the impossible combination of Roosevelt and Reagan – which only an idiot would make, so one can assume they are unattributively quoting Johnson himself – they then go on to write that even as far as 'levelling up' was concerned, he was 'boosterish, inchoate and self-serving'. (p. 324) Even so, towards the end of the book, they once again insist that Johnson wanted to implement 'a "new deal" in the manner of Franklin D. Roosevelt'. (p. 566) What on earth are their readers to make of all this?

At one point, they discuss his ideas with regard to education. He was inevitably 'far to the left of the party' on education. But what did this 'leftism' amount to? On one occasion, Johnson apparently defaulted 'as he often would to his time at Eton' and told Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, Dominic Cummings and others that 'When I was at school . . . we were all

ranked from one to two hundred, and it injected this competitive spirit in us. We need something like that in our schools now'. At this Cummings 'failed to suppress a laugh'. In what universe would this be 'leftwing'? Unless you believe that wanting to make state schools more like the public schools – although obviously without the same resources – is somehow 'leftist'. According to Williamson, Johnson was also very concerned about the need 'to get Classics in the curriculum more. He came up to me about once every three months saying he wanted it to be funded better, to be in state schools'. His other great concern was with the need for more sport in state schools, 'as long as it was competitive sport'. (pp. 177-178)

What of the 'culture wars' that the Conservative Right, with the enthusiastic assistance of the rightwing press and TV channels, have imported from the United States? Seldon and Newell seriously argue that Johnson 'was never particularly interested in the culture wars as he saw himself as an instinctively liberal unifier'. (p. 343) It is worth repeating this last claim. He saw himself as 'an instinctively liberal unifier'! The reality is somewhat different. Johnson had himself begun importing the culture wars into Britain when he was editor of the *Spectator*, leading the way in fact. He may have been uncomfortable with aspects of the American phenomenon – for example, the assault on abortion and the frowning on adultery. However his response to Tony Blair and New Labour, who had essentially adopted Thatcherism as far as economic policy was concerned, was to go after them over the issue of excessive 'regulation', curtailing freedom with speed cameras and the like. Johnson, according to Seldon and Newell, was apparently torn between his 'metropolitan liberal mayor brain' and another brain 'which hates the puritanism of "woke"'. (p. 346)

My own belief is that as far as Johnson was concerned, culture war issues were a way to get into power, and not of much concern once he was installed. He knew that the whole thing was manufactured, fake, and had a wholly instrumental attitude towards it. Seldon and Newell do identify one issue that did genuinely provoke his wrath: the assault on the reputation and statue of his hero, Winston Churchill. More generally, however, his lack of interest in culture war issues alienated close advisers like Munira Mirza along with 'many on the right of the Conservative Party, in the press and voters in traditional working-class heartlands'. (p. 348) They are guilty of wildly exaggerating the potency of culture war issues in Britain, despite the strenuous attempt by the rightwing press to use it to distract attention from the general fall in people's living standards.

Seldon and Newell do not have much of interest to say about the implementation of Brexit, the Covid crisis (although it is good to know that just

about everyone in government referred to Matt Hancock as 'that cunt') and the Ukraine War. (p. 220) 'Partygate' is, of course, still unfolding. Why is their book so bad in this respect? Leaving aside their complete failure to get a handle on Johnson, the book does not seriously attempt to put his government in the context of what has happened to British society since Thatcher and Blair, and more particularly since Cameron, Osborne and Clegg's austerity regime. What we have seen is a massive aggrandisement of the rich and super rich with a historic rise in levels of inequality that have transformed the political system. While the concerns of government have increasingly focussed on looking after the interests of the wealthy, in particular in the financial sector and private equity companies, everything else – whether it be the NHS, state education, social care, housing, transport, even the military – has been allowed to descend into crisis. Although this is hardly ever pointed out, the British military no longer have a serious capability and when the United States decides on its next intervention the UK will be unable to field a credible force in their support. Britain has been relegated from (albeit minor) ally to camp follower.

More pertinent perhaps is the fact that what we have seen in this country is a return to slum housing on a massive scale, something that has not just happened but as the result of government policy. The Conservative governments that have been in power since 2010 have reinstated slum housing conditions for millions of people. Similarly, the run-down of the NHS is a deliberate policy intended to force as many people as possible to go private. The intention is clearly for the GP system to go the same way as dentistry. With the handing of as much of the NHS as possible to private health companies, this will enable some future government to finish off this last remnant of the 1945-51 Attlee government once and for all. There is no appreciation in this book of the fact that today we live in 'Food Bank Britain', that in 21st century Britain more and more people – even people in work – cannot afford to feed themselves and their families. And this dramatic increase in the wealth and power of the rich and super rich has not just impacted on the working class, both white and blue collar. What we have seen is that the legal and medical professions, senior civil servants and others, groups that were once a constituent part of British Conservatism, have been alienated, cast aside and denounced as enemies. The wealthy are the only people who count.

The other side of this coin is the open corruption that is on display today, with the government and Johnson in many ways coming to embody this. The VIP lane for Covid contracts was a particularly blatant example. As for Johnson, this alleged man of the people was always on the lookout for a handout from his rich friends even while in office. Today we live under a regime that can be usefully described as the 'New Corruption'. Since he was

removed as Prime Minister, has Johnson devoted himself to the care of his constituents, charitable work and volunteering at any of the seven food banks in his constituency? No. He has devoted himself to making money – so much money that a man, who only a short while ago was pleading poverty (not that he knows the meaning of the word), could pay £3.8 million in cash for a listed house with a moat, nine bedrooms, five bathrooms, and six reception rooms, set in five acres of land with a guest cottage, tennis court, and two stables. And yet presumably his concern for the underdog remains undiminished.

What does the future hold for Boris Johnson? His precipitate resignation as an MP on 9 June, heading off his inevitable humiliation at the hands of the Commons Privileges Committee – on which Conservative MPs are in a majority – has been seen by some commentators as signalling the end of his political career. While one might hope that this were true, it seems most unlikely that this is how Johnson sees it. Instead, he seems intent on doing as much damage to Rishi Sunak's government as he can, and while spite and revenge fuelled by interference with his resignation honours list (his father lost his knighthood, but his hairdresser kept her OBE!) are a factor, it seems most likely that he still thinks that he can lead a revolt of the Conservative Party membership outside of Parliament, remove Sunak, once again become Party leader and win another general election. Such is the man's narcissistic belief in his own greatness! Given the damage his lying incompetence, his money-grabbing selfishness, his belief that the rules do not apply to him and his cronies – given the damage that all this has done to his reputation in the country at large, most commentators seem to consider the prospect of a Johnson comeback a fantasy. But we have to remember that not so long ago the prospect of Johnson becoming Prime Minister at all would have been dismissed as too ridiculous to be taken seriously. Such is the state of British politics and society today, however, that we still have to regard Johnson as a threat, as someone who will still have an impact on the British right for the foreseeable future and to whom desperate Conservative MPs might still turn, despite the fact that most hold him in contempt. And even if he does not manage to return to the Commons any time soon, he can still propagate his brand by returning to journalism, perhaps even as editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. One big advantage of not being an MP is that he will no longer have to declare his income and where the money came from. As for Seldon and Newell, the prospect of Johnson ever returning to power must seem particularly grim, as they will have to begin work on yet another *Johnson at 10*.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God:
Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism*,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>