

Failures of State:
The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus
Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnot
London: Mudlark Harper Collins 2021 £20.00 (h/b)

John Booth

There are journalists – and then there are journalists. There's Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, who while London Mayor called his £250,000 *Daily Telegraph* second-job contract 'chicken feed'.¹ And then there's the digging work Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnot have put in for the *The Sunday Times* over the past Covid year and which they have brought together in this important book.

Lobster readers who have lost family, friends, health, work, businesses and social life in the past year might choose not to buy *Failures of State* once they get the chance to visit a bookshop again. Seeing chapter headings 'Sleepwalk', 'Part-Time Prime Minister', 'Dither', 'Left to Die at Home', 'A Reckless Summer' and 'Plague Island', you might prefer lighter fare, even buying a round of drinks with 'socially-distanced' friends when the Prime Minister permits it.

Calvert and Arbuthnot open with the failure of 'take back control' Johnson to focus on the unfolding crisis in the winter of 2019/20 while trying to sort out his chaotic private life. They trace the bumbling inadequacies of his administration and those lifted high in his train, with Matt Hancock's imitation of his leader's propensity for making outrageous claims also being rigorously examined.

From the decision to permit crowds at Cheltenham Races to the non-use of expensively equipped Nightingale hospitals, the pair cite example after example of the incompetence of the Johnson regime. This chilling read documents its failure to learn anything from earlier errors by continuing to repeat them as the death toll mounts, all the while corruptly placing non-tendered contracts with Tory friends and donors.

Their concluding chapter pictures Johnson as Ebenezer Scrooge with the Ghost of Christmas Past taking the Prime Minister on a journey back in time:

'Warnings flash up from scientists that there was something uniquely

¹ <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/jul/14/boris-johnson-telegraph-chicken-feed>>

dangerous about this virus from China. The health secretary bounces out of the Cobra meeting to say the risk to the UK is low. The audience laughs in the grand hall of the Old Royal Naval College as he [Johnson] tells them he will don his Superman outfit and fight the fools who are in an irrational panic about the virus.'

Summer release with its subsidised eating-out leads to autumn lockdown.²

The authors write:

'The dominating image is now of another Dickens character. "Something will turn up,' says Wilkins Micawber. But it doesn't. There are new graphs that show numbers of infections rising higher and higher. And deaths.'

What does eventually turn up after a cancelled Christmas and yet another lockdown is the promise of vaccination and with it a rise in Johnson's poll popularity. That this has happened in the face of the appalling health, social and economic consequences of Covid takes some explaining. This is not a task Calvert and Arbuthnot seriously attempt but is one worth pondering as ever more tales of Tory crony corruption emerge and Starmer's Labour falls further behind in the polls.

I finished their book just as Johnson's PR, Allegra Stratton, declared that he acted with 'honesty and integrity' as London Mayor in relation to his mistress, Jennifer Arcuri.³

Before Stratton set foot in Johnson's expensive new press room in March 2021 she had been on quite a journey, one which might help explain a little of why her boss is still Mr Teflon. For anthropology graduate Stratton is a former *Guardian* political correspondent, appointed to the role by editor and fellow Cantabrian Alan Rusbridger.⁴ As the wife of *Spectator* political editor James Forsyth (Winchester and Jesus College, Cambridge) is she someone faithful, liberal-minded *Guardian* readers could ever expect to produce incisive and informative critiques of the Westminster establishment?

I mention this not because I am unaware of the powerful corporate, media and international forces which lie behind Johnson. Rather it is because I

² 'Lockdown' is the word usually applied to restricting prisoners to their cells, typically to regain control during a riot. Its current common usage for confining the lives of a whole population is perhaps worth more attention.

³ <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/boris-acts-honesty-integrity-says-23817895>>

⁴ Not all Cambridge anthropologists make poor journalists. Gillian Tett claimed that discipline helped pierce the arcane world of financial instruments, allowing her to warn of the impending financial crisis of 2008.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gillian_Tett>

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b036tz9w>>

believe his career path has also been smoothed and sustained by the network of largely Oxbridge journalists and media executives – ‘anti-establishment’ Rupert Murdoch, remember, is an Oxford man. They quite liked the idea of one of their own, especially one who had turned himself into ‘Boris’ the tousle-haired celebrity, making it to No 10 over the heads of all those dullard MPs.

Several I know were well aware of his personal dishonesty back in his Balliol days and many more have experience of how that extended to his professional and political life in later years. Yet his inexorable progress continued largely unexamined by his pals in the mainstream media, leading him into Downing Street and the country into the Coronavirus crisis with the disastrous consequences detailed by Calvert and Arbuthnot. (Peter Osborne’s welcome confirmation of his former *Spectator* editor’s rank dishonesty is a rare example of a journalist accurately portraying the naked emperor, one for which Osborne appears to have paid a career price.⁵)

In addition to the indulgence of his media mates Johnson landed lucky with the Covid disaster coinciding with Sir Keir Starmer assuming leadership of Labour. Much has been made of the ‘forensic’ skills of the former Director of Public Prosecutions, but to date these have not impressed the public, even less the increasingly demoralised party.

If the trust lost in democratic politics cannot be re-established by Starmer even in his own party, what hope for the country at large? Where will the failures of a state already weakened nationally and locally by decades of privatisation and City corruption leave us if Johnson’s leadership is the best the citizens of the UK can be offered?

Johnson sees himself as a latter-day Winston Churchill and in portraying the Covid virus as the enemy plays up to the emotional attachment many Britons have for him. But the sober-minded electorate decided in 1945 that that PR savvy Conservative wartime Prime Minister had outlived his usefulness and chucked him out.

Quite why Labour has failed to remind the electorate of this bit of history – one when its supporters showed so much sense – eludes me. Until the party confidently comes to terms with this and other important parts of its history, the likes of Johnson and his successors will be left free to prosper while wrecking the lives and hopes of the rest of us. *Failures of State* shows how far down that road of decadence and decay we have already travelled.

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⁵ See <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster81/lob81-assault-on-truth.pdf>>.

