

In the Thick of It:
The private diaries of a minister
Alan Duncan
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If Sir Keir Starmer ever chooses to confront Boris Johnson at Prime Minister's Questions he could do worse than draw upon these diary entries of the Tory leader's former deputy at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Sir Alan Duncan's near-daily record has presented the 'forensic' Leader of the Opposition with an arsenal of ammunition that Rumpole of the Bailey could only dream of after his third bottle at Pomeroy's.

Here's the Labour leader's starter for 10. 'Has the Prime Minister, known for his voracious appetite for new experiences, yet dipped into the diaries of the former Member for Rutland and Melton?'

Whichever way slippery Johnson chose not to answer on first asking, the door would have been opened to using Duncan's acerbic descriptions of the PM, his Cabinet colleagues and back-bench Tory MPs. So numerous are Duncan's damning observations, Starmer would still have plenty of ammo left for a High Noon every Wednesday way into the silly season and beyond.

Here are a few samples from the prosperous Tory loyalist, a trusted member of Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee and a central figure in party life from his splendid Westminster pad for more than 30 years.

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 'lunatic self-seeking' Michael Gove is an 'unctuous freak'.

Home Secretary Patel is 'Priti Horrendous'.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson is a 'venomous self-seeking little shit'.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab is a 'self important humourless bore'.

Leader of the Commons and Lord President of the Council Jacob Rees-Mogg, records Duncan in April 2019, 'lost it on *Today*, refusing to condemn the far-right Alternative für Deutschland, and then attacking its presenter

Mishal Husain for bias. His faux politeness disguises a streak of arrogant snobbishness.'

Before Johnson made 2019 Tory leadership rival Matt Hancock Health Secretary, Duncan observes:

'I just can't believe that he [Hancock] has suddenly switched from striking out on his own to taking the Boris shilling, no doubt in exchange for the promise of a job. It smacks of George Osborne in the background, pulling his strings and scheming for that future moment when Boris explodes and the Hancock time arrives.'

His diary entry for Saturday June 16 2019 continues:

'Boris is refusing to participate in tomorrow's TV debate with the other [Tory leadership] candidates. He is under a gagging order imposed by his minders. They know that if he opens his mouth it could all go horribly wrong.'

The prosecutory opportunities for Starmer don't end there. Johnson's supporters in the European Research Group (ERG) are repeatedly hammered. Former chair Steve Baker is a 'little tick' who 'has been the most useless minister and is just so simplistic he might just as well not have a brain'. The current ERG deputy chair Andrea Jenkyns is 'ghastly' and 'a brainless nothing'.¹

After softening up the Prime Minister with critical quotes about his praetorian guards and spear carriers, the former Director of Public Prosecutions could then move on the main event – Duncan's description of his former FCO boss, the self-styled World King himself.

In 2016 Duncan attends Chatham House for the presentation of a Royal Institute of International Affairs prize to US Secretary of State John Kerry:

'View on Boris from the person beside me at lunch: he's intelligent, mercurial, a writer for whom the production is the output. Limited concentration/attention span. Likes to be liked. Takes the path of least resistance. Trust him? No . . . because he is not reliably constant.'

The following year after a spat between Johnson and himself in *The Daily Telegraph*:

'He [Johnson] loves double-page spreads puffing him up, but is over-sensitive and loses all perspective when he faces an inch of adverse

¹ Jenkyns ousted Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Ed Balls from Morley and Outwood in 2015 after the New Labour machine had found a second 'safe' seat in Yorkshire for the friend and ally of Gordon Brown. Jenkyns, 'the brainless nothing', now sits on a Tory majority of 11,267.

comment He is an egotistical showman who just doesn't understand Parliament, or how to run and motivate a team around him.'

Later in 2017:

'Boris has done it again with an interview in the *Sun*. Although political editor Tom Newton Dunn considers him a prat, or possibly because of it, he has given him a double-pager in which Boris insists on his "red lines" (i.e. ultimatums) on Brexit.'

An article in *The Times* that year reported 'civil servants in the Foreign Office are horrified by their boss's lack of discipline and have taken to slipping in to see his deputy, Sir Alan Duncan, when they need a decision'.²

Duncan's diary records:

'Boris calls. He wants to see me. We discuss the article, and Brexit. For the first time ever, we have something of a stand-up confrontation. He has completely popped and accuses me of briefing it, which I hadn't. He says: "Why do you say they don't take me seriously?" I shake my head and say, "Just look in the fucking mirror!"

While I was not the source – it could have been any number of people, and was probably an amalgamation of lots of comments – it was pretty accurate. He's always larking about and loves the publicity, but as soon as it turns on him he's amazingly thin-skinned.'

The impression one gains is of a lazy, inattentive and indecisive Johnson using the FCO as a child's global playground with adults having to clear up his mess. Duncan's diary only covers the four years until he retires from Parliament in 2019, so one can only imagine what he might have to say about Johnson's Covid role.³

In November 2017, while Patel is on an unauthorised trip to Israel (see below), Duncan writes:

'Meanwhile Boris has made a costly gaffe. He said in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is imprisoned by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, had been training journalists there. She never had. But, as a result, reports suggest she has been sentenced to an extra five years.'

With all this damning material by an important Conservative figure so readily

² *The Times* 29 August 2017 at <<https://tinyurl.com/3r6v7sm3>> or <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/our-foreign-secretary-is-an-international-joke-7707q0z66>>.

³ *Failures of State: The Inside Story of Britain's Battle with Coronavirus* by Jonathan Calvert and George Arbuthnot, reviewed by this author in *Lobster* 81 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster81/lob81-failures-of-state.pdf>>.

available, why has the Leader of the Opposition failed to exploit it?

Apart from his political inexperience and the ineptitude of his advisers,⁴ Sir Keir has a major problem with using this damaging evidence: Duncan is a supporter of Palestine and a forceful and courageous critic of the powerful pro-Israel influence on Whitehall and Westminster.⁵

How this son of a senior RAF officer who became very wealthy after working in the oil markets under the astute guidance of Marc Rich⁶ came to be a supporter of the Palestinian cause has only this explanation in the book's biographical note:

'These years during the 1980s were a period of pioneering change in the industry, which saw the creation of the free market in oil after the price shocks of the 1970s. Duncan helped open up new oil-trading markets in Asia, and was based for a time in Singapore. His business experience during this period afforded him a deep personal understanding of international relations and of the Middle East, which developed into an abiding political interest in the region.'

The wealth Duncan accumulated in his time with Rich and in the consultancy he later formed 'to advise foreign governments on oil supplies', also gave him the financial security to launch a political career. His home conveniently near Parliament was used as HQ for the John Major leadership campaign of 1990. As a long-time friend and former flatmate of William Hague, he supported his subsequent bid for the Tory leadership and was appointed by him to be vice-chairman of the party.

Duncan's opens his fascinating 542 pages with this fierce denunciation of the Israel lobby in the Conservative Party with this entry for 6 January 2016:

'I missed [Labour MP] Sarah Champion's Westminster Hall debate on

⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/yex2suh3>> or <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/19305261.sir-keir-must-get-genuine-save-labour/>>

⁵ Starmer has employed an Israeli ex-military intelligence official as Labour's 'social listening and media organising manager'. See <<https://tinyurl.com/8bywp986>> or <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/labour-ex-israel-military-intelligence-officer-role-anger-grows>>.

⁶ Marc Rich was famously pardoned by President Bill Clinton in January 2001, on his final day in the White House. Rich's Wikipedia entry tells some of the story of Duncan's former employer <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Rich#U.S._indictment_and_pardon>.

A recommended account is *The King of Oil: The Secret Lives of Marc Rich* by Daniel Ammann (London: St Martin's Press, 2009.) The description of Rich's recruitment criteria given to Ammann seems to fit the young Duncan, fresh from Oxford, Harvard and Shell: 'He [Rich] was looking for people ready to work, ready to travel, ready to be loyal to the company, ready to earn money.'

child prisoners in Israel. The Conservative Friends of Israel stooges have been out in force: Guto Bebb, Andrew Percy and the deeply unimpressive John Howell. Afterwards I saw Percy and CFI ringmaster Stuart Polak in the cloister corridor smirking and gloating. I learn later that they had positively revelled in defending Israel's incarceration of children. It is repugnant.'

February 6 2017: 'Netanyahu is being feted in Number 10, meeting the PM, followed by lunch, and then we let him use the FCO media suite to peddle his pro-settlement propaganda. We are supine, lickspittle, insignificant cowards. I am ashamed of my government. Instead of sucking up to him we should have taken offence and called him out.'

The following month we have this on an earlier Prime Minister:

'Home for lunch with Oman Ambassador, Abdulaziz al Hinai, and bump into Simon Walters of the *Mail on Sunday* outside Harry's Bar. He says Blair is pitching to Jared Kushner to offer advice on the Middle East, and (bizarre and not true) that Trump demanded the dismissal of Robert Hannigan from GCHQ, blaming him for trying to stitch him up over Russia.'

November 6 2017: 'Priti Horrendous is in a deep mess. Last week, sparked by someone finding a tweet from an Israeli she met in the summer, it now turns out that she went to Israel on what she called a holiday and met some Israeli ministers there without telling the embassy. When first asked about it, she said she had told the FCO – by speaking to Boris – and that is was only a couple of meetings. It is now clear that she had lied. She had not told Boris, and in fact had a whole series of meetings, including with PM Netanyahu. All but one of them were also attended by Lord Polak, who for three decades has been a mainstay of Conservative Friends of Israel. Thus she spent a whole week there on a programme put together by Polak, without telling the FCO or even her own Department, attending meetings at the highest level, accompanied by the principal pro-Israel donor lobbyist in the UK.

She has been forced to publish a statement. It lists a raft of meetings and then says that as a result she commissioned policy work in DfiD about working with the Israeli Army in Palestine! So by her own admission she has directly linked undeclared meetings to subsequent policy-making. She could not be more compromised. It is yet further evidence of the pernicious influence at the heart of our politics.'

In 2018 Duncan talks to then Secretary of State for Communities and Local

Government Sajid David about the proposed Holocaust Centre⁷ in Victoria Palace Gardens, next to the Houses of Parliament:

'The whole project reeks of impropriety and seems to me to be linked to donor influence more than anything else.'

He says little about the 'Labour antisemitism' controversy that ran through these diary years, but two mentions I found interesting. The first in September 2018 follows Labour's adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism:

' . . . but instead of championing the contemporary Palestinian cause Corbyn continues to attack the manner in which Israel was founded. There are indeed many arguments to be made about Irgun, the bombing of the King David Hotel, etc, but he undermines any argument he might hold about defending Palestinian rights by seeming to challenge the right of Israel to exist at all. Such an unacceptable attitude is a gift to his critics. He is a plonker.'

The second follows his January 2019 conversation with Lord Triesman, a Blair appointment first as Labour Party General Secretary and then as Foreign Office minister:⁸

⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/fyrk6v9z>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/27/holocaust-survivor-anita-lasker-wallfisch-uk-holocaust-memorial-learning-centre>>

Ed Balls, Lord Pickles of Brentwood and Ongar, former head of NHS Test and Trace Baroness Dido Harding, BBC TV presenter Natasha Kaplinsky and convicted Guinness fraudster Gerald Ronson are among the members of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation. <<https://tinyurl.com/yhr4wj4f>> or <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/communities-secretary-announces-new-members-of-the-uk-holocaust-memorial-foundation>>

⁸ Lord Triesman is probably better publicly known as a Spurs-supporting former chairman of the Football Association, but he was a key New Labour figure. See <<https://www.newstatesman.com/200110010023>>.

With a CV combining the roles of trade union leader and merchant banker, Triesman was General Secretary of the Labour Party at the time of the 2003 Iraq invasion, having previously attacked the *New Statesman* in 2002 for articles on the influence of Israel supporters on the Blair government.

He is a member of the Henry Jackson Society advisory council. See <<http://henryjacksonsociety.org/people/council-members/>> and on the executive board of the European Leadership Network. See <<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/about/our-people/executive-board/>>.

He resigned the Labour whip in the Lords in 2019 accusing Jeremy Corbyn of being anti-semitic. See <<https://tinyurl.com/wyrvz6wv>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-party-peers-quit-antisemitism-protest-corbyn-lord-triesman-darzi-turnberg-a8997491.html>>

He resumed the Labour whip on the election of Sir Keir Starmer as leader. See <<https://tinyurl.com/73d3sets>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/starmer-s-action-on-antisemitism-prompts-three-jewish-peers-to-rejoin-labour-1.500815>>.

'He [Triesman] said in passing that under Corbyn no Jew could feel comfortable in the Labour Party. I said Corbyn was too stupid to make the distinction between Jews in general and the actions of Israel in Palestine.'

That Duncan says relatively little about 'Labour anti-semitism' is a little surprising given the way he himself was targeted by the Israeli state. He states early on that it was the Israel lobby in the Tory party – Lords Pickles and Polak in particular – that prevented him becoming Minister for the Middle East. He noted in July 2016:

'In any other country the conduct of Eric Pickles and Stuart Polak would in my view be seen as entrenched espionage that should prompt an inquiry into their conduct.'

Then in the 2017 Al Jazeera film series ⁹ Israeli 'diplomat' Shai Masot is shown seeking to organise the demise of Duncan. He, being forewarned, had already taken up the matter with Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood.

The January 5 2017 entry notes:

'I make the planned 12.30 call to [Israel] Ambassador Regev. He used to be Netanyahu's media spokesman, so is well versed in press handling. He is one of those spin-the-line people. He thinks he's so very clever, he's actually rather stupid.'

After a blurted apology Regev 'then goes into full super-shit "not me guv" mode'.

'Someone called Shai Masot has been filmed etc. He is a local hire, works in a junior capacity and does not have diplomatic status. What he has been doing does not have the authority of the embassy. It is totally unacceptable. We do not do this sort of thing. You are a minister of the Crown, and it would of course be totally improper to undermine a government minister. He will be disciplined. He might be dismissed, but we have to go through proper procedures. He is only twenty-seven.'

Duncan's entry continues:

'It's all total bollocks. Masot is a First or Second Secretary, a member of military intelligence, employed specifically as a parliamentary and undercover propagandist. It is of course exactly why the CFI sat Masot next to me at their annual lunch. It is all part of a carefully defined strategy to promote an Israel which will one day take over the West

⁹ <<https://tinyurl.com/57rsdba8>> or <<https://www.aljazeera.com/program/investigations/2017/1/10/the-lobby-young-friends-of-israel-part-1/>>

Bank and to destroy anyone who opposes settlement expansion. They are driven by the threat of BDS – boycott, disinvestment (or divestment) and sanctions – a rational cause of the left, but something I have never so much as mentioned. Their scheming is probably about to recruit many more exponents to the call for BDS.’

His view of the Israel Ambassador is damning:

‘What on earth is the point of Regev stating something that is so blatantly untrue, and about which we both hold the facts? What a muppet. Put simply, they have been caught red-handed, Regev has started off well by apologising and then screwed himself by lying. Par for the course.’

When Duncan raises this with his FCO boss, he finds Johnson at first ‘indignant and all over the place’ and then ‘ambivalent, and rather muddled’.

The diary continues:

“The Al Jazeera tapes essentially say that I run the FCO, BoJo is an idiot, I take the serious decisions, and if anything happens to Boris I will become Foreign Secretary and so I must be destroyed. It’s a poor reading of the facts – indeed it’s balls – but it gives a useful insight into Israel’s mentality. At least as ministers we’re legitimate, unlike Israel’s settler ministers and settler Knesset members.’

As the Masot story is published Duncan is away on one of his regular trips to Oman:

‘Texts from Robert Halfon,¹⁰ whose pretty Italian female assistant was one of the people filmed trying to do me over, and, needless to say, a message from Stuart Polak, both no doubt orchestrated. Halfon just asking me to call him, which I don’t. It’s past midnight UK time anyway. Polak’s is rather less subtle: “I have just come back from dinner and have just seen the news, so have issued a press release on behalf of the CFI condemning any such behaviour.” Yeah, right!’

Duncan describes so many interventions in UK democracy on behalf of Israel, one would expect much more on what happened to Labour during the four years covered by his diaries. Knowing how his career was affected by these malign influences, did he not register what was happening to Jeremy Corbyn? Did he not know, for example, that Sir Mick Davis, the Xstrata mining magnate who became a top Conservative Party official, had previously

¹⁰ Halfon is a vice-president of the Jewish Leadership Council. See <https://www.thejlc.org/vice_presidents> and <<https://www.thejlc.com/news/uk/halfon-expresses-anger-over-jewish-lobby-references-in-swire-political-diary-1.507282>>.

chaired the Jewish Leadership Council, a key body in promoting the 'Labour anti-semitism' scare?¹¹

This is just one of many questions that come to mind reading this *tour d'horizon* of the much-travelled diarist. But first he must be thanked for telling us so much about the workings of UK government and politics – and not just about the insidious influences upon both.

Duncan is a gutsy guy, the first openly gay Conservative MP, one who entered a civil partnership and had strongly supported the passage of the Civil Partnership Act. He must have realised early on that he would be very unlikely to become Prime Minister, but devoted himself to serving the Tory cause without ever landing the top spot himself. Along the way he must have been frustrated by the quality of those with eyes on No 10. This may partly account for some of his trenchant assessments of them.

I suspect that these diary entries, absorbing as they are, were made with publication in mind. They have also been vetted:

'As a former minister, I was required to submit the text to the Cabinet Office for comment, and to abide by the principles of the Radcliffe Report of 1976.¹² This process necessarily involved a degree of negotiation about what should and should not be disclosed, and took up much time on both sides. I am grateful to the team at HarperCollins and their counterparts in the Cabinet Office who navigated this tricky territory.'

So while this is not all that Duncan could tell us about his final four years in Parliament, he reveals a good deal about his colleagues at home and about the wider world.

His close involvement with Oman over many years threw light on an aspect of British policy of which I was largely ignorant.¹³ It has already

¹¹ On Sir Mick Davis see

<<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster80/lob80-corbyn-left-out.pdf>>.

Glencore tells a little about Marc Rich's involvement in its creation here:

<<https://www.glencore.com/who-we-are/our-history>>.

Davis stood down as Conservative Party chief executive in 2019. See

<<https://tinyurl.com/f63sk3y9>> or <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/sir-mick-davis-resigns-as-chief-executive-of-the-conservative-party/>>.

¹² <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11299332>>

¹³ The Prime minister's new ethics adviser, Lord Geidt, is one of the senior members of the British state who make up the Oman Privy Council. See <<https://tinyurl.com/37yn9kcp>> or <<https://blog.webdesignrsa.co.za/2021/05/11/declassified-uk-boris-johnsons-new-ethics-adviser-made-secret-trips-to-gulf-dictatorship/>>.

prompted others to dig deeper.¹⁴

Some of his brief references filled in details I'd missed, such as Foreign Secretary Johnson switching Carrie Symonds, now his wife, from Conservative Party HQ employment to become his FCO special adviser.

His social arrangements – seeing ex-MI6 chief Sir John Scarlett dining with former US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff – point to a world most of us rarely glimpse but whose actions have a big impact on our lives.¹⁵ Duncan's familiarity with veteran Westminster journalists suggests a briefing intimacy likewise closed to public view.

Having read accounts of the 2015-2019 period with a Labour focus¹⁶ I find Duncan offers an important alternative perspective. We don't have to believe every word his diaries record to find the content highly informative as well as entertaining. With so much international business experience behind him – a world which informed his knowing dealings not only with the likes of Mark Carney¹⁷ – his perceptions are often insightful and his sadness at the state of his native country heartfelt.

¹⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/2vpztrxf>> or <<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-04-20-colonialism-never-ended-the-elite-british-cabal-propping-up-a-gulf-dictatorship/>>

¹⁵ The controversial former head of MI6, Sir John Scarlett, was appointed chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee a week before the September 11 2001 events in the United States. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6217417.stm Scarlett>.

He was subsequently appointed to the board of Times Newspapers and co-owned a consultancy with the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Lord Carlisle. <<https://tinyurl.com/fchsezws>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/former-reviewer-of-anti-terror-laws-co-owns-consultancy-with-ex-mi6-chief>?CMP=share_btn_tw>

Michael Chertoff was the co-author of the US Patriot Act 2001 that swiftly followed the September 11 events and was appointed Secretary of Homeland Security by President George Bush in 2005. He was elected chairman of BAE Systems in 2012 and is a board director of the Atlantic Council.

<<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/board-of-directors/>>.

¹⁶ See <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster80/lob80-corbyn-left-out.pdf>>.

¹⁷ Duncan diary entry 25 January 2019:

'Phone call from Mark Carney, Governor the Bank of England, about Venezuela's gold. They hold bullion which is now worth about \$2 billion. Maduro has asked for it back, but the Bank are hesitating, quite sensibly. They want to be quite sure they are doing so on firm legal grounds – even though Venezuela has proposed it is returned via the Bank of International Settlements, rather than directly to Caracas. I tell Carney that I fully appreciate that, although it's a decision for the Bank, he needs a measure of political air cover from us. I tell him I will write him the most robust letter I can get through the FCO lawyers, and it will outline the growing doubts over Maduro's legitimacy and explain that many counties no longer consider him to be the country's President. *A Mark Rich oil trader knows how to do business with a Goldman Sachs banker.*' [my emphasis added].

Like many traditional Tories he is hugely admiring of the monarchy – ‘the Queen in beautiful green’ etc – and of the UK’s established institutions. Yet he shares with most of them an unwillingness to see how much his party is historically responsible for the poor condition of its democracy and its people. Duncan remains a loyal Conservative throughout, sharing with his fellow party members and funders a determination to hold power despite the very many misgivings these diaries show he has about those who wield it.

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