

How the country is run

*In The Thick of It:
The Private Diaries of a Minister*¹

Alan Duncan

London: William Collins, 2021, £25, h/b

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In the Introduction to his Diaries that cover the period from 2016 until 2020, Alan Duncan makes clear that he is well aware that for many of his readers what they will find most interesting is what he has to say about Boris Johnson; and indeed his take on the man is of considerable interest. There is much more here than just robust abuse of Johnson along with the likes of Michael Gove, Priti Patel and others, enjoyable though that is. But first, a bit of background about Duncan himself will be helpful. He was, of course, privately educated, before going to Oxford University where he became President of the Oxford Union. After university, he worked in the upper echelons of the oil industry and eventually in 1989 established his own consultancy, specialising in oil and gas. This interest in the oil and gas industries is particularly important because there are times in the diaries when one could be forgiven for thinking he was MP for Oman rather than MP for Rutland. We shall come back to this.

What of his political opinions? These are not that evident from his diaries it has to be said, but back in 1995, when he was already a Conservative MP, he had co-authored with Dominic Hobson a somewhat idiosyncratic ultra-Thatcherite volume, *Saturn's Children: How the State Devours Liberty, Prosperity and Virtue*. Some of the book's subheadings provide a useful insight into its libertarian pro-capitalist stance which is bolstered by a considerable display of scholarship, although some would undoubtedly say pseudo-scholarship. We have 'The Despotism of Democracy', 'The Role of Democracy in Heightening Expectations', 'Why Progressive Taxation is Not Fair', 'The Invention of Retirement', 'The Nationalisation of Private Life', 'The Cultural Importance of Inherited Wealth', 'The Nationalisation of Education', 'The Nationalisation of the Universities' and so on. One section, with the sub-heading 'The Threat

¹ This was also reviewed in *Lobster* 82 by John Booth.

Taxation Poses to Liberty', actually has our two authors seriously describing the Inland Revenue as 'the moral equivalents of the Stasi, the Gestapo and the KGB'. The way forward is the 'liquidation of the State', although interestingly they are extremely wary with regard to the National Health Service, acknowledging that there is a case for making it 'immune from any restructuring of public expenditure'. They also call for the decriminalisation of all drugs, arguing that the 'price mechanism' should be relied on instead.² How far Duncan still adhered to these views after years of austerity is not clear from his diaries which focus on other concerns and on his time at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) where he had the honour of serving under Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

One last point worth mentioning here is that Duncan does reveal that on 24 June 2016 he was the speaker 'at the annual meeting of Le Cercle' which he goes on to describe as 'a long-standing, slightly crazy security conference which I have been going to for years'. (p. 44) He tells the meeting (none of the other attendees are named) how difficult and politically damaging implementing Brexit is going to be.³

'An Utter Shit'

Let us start our discussion of the Diaries with Duncan's assessment of the

² Alan Duncan and Dominic Hobson, *Saturn's Children: How the State Devours Liberty, Prosperity and Virtue*, (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1995) pp. 113, 397, 398, 411-412. Our authors also display great concern over the fate of the working class male under the 'New Despotism' that we live under:

'The modern urban, unskilled, working-class male faces a tax and benefits system which forces him into prolonged unemployment, or into the black economy. He lives in a concrete council-built tower block, where the lifts do no work and the stairwells are covered in graffiti, rubbish, excrement and discarded needles . . . He attended a State comprehensive school, where he learnt little except how to intimidate adults and write 'Fuck off, Miss' in his exercise book. He left school without qualifications and after going on a State-subsidised training programme, he worked for a time for the State as a hospital porter or a dustman. Then he went on the dole. He will be familiar to the police . . . Throughout his life the State has housed him, nurtured him, educated him, trained him, employed him, criminalised him . . . He never had a chance, as Charles Murray has put it, to make sense of the world around him. He never governed himself, or developed himself, or owned anything himself . . . the State never let him control anything . . .' (p. 386).

Whatever criticisms one might have of this book, the authors certainly succeeded in turning stereotyping into an art form!

³ This is not the place to discuss Le Cercle Pinay and its history but merely to note that among other current Conservative MPs associated with the organisation are Kwasi Kwartang, Greg Hands and Nadhim Zahawi. The former Conservative MP, Rory Stewart, was also involved with Le Cercle.

character and capabilities of various of his colleagues. He clearly has no great admiration for Michael Gove who he describes as 'an utter shit' (p. 49) and as 'a whacky weirdo who is both unappealing and untrustworthy'. (p. 196) Seems spot on there. As for Gavin Williamson, he is 'a venomous, self-seeking little shit' (p. 305), while Dominic Raab is dismissed as 'a self-important humourless bore'. (p. 311) And Jacob Rees Mogg is obviously 'an anachronism', one of 'these comical Etonians' whose 'faux politeness disguises a streak of snobbishness'. (pp. 220, 263, 432) To be fair, a streak of snobbishness hardly does Rees Mogg justice. All this is comparatively restrained compared with his loathing for Priti Patel who 'really is a nothing person [. . .] is clearly a complete and utter nightmare'. Such is his dislike, he even tells us that the thesis she submitted at Essex University was considered to be 'abysmal beyond measure'. (pp. 21, 135) On 6 November 2017, he records that 'Priti Horrendous is in a deep mess'. She had claimed to be on holiday in Israel, but had in fact been there for a series of meetings 'including with PM Netanyahu', a programme 'put together by Lord Polak, who for three decades has been the mainstay of Conservative Friends of Israel'. The FCO had never been informed of these meetings, her own department (she was head of the Department for International Development) was kept in the dark and Prime Minister May knew nothing about it. On top of that she returned home to recommend that her Department should 'pay for the Israeli Defence Forces to do "humanitarian" work in the Golan Heights'. The Israeli military doing 'humanitarian' work in the Golan Heights! She will be sending refugees to Rwanda next! Duncan was absolutely outraged. He describes her behaviour as 'deceitful, morally corrupt and improper . . . contemptible. She is quite despicable'. 'Priti Appalling' is forced to resign, but what leaves Duncan incandescent is that she is allowed to resign over her lack of transparency without any mention of Israel and the improper influence of the Conservative Friends of Israel. This is all brushed 'under the carpet' and as far as he is concerned 'it stinks . . . The rules of propriety, and all the morality and principle that goes with it, are discarded and rewritten to accommodate this exceptional pro-Israel infiltration into the very centre of our public life'. (pp. 242-244). We shall return to this issue.

Which brings us to Boris Johnson. Duncan does at one point confess that 'I actually rather like him' (p. 332), but the absolutely overwhelming weight of his commentary regarding Johnson is critical. Now he did have firsthand experience of working with Johnson at the FCO and makes the point that Johnson's main concern is to see 'double-page spreads puffing

him up'. At the same time, he 'is over-sensitive and loses all perspective when he faces an inch of criticism'. He sums the man up as 'an egotistical showman who just doesn't understand Parliament, or how to run and motivate a team around him'. (p. 205) This was in June 2017. Soon after (29 August), he discusses Johnson's response to an article that appeared in *The Times* 'tagging Boris as an "international joke"' and reporting that '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, the Europe minister, when they need a decision'. Johnson confronted him over the article, accusing him of briefing against him. Johnson actually asked Duncan 'Why do you say they don't take me seriously?' to which he replied, 'Just look in the fucking mirror'. Duncan insists he was not the source for the story, but notes that 'it was pretty accurate'. (p. 217) Relations did not improve, so that by 24 September 2017 he is recording that 'I have lost my respect for him. He is a clown, a self-centred ego, an embarrassing buffoon, with an untidy mind and sub-zero diplomatic judgement. He is an international stain on our reputation'. And to make matters even worse, he 'thinks he is the next Churchill'. (p. 227) When Johnson eventually became Prime Minister and appointed his new Cabinet, as far as Duncan was concerned he had replaced 'the Sensibles with the Despicables'. (p. 504) Of course, Duncan is much too generous towards Johnson. He does not mention the man's dishonesty, his routine lying, and his complete lack of any sense of responsibility for any of his actions. He does not indict him for his later corruption of the British political system, but, to be fair, he had already stood down as an MP by the time Johnson had got round to this.

Duncan does not lambast everyone he encounters however. On 16 February 2017, he records how that 'wonderful financier and former Party Treasurer Michael Spencer comes to my office for a drink, kindly bringing a rather splendid bottle. His generosity has held the Party together for years, but he keeps getting knocked off the honours list'. (p. 150) The billionaire financier had donated millions to the Conservative Party. He finally got his peerage in September 2020. Then on 15 June 2019, there was the lunch celebrating the billionaire Wafic Said's fiftieth wedding anniversary: 'It couldn't be more sumptuous, Tusmore, the house and the park, are manicured to perfection, and the 300 guests are a star-studded array of royalty, elegance and Syrian-Lebanese chic'. This was followed later on 10 December by a dinner at Clarence House 'given by the Prince of Wales in honour of Wafic Said and his charitable work, and to mark his eightieth birthday'. This wonderful man had given Margaret Thatcher 'the

run of a lovely country house in Oxfordshire' during her final years. (pp. 483, 535) Wafic Said, it is worth remembering, was involved in facilitating the Al Yamamah trade deal between Britain and Saudi Arabia which led to allegations of massive corruption. The investigation was closed down by the Blair government when the Saudis threatened to end their intelligence relationship with Britain if it was pursued.⁴ He gave hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Conservative Party and made a donation of £20 million to Oxford University to open the Said Business School. In 2013, the Thatcher Business Education Centre was opened at the School. To be fair to Said, the School also has a Nelson Mandela Lecture Theatre which Mandela himself opened in 2002. Said counts among his close friends a certain Peter Mandelson. Which conveniently brings us to Duncan's dinner 'at Peter Mandelson's house off Regent's Park with a bunch of people from Lazard' on 23 March 2017. As he observes: 'Time with Mandelson is never dull'. (p. 170)

'In Oman for the Sultan's New Year Dinner'

In the Introduction to the Diaries, Duncan feels obliged to explain why he has so much to do with Oman and its ageing playboy despot Sultan Qaboos in its pages. This is because during his time working in the oil industry before he became an MP, he had 'built up extensive contacts and friendships across the Middle East and become a committed champion of Palestinian rights'. In particular, he had got to know Sultan Qaboos extremely well and 'was often called upon to use my personal connections to help advance British diplomatic and defence interests in the region'. (p. 5) The Diaries certainly provide ample evidence of this. It was not just Oman of course. On 13 My 2016 he is at the Windsor Horse Show 'as a guest of the King of Bahrain'. He dismisses accusations of 'torture and oppression' as so much nonsense 'accepted without question by gullible members of the press'. The Queen joins them for tea and Duncan observes: 'The King adores her and would do anything for her. The chemistry between them is a delight to watch'. (p. 41)

Nevertheless, Oman is his main concern. As he tells us on 20 October 2017, perhaps 'two or three times a year I pen a private letter to Sultan Qaboos in Oman, giving him my version of what I think is happening in UK politics . . . He is always appreciative, and it keeps our top-level links in working order'. (p. 239) And there are regular visits to the country. At the end of December 2018, he is in the country 'for the Sultan's New Year dinner'. He was seated 'at the same seat I've occupied for the last twenty

⁴ See *Financial Times*, 18 December 2006 at <<https://archive.is/IIR9g>>.

years'. On this occasion he was intent on interesting Qaboos in 'a forward-looking strategic plan for UK-Oman engagement' and was pleased by his response. They had one disagreement when they discussed Palestine, with Qaboos thinking Netanyahu was flexible and had not ruled out a two-state solution. Duncan argued 'politely' that Netanyahu might 'say such things but in practice considers all the West Bank to be his and he will always continue to annex it with illegal settlements until eventually he controls and owns the whole lot'. (pp. 387-390) Securing a 'Comprehensive Agreement' with Oman became Duncan's great objective and on 22 May 2019 it was signed by Johnson's replacement as Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt. He describes the Agreement as 'my diplomatic triumph'. (p. 464) When Qaboos died, he was present at the funeral which he considered a triumph for Britain:

'The UK tribute is way ahead of any other country . . . The Duke of Cambridge was the last official visitor to see Sultan Qaboos, and the Prince of Wales was one of the first to see Sultam Haitham. Well done, UK. We got there'.

Soon after the funeral he was approached by a certain Tony Blair who wanted 'to pick my brains on Oman . . . He wants to convey a message to the new Sultan'. (pp. 540-541)⁵

'The CFI and the Israelis think they control the Foreign Office. And they do!'

One assumption that I made about Duncan's stance in support of the Palestinians was he was not really serious and that it was all about cosying up to the Arab states and protecting oil interests. This was completely unfair. As the Diaries show, he was passionately concerned about Palestinian rights, completely opposed to land seizures and illegal settlements, and uncompromising in his support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. And he paid a price for this. When Duncan was offered a Foreign Office post by Prime Minister May, his assumption was that it was for his Middle East expertise. As far as the Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) and the Israeli Embassy were concerned, however, his support for a Palestinian state made him completely unacceptable and it soon became clear that he was to have no involvement with Middle Eastern affairs at all. The reason he was given for this is his involvement in the oil industry, which he considers so much nonsense. In his Diaries,

⁵ For an obituary of Qaboos see my 'Billionaire Super-Yacht Owner Dies', *Socialist Review* (February 2020) at <<https://tinyurl.com/2a6kkfap>> or <<https://socialistworker.co.uk/socialist-review-archive/billionaire-super-yacht-owner-dies/>>.

he puts it down to 'CFI lobbying'. As far as he was concerned, what was going on 'is improper. It's wrong. I actually think it's corrupt'. He writes of how 'the Board of Deputies of British Jews had an open webcast with their Chairman Jonathan Arkush, in which Labour MP Louise Ellman says I must not be an FCO minister'. This was before his appointment was even announced. What was taking place was 'the most disgusting interference in our public life'. (p. 62) He reluctantly accepted that he was responsible for Europe and the Americas, barred from the Middle East.

On 4 January 2017, he had a phone call from a journalist, Clayton Swisher, warning him of a forthcoming 4-part Al Jazeera expose of Israeli interference in British politics and that the story would be breaking imminently in the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Guardian*. Swisher tells him that he 'has footage of diplomats from the Israeli embassy in London collaborating with MPs from both Labour and Conservatives on Israel, which includes Shai Masot from the embassy calling for them to destroy the "Deputy Foreign Minister" (i.e. me)'. Interestingly, the Israelis dismissed Johnson as an 'idiot'. (p. 116) Despite this open, blatant interference in British politics, the decision is made not to carpet the Israeli ambassador, Mark Regev, according to Duncan, because this might compromise relations with the United States. Duncan wants the government to 'assert our independent, confident view of the world by telling both Trump and Netanyahu to bugger off . . . But we will instead capitulate and be supine'. He tells Simon McDonald, a Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCO: 'The CFI and the Israelis think they control the Foreign Office. And they do!' (p. 122) For their part, the Israeli Embassy denies any responsibility for what went on with Regev, claiming that Shai Masot was acting on his own and was a junior figure with no diplomatic status. This was barefaced lies as far as Duncan was concerned. Incredible though it seems, in retrospect, nothing was done about this blatant interference in British politics except to sweep it under the carpet as quickly as possible and move on. Another motive for this was also the need to prosecute the fake anti-Semitism campaign against Jeremy Corbyn. A protracted scandal regarding Israeli interference in British politics would have inevitably compromised this.

What Duncan believed had happened regarding the Swisher story was that Al Jazeera were actually investigating the orchestrated campaign against Jeremy Corbyn, but once 'they got going, they hit a goldmine and to their amazement discovered far more beside'. (p. 123) Being on the receiving end himself did not lead to his having any sympathy for the principal target, Jeremy Corbyn. The 'anti-Israeli Marxists' around Corbyn

are, he wrote on 1 August 2018, 'vile. If they were both reasonable and rational they could defend the rights of Palestinians and attack the wrongs of Israel without spilling over into contemptible anti-Semitism'. (p. 320) On another occasion, he has a discussion with a Labour peer, Lord Triesman, a former Maoist, who tells him 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'. (p. 404) Duncan's comment was completely untrue. That was just the way an unprecedented campaign of abuse and vilification against the man presented him. A later conversation with Triesman actually has him confiding to Duncan that 'he would not feel safe as a Jewish person living in the UK if Corbyn became Prime Minister'. Even Duncan thought that was going a bit too far. (p. 432) As for Corbyn's election promises: 'There were many frightening absurdities in it, such as a ridiculous promise to create 400,000 jobs, and a policy to cover the country with wind farms, but one sentence I fully agreed with was his pledge to recognise Palestine immediately he is elected'. (p. 347)

Conclusion

Alan Duncan's Diaries throw an interesting light on the internal workings of the Conservative government as it begins to implode under the weight of years of Austerity and Brexit. How dire the situation was is shown by the way they turned to a shameless, lying incompetent like Boris Johnson to save them. As far as his abuse of some of his colleagues goes, he merely puts into print what millions of people think. What is most interesting and disturbing about the Diaries, however, is his account of the covert activities of the Conservative Friends of Israel and of the Israeli Embassy. Such direct interference at such an elevated level in British politics by a foreign government is surely something to be roundly condemned, with those responsible called to account. Instead, the response was to play it all down, not just the victimisation he was subjected to but Priti Patel's manoeuvrings as well. The official response was to move on as quickly as possible so that attention could be focussed on destroying Jeremy Corbyn. One last point worth ending on is that such is the state of British politics today, nothing Duncan believes or has been involved in, no matter how reactionary, would stop him being a member of the Labour Party, even being a Labour MP . . . except, that is, his stance on Palestine. That would not be tolerated in Keir Starmer's Bad Labour.

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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/>>