



BOGGLE: The basis for almost everything Prime Minister Boris Johnson utters in an interview, press conference or parliamentary performance

# We have no idea what Johnson understands about anything

LIKE Boggle. It involves shaking sixteen dice – each one with six letters of the alphabet on it – and then writing down as many words as you can from the jumble of letters within three minutes. The words can be as long or as short as you like.

They don't have to be interconnected in any way. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are all acceptable. You don't even have to be able to make a coherent sentence or paragraph from the words you gather. As long as they are words in the English language you can add them to your score.

Boris Johnson likes Boggle, too. Indeed, Boggle is the basis for almost everything he utters in an interview, press conference or parliamentary performance. He writes down as many words as he can before he's required to speak and then simply tumbles them out one after another. Sometimes you can see him struggling to remember a word: closing his eyes, flapping his arm about like a long-dead flamingo to distract attention and then spitting a word across the room like a gobblet of lurch which had taken up residence in an unfilled back tooth.

Barnacle. Protuberance. Hacksaw. Jemmy. Gadzooks. Skerrick. Impignorate. Jentacular. Nudiustertian. Tittynope. Fabulist. All very useful if you're compiling a round-winning Boggle score, but absolutely useless (he'd probably choose the word inutility) for explaining the Northern Ireland Protocol.

But that didn't prevent Johnson from having a go at explaining the protocol to Mark Devenport on a BBC Spotlight special on Tuesday evening. It was excruciating stuff, particularly when he reached the point at which he tried to sandpaper the carefully crafted legalese of the protocol into the half-remembered sawdust of Boggle. It was like listening to a semi-comatose Private Baldrick outlining his latest 'very cunning plan' to Blackadder. A master class in jibber-jabber, in fact.

Alex KANE



When I first heard the clip all I could think of was a pupil who hadn't done the homework, hadn't bothered to do any of the reading required for the homework, had no interest in the homework, yet who still felt the need to persuade the teacher that a passing dog (probably a French Poodle, German Schnauzer or Bracco Italiano) had eaten the homework. And for reasons known only to him, the original terminological inexactitude won't prevent him from continuing the pretence by insisting on quoting from a homework which never actually existed.

Yet when I heard the clip a second time my mind was drawn to an old, almost forgotten memory of the Bobo The Laughing Clown exhibit on Brighton Pier, which roared and wobbled if you shoved a few pence into the slot. And do you know something, I'm pretty sure that the original Bobo (even if he had to be dragged from storage, dusted down

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and plugged in) would have provided more insight into the workings and intricacies of the protocol than Bobo Johnson the Prime Minister.

Like most industrial-scale narcissists Johnson doesn't lose sleep over his similarly industrial-scale ignorance of the nitty-gritty of anything he may have signed off in his role as prime minister. He has always inhabited a world in which a torrent of random words and bizarrely incoherent phrases gets him off the numerous hooks upon which he has regularly found himself. His greatest strengths arechutzpat and a rigid adherence to the Thorpe dictum: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his friends for his life."

In a BBC online commentary programme I was doing on Tuesday evening, Fintan O'Toole made the point that the vast majority of people on either side of the border would struggle to explain the protocol. I agreed with him: but I also noted that the vast majority of them would, almost certainly, make a better fist of explaining it than the prime minister who pushed it through the House of Commons.

And that's the real difficulty with Johnson. We have no idea how much he understands about anything. Which is not, most would agree, an ideal quality in a prime minister. He still thinks he got 'Brexit done,' even though part of the UK remains in the EU. He seems

blissfully unaware that a new border between GB and NI might be construed as a threat to NI's constitutional integrity. He probably thinks that constantly name-checking the leader of the largest unionist party as 'Arlene' is enough to reassure her he actually gives a monkey's about her concerns.

He certainly thinks sandpapering a barnacle is a legitimate negotiating strategy.

As ever, when asked for a straight answer to a straight question he'll throw the Boggle dice and pray for as few Fs as possible.

## ON THIS DAY

APRIL 23 1971

### Fitt Wants Socialist Republic

MR GERRY FITT, MP for West Belfast, told the Scarman Tribunal yesterday that his aim of a 32-county Socialist Republic could not be achieved until both sections of the Northern community had been reconciled. His view differed from that of Cathal Goulding, Chief of Staff of the IRA. He didn't believe in Marxist Socialism. He was a Connolly Socialist.

Mr Fitt told Counsel for the Shankill Residents, that violence among the minority since 1969 had caused him a personal defeat. He had gone to Westminster in 1966 to tell the British people about Unionism and why he was opposed to it. Then came the violence of '69 and the minority had the overwhelming support of people throughout the world, but as a result of the violence which had continued, they had lost that support.

Mr Fitt said that the Catholics of the Falls wanted to see an impartial civilian police force, but they were still very suspicious of the RUC. 'There seemed to be great disparities in the sentences on Catholics and Protestants. One young boy who shouted 'Up the IRA' in the vicinity of a Junior Orange parade last week was given one year's imprisonment while another man from a Protestant area found in possession of arms was given six months in prison.'

### North-South Talks

TALKS took place in Dublin yesterday between officials from Stormont and Leinster House. Mr J C B McCarthy, secretary at the [Dublin] Department of Industry and Commerce and Mr Arthur Brooke, secretary of the Stormont Commerce Ministry led the delegations. The talks were concerned mainly with possibilities for joint industrial or regional development along the border as well as tourism.

The Taoiseach, Mr Lynch told Mr Barry Desmond (Labour) in the Dail that it was hoped that meetings at ministerial level would follow.

### Paisley 'Brutality File'

A DOSSIER of complaints from Protestant residents in the Newtownards Road area of Belfast, alleging military brutality during the riots in the locality on Easter Tuesday, was produced at Stormont yesterday by the Rev Ian Paisley. The Army, he said, allowed the 'mechanics of terrorism' to be built up in the Catholic area of the Newtownards Road. (From his early days in Republican Labour Gerry Fitt had claimed to be a follower of James Connolly's vision of an all-Ireland socialist republic. Meanwhile Ian Paisley, though a rural MP, was forging links with the emerging working-class loyalism of east Belfast. Despite north-south tensions and IRA attacks, Faulkner authorised cross-border talks on industrial development and tourism.)

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