



RUTHLESSLY REHEARSED: Boris Johnson's Conservative Party conference speech was a performance in which dog whistles jostled with hand-me-down quotes

Johnson's a menace to the union but too stupid to realise it

BORIS Johnson bothers me. He has bothered me for a very, very long time. And the reason he bothers me is that I never believed the time would come when someone like him would be prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Indeed, I remember writing an article about a decade ago – in response to a profile of him in a political weekly – setting out a lengthy list of reasons why he could never be leader of the Conservatives, let alone prime minister. In 2017 – when he was plotting against Theresa May – I added a few more reasons to that original list.

Yet here he is, Prime minister. An odd mix of Pooh Bear and Tigger, yet without the decency, compassion, integrity or loyalty of either of them.

The living, breathing embodiment of Sherlock Holmes's maxim that mediocrity recognises nothing higher than itself.

Faking sincerity with reckless abandon and being all things to anyone and everyone. Like Groucho Marx, if you don't support his principles he'll simply slip a hand into an inside pocket (which may not even be his own pocket) and produce entirely different principles.

His elevation to the highest political office in the land was the unexpected, unintended consequence of the Brexit vote.

With the Conservative Party so deeply wounded and divided in the early spring of 2019, and with Theresa May clinging to office while blow after blow rained down on her, there was a desperate search for a 'character' to rally the troops as well as see off the challenge – and potential electoral damage – from Nigel Farage.

And that's exactly what Johnson was able to do.

None of the other big beasts in the party was backed by the ERG and other assorted backbench oddities, so he had that pitch entirely to himself; helped by the fact that his opponents were as dull as Hugo Horton on a good day.

Alex
KANE



Crucially, he played Farage like a fiddle (a man who is nowhere near as clever as he likes to think) and won a stonking victory for the Conservatives in December 2019.

The fact that he had to tell one porkie after another to keep the DUP on board long enough to suit his purposes was, I suspect, all part of his original plan.

He is still mostly adored by the Conservative grassroots, many of whom were wondering if they'd live long enough to ever see another 'proper' election victory on the sort of scale Thatcher used to deliver with her eyes closed.

And 'getting Brexit done' endeared him to the English-nationalist end of Labour, who abandoned Farage for him and delivered a few dozen 'red wall' constituencies to underpin his election victory.

But he has a new type of reality to face: a reality that will probably be immune to his industrial scale jibber-jabber. Increased taxes. Old Tories don't like tax hikes.

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Younger English nationalists—particularly those from working class, lower-pay areas – don't like tax hikes.

Many of them opposed lockdown restrictions and don't want to subsidise the economic impact of those lockdowns.

They don't embrace the cheerleading for the NHS, because too many of them believe it has let them down with waiting lists and cancelled appointments.

More important, they are not the sort of people who will be wowed by rhetoric or won over by his increasingly dated speaking style: described to me by one observer as 'inappropriate juvenile piffle.'

Which is exactly what most of Wednesday's conference speech was.

He doesn't talk to people. He talks towards them and above them.

Talks to them in that very curious 'I'm-really-very-clever-and-making-this-up-as-I-go-along' style of his. Actually, it's like listening to someone reading their own column. And a column, whatever else it may be, is not a speech.

He has always struck me as utterly incapable of empathy, unable to touch the hearts as well as the minds of his audience. It's not a speech at all; more a performance of some sort in which dog whistles jostle with hand-me-down quotes.

Every pause, ruffling of the hair and ad lib has been ruthlessly rehearsed.

This is a man who places the noise of the clap-o-meter above and beyond thought-through argument and detailed costing.

A character maybe; but one from the lesser-known Dickens novels.

That he is prime minister appals me. I'm not exactly sure what it says about politics today, particularly in England.

But of one thing I am absolutely certain: he is a menace to the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, yet too damn stupid and self-absorbed to realise it.

ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 8 1971

Civil Rights Pioneer Warns

ADDRESSING a meeting called by the Campaign for Social Justice in the North at the British Labour Conference in Brighton, Dr Conn McCluskey said that at present non-violent minority opinion was taking a back seat in the North.

'We early Civil Rights have watched our influence with the people diminish steadily. The militants now are setting the pace. We are convinced that the responsibility for this lies with the Unionists who have held the initiative since 1921. More recently they have failed to honour the spirit or the letter of the Downing Street Declaration [declaring equality for both communities and issued from Downing St on 19 August 1969]. Of course, the Westminster Parliament has been a party to all that went wrong with the subordinate administration of Stormont. You must now face the very daunting fact that the man in the street in the North of Ireland is convinced that no advance in social reform is possible without violence... The British Labour Government had not the moral courage to do what they knew was right.' Dr McCluskey reminded the meeting that in August 1969, when the Stormont forces turned their guns on the defenceless people of Belfast, there was only a handful of active Republicans. 'I can tell you that there are now a further, not one but two generations of militant Republicans around.'

The Defence of Rathcoole

LETTER to the Editor

SIR. Since October 3, people calling themselves the 'Rathcoole Defence Association' have been operating unarmed road barriers at the main entrances to the Rathcoole, Rathfern and Rush Park estates in Newtownabbey.

Peace has reigned in these estates throughout all the troubles since August 1969, but this entirely Protestant force can only serve to provoke and raise fears unnecessarily in the community as a whole.

A 'Peace Committee' would be more apt in the circumstances... In any case, an organisation wishing to protect the community must be seen to be drawn from all sides of that community.

It is only by such united effort that a lasting peace can be secured in NI.

Yours, Concerned, Rathcoole

Dr Conn McCluskey, a Dungannon GP, and his wife, Patricia, had highlighted the denial of civil rights in the north among British MPs in the 1960s. In this speech at the British Labour conference, he blamed the rise of the IRA on the failure of the Wilson government to impose reforms on its subordinate government in Belfast. These days also saw the rise of sinister loyalist 'defence associations' in mixed housing estates. By 1972 these vigilante groups would fuse into the UDA.

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