

# **The Johnson Government**

## **Various Criticisms and Comment**

**as of January 2021**

Civil Servants had never – in recent memory at least - found themselves working for anyone like Boris Johnson. His endless lies, his attempt (thwarted by the courts) to prorogue Parliament, his many appointments to the House of Lords (including, in one case, over the objections of the Appointments Commission), his bouncing the Brexit trade agreement through Parliament, and various limitations on the effectiveness of Select Committees, represented an unparalleled assault on our constitution.

This is a selection of comments, touching on Boris Johnson's fitness for office, made by essentially neutral or right-leaning academics, politicians and journalists<sup>1</sup>.

- Max Hastings:- If the day ever comes that Boris Johnson becomes tenant of Downing Street... it means that Britain has abandoned its last pretensions to be a serious country. ... Most politicians are ambitious and ruthless, but Boris is a gold medal egomaniac. ... His chaotic public persona is not an act – he is, indeed, manically disorganised about everything except his own image management. He is also a far more ruthless, and frankly nastier, figure than the public appreciates. ... I would not take Boris's word about whether it is Monday or Tuesday. ...

A friend said to me not long ago: "When will you understand that the reason the young are potty about Boris is precisely because he is not serious, because he treats the whole business of politics as a bit of a lark." This is true. ... He is not a man to believe in, to trust or respect, save as a superlative exhibitionist. He is bereft of judgment, loyalty and discretion. Only in the star-crazed, frivolous Britain of the 21st century could such a man have risen so high, and he is utterly unfit to go higher still.

- David Allen Green:- 'Republic or constitutional monarchy, codified constitution or 'unwritten' constitution, it turns out there is little one can do when a powerful person unashamedly defies the rules of the game. With social media and modern communications technology, never has it been easier to mass shame the powerful ... and never have the powerful been so unashamed.'
- Joshua Rozenberg:- 'Put simply, the British constitution expects ministers to do the decent thing. For centuries, members of the establishment have known how to behave. Until recently, the 'powers that be' used to know how to use the powers they had. ... Just because the law permits you to do something doesn't mean you should.'
- Stephen Pinker, drawing on Quentin Bell:- Some of us (*Toby Young, Boris Johnson, Dominic Cummings?*) do not depend on the approval of others, and can indulge in

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Hyde is the only person in this list to write from a left-wing perspective.

‘conspicuous outrage’. “I’m so talented, wealthy, popular, or well-connected that I can afford to offend you.

- Peter Osborne:- ‘The British state used to be renowned internationally for its integrity. With Johnson in charge that reputation is being swept away. Nolan set a number of moral principles which offer the ethical grounding for matters including misleading parliament, MPs' interests, business appointments for former ministers, ministerial accountability, impartiality of the civil service and neutrality of the monarch. In each one of these areas, standards have fallen under the last three Conservative prime ministers and are now in collapse under the current prime minister. Johnson and the team that surrounds him do not believe that ordinary standards belong to them. As Eric Anderson, Johnson's headmaster when he was at Eton, wrote in his school report: "I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else."
- Professor Leighton Andrews:- "The Nolan era is over. Ministers can perform badly but not be sacked. They can mislead Parliament but escape punishment. Cabinet and other ministers can breach collective responsibility with impunity. Details of Cabinet meetings and indeed Cabinet minutes can be leaked without any sanction. Ministers can undermine civil servants without consequence to themselves."
- Matthew Parris:- I said “bullies, twisters and worse”. There exists a very great danger that 21st-century cynicism encourages the mistaken belief that all governments are like this, and that there is no honour in public administration. The huge crop of new (and often unexpected) Tory MPs who think of themselves first and foremost as local heroes have arrived at Westminster with, perhaps, youthful memories of *The Thick of It* or even *House of Cards*, but less grasp of the part that personal honour and collective integrity have always played in parliamentary party politics.

Honour has not always won the contests. There has always been deceit, corruption, self-interest, cowardice and unscrupulous careerism. But honour, and its counterpart, shame, have always been there, always active, sometimes victorious, and always in the fight. Until Johnson. It is he who sets the tone. Selected by his party for no known personal qualities except a brassy and shallow appeal to voters that colleagues (correctly) thought might win them an election, he now sits atop an administration more as mascot than commander: but a mascot, the public face of a government, can set the tone. Watch him flop and teeter as he did yesterday at his Covid-19 press conference: not so much a prime minister as a chap doing his variable best to put across the message he’s been handed to deliver. Not for a moment does he look like the architect of the policy. Imagine Margaret Thatcher in Johnson’s place at that lectern yesterday, and the command she would have conveyed. Johnson’s combination of insouciance, dysfunction and shamelessness is a modern wonder.

- Stephen McGann:- ‘If you are a sincere government, working to the best of your abilities, doing work you’re truly proud of, then you just don’t need to lie about everything ... and evade scrutiny all the time. It’s obvious.’
- Rachel Sylvester:- Johnson also has a transgressive streak—he has never stuck to the normal rules, either in his personal or his political life. He (and Cummings) have always reminded me of Tom and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* who were, in F Scott

Fitzgerald's words "careless people – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

- Ian Dunt:- '[It's] really remarkable, even after all this time. To just see the prime minister knowingly lie [in the House of Commons] and to do it so naturally, without even a hint of hesitation or doubt. We've had liars in No.10 before. We've never had one like this.'
- Marina Hyde (Guardian 2 Jan 2021) noted how both Theresa May and Boris Johnson lacked empathy/compassion when interacting with the public (at Grenfell Tower and responding to 'a shielding and frightened member of the public' respectively).
- Robert Saunders, commenting on the farcical Brexit/TCA debate on 30 December 2020:- Brexit has charged what David Allen Green and Thomas Poole call 'the executive power project': the transfer of power and democratic legitimacy from Parliament to the largest party. This should alarm anyone who thinks that scrutiny, debate and pluralism are important to democracy.'
- Constitution Society Report:- *Good Chaps No More? Safeguarding the Constitution in Stressful Times* - by Andrew Blick and Peter Hennessy:-

A key characteristic of the British constitution is the degree to which the good governance of the United Kingdom has relied on the self restraint of those who carry it out. Unlike nearly every other democracy in the world, we lack a 'written' or 'codified' constitution ... we have trusted politicians to behave themselves. We have long assumed that those who rise to high office will be 'good chaps', knowing what the unwritten rules are and wanting to adhere to them. Recent events suggest it is worth considering the implications of a decline in the viability of the 'good chap' system in this country.

### **Authoritarian? Populist? Verging on Fascist?**

There is no doubt that Boris Johnson, like Donald Trump, has strong authoritarian and populist tendencies. Opinions differ about whether he and Donald Trump are truly fascist though I suspect that Rafael Behr was close to the truth (including when quoting Timothy Snyder) when [writing in Prospect Magazine](#):

"[Trump] strikes a fascist pose, and the issues generic palliative remarks and denies responsibility for his words and actions".

[His fascistic streak] comes with an absence of discipline and wilful shallowness taken from the showbiz milieu that brought him to prominence. ...

A more orthodox fascist than Trump would have [seen Covid] as a licence for repression. But he chose instead to deny the severity of the threat. His supporters rejected anti-Covid measures as an affront to personal freedom. That makes them tricky recruits to any traditional fascist project, which demands subordination of individual will into the collective project for national supremacy. ...

Most radical ultras in western democracies have grown up saturated in the lifestyle and expectations of consumer capitalism ...

Today's young battalions of internet vigilantes are not drilled in taking orders – let alone handling real weapons – like the generation that emerged from the trenches in 1918, traumatised and alienated. ...

It is important not to mistake shallow clickbait totalitarianism for the real thing.

Writing in the Spectator, Robert Hutton noted that

... some British Conservatives also admired Trump's style. After a decade of Tory rebranding under David Cameron, many welcomed a bit of muscular fighting back against political correctness. They had good reason to enjoy the sight of someone winning an election by articulating white working class anger at the way the world had changed.

As for Johnson himself, it is hardly surprising that one political arsonist should admire the blazes being started by another. The Prime Minister has lived his life unmindful of consequences. He didn't need to share all of the president's views to enjoy the thrill of seeing the world stage dominated by another man who ignored the rules and got away with it.

Johnson is indeed a different man from Trump. He is, for a start, both a reader and a writer of books. But his relative sophistication doesn't acquit him. Both men are happy to offer alternative facts when the real ones are awkward. It's hard to imagine Johnson inciting a mob to storm parliament, but one doesn't need a long memory to recall him shutting parliament down because he didn't like the way it voted. If Trump is at ease with political violence, Johnson was dismissive of suggestions he moderate his language as MPs were sent death threats.

There is certainly plenty of reason to be concerned about Johnson's mendacity, the conflict between his policies and his avowed liberalism and internationalism, and his unwillingness to accept any blame. Against that background, these cartoons and quotes may be relevant:-



- Max Hastings:- '[Rory Stewart] castigates the prime minister's lifelong mendacity. Yet Stewart misses the important point that Johnson's supporters cheered him into Downing Street, untroubled by his threadbare ethics. Ferdinand Mount observes that they, like Trump's fans, love their man because of what he is, not in spite of it.
- United States *Office of Strategic Services* in describing Hitler's psychological profile:- His primary rules were: never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.
- Hannah Arendt observed Adolf Eichmann's trial and saw 'a bourgeois sales clerk who found a meaningful role for himself and a sense of importance in the Nazi movement. She noted that his addiction to clichés and use of bureaucratic morality clouded his ability to question his actions, "to think". This led her to set out her most famous, and most debated, dictum: "the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of *the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil*". By stating that Eichmann did not think, she did not imply lack of conscious awareness of his actions, but by "thinking" she implied reflective rationality, that was lacking.'



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