

# Boris Johnson and Cynical Optimism

July 28, 2019



It's easy to be pessimistic. Since 1979 the key industrial battles have all been lost by the left, resulting in the imposition of the economic settlement we now groan under. And while it looked like social liberalism was all-conquering and irreversible, the appointment of Boris Johnson, the Windrush scandal, the cynical manipulation of Labour's antisemitism wars by the right, and the rising hate crime figures against women, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities underline how we can never be complacent about such things. We're in a bit of a funk because the world is looking gloomy. To find some reasons to be cheerful would be nice.

Cheerfulness is the cornerstone of Johnsonism, if we can now speak about such an abomination. His first appearance at the dispatch box as Prime Minister was pretty terrible, all told. Jeremy Corbyn's statement fired no less than 10 questions, to which Johnson replied that he didn't hear a single one. This then is how it's going to be. As we've already seen, Johnson's first day in the job was geared around the impression of getting to grips with things, but all done with a smile and a thumbs up. The Commons performance was part of the same piece. As the otherwise guileless Jeremy Hunt observed in his first leadership debate with Johnson, while you're chuckling away at his response you've forgot that he didn't answer your question. The Johnson fans lapped it up, but not everyone was convinced. As an inveterate crowd-pleaser, that more than a few Tory MPs were sitting there wrapped in scowls and frowns should give his team pause for thought.

But Johnson is on to something. You don't need to pretend Number 10 has read Gramsci to observe that the new Prime Minister and friends have read the country's mood, and are responding accordingly. Looking back at Theresa May's first few months in office, she was able to speak vaguely about a better future with her remarks about tackling injustice and poverty. At the spectacular level she made a break with Dave's grim vision of austerity forever, while appearing to be the best figure to consolidate any post-Brexit national renewal. We know how that turned out. And then in 2017 we saw the unexpected happen. You will recall how, as soon as the election was called, Labour's polling inexorably rose which gave the party its second best vote tally for 50 years. According to recent rewrites of history, this was because many mistook Labour for a remain party. In fact, as actual polling at the time indicated Brexit was not the primary concern of the bulk of Labour voters.

Corbyn's message of a different future, of, again, a break with the tired status quo and actually holding out the possibility of hope and how things *could* get better resonated.

And now? Johnson and co know people are fed up of Brexit, are sick to the back teeth of hearing about Brexit, and can't wait for Brexit to be over. Alas, if you're one of these people I've got some unwelcome news for you ... So the public don't want to know or would prefer it gone sooner rather than later. Therefore the huge stress, some might say overemphasis, Johnson has placed on the 31st October deadline. There is more to it than placating the kamikaze base — he thinks the done and dusted approach has a wider purchase beyond the Leave-committed. The second is, well, folks are pretty teed off more generally. In the months to come Johnson will tediously talk about the record numbers of people in jobs yadda yadda, but behind the scenes Dominic Cummings and some of the smarter Tories know that low wages, low prospects, high debt, unaffordable housing prices and rising rents, and substandard services are stirring up real trouble for the Tories, especially for voters under 50, i.e. the majority of the working population. The immediate sticking plaster is to talk up the eye-catching items, like 20k more police (pinched from Labour's manifesto) and a bit of money to improve rail links between Manchester and Leeds, and wax lyrical about how these are going to help catapult a "global" Britain into a new golden age with a new economics. That and all the bluster about industries of the future and high-paying jobs. Well, some who should know better have fallen for it.

By talking things up all the time and unveiling a set piece improvement here and there, Johnson's hope is this will be enough to distract attention, or at least soften awareness of the difficulties arising from a likely no deal Brexit. Because, in early November, if we leave without a deal the sun will still rise the next day and the apocalyptic predictions of no flights and no medicine won't come to pass, Johnson can claim the absence of cataclysm as proof of the power of can-do. And this is how it will be until his ejection from Number 10. However, when you look at the people he's appointed to his cabinet — easily the most right-wing ever — you've got to ask how Johnson hopes to square his everything-is-fine messaging with his coterie of arch-neoliberals, cutters, privatisers, corporate welfare enthusiasts, and the rest. Because when the axe starts to fall, no amount of bluster and funny ha-ha hi-jinks will save Johnson from the political fall out of this idiocy.

*Originally posted at All That is Solid...*