

Boris Johnson Becomes British PM: Will he Restrain Himself, or be Unduly Foolish on the World Stage?

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The BBC World Service took its listeners to the English cathedral town of Ely, set in picturesque Cambridgeshire, during the course of a hot July 23 in an effort to take the pulse of the country. Well, at least that particular, erratic pulse. It found, for the most part, a certain enthusiasm for Boris Johnson, the fop-haired, bumbling wonder of the Conservatives, a quite literally inventive journalist, former magazine editor and Mayor of London who has become the new prime minister of Britain.

One word kept cropping up in discussions like an endangered species searching for a bullet: enthusiasm. Plain, sprightly, delightful winged enthusiasm. “We need to be enthusiastic; Boris (because, of course, he is Boris to them) is enthusiastic.” Be gone pessimists and Cassandras; farewell such tactical and strategic realities of being in or out of the European common market; in or out of European regulations; ease of access or difficulty on the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

With the Conservatives voting on who to replace Theresa May as leader of the Conservative Party, and, it followed, Prime Minister, Johnson won through against Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt. The margin of victory – 66 to 34 percent of the party membership – was nearly two to one, and came from a system Johnson [derided](#) as a “gigantic fraud” when employed by the British Labour Party in 2007.

His [victory speech](#) had much of what has come before. It spoke of instincts – the acquisitive standing out (“the instincts to own your own house, to earn and spend your own money”). These were “noble”, “proper” and “good”. Nor should the needy be forgotten, the poor abandoned, in realising them. Words were given like those of a motivational speaker. “Do you feel daunted? I don’t think you look remotely daunted to me. And I think we know we can do it, and that the people of this country are trusting in us to do it, and we know that we will do it.” While he conceded that the campaign of deliver, united and defeat – spelled DUD – did not augur well, detractors had forgotten the E: “E for energise”. “I say to all doubters, dude, we are going to energise the country.”

The October 31st deadline for Britain’s exit from the European Union would not change. The “new spirit of can-do” would prevail. Britain, “like some slumbering giant” would “rise and ping off the guy ropes of self-doubt and negativity.” Metaphors of growth and movement abounded: “fantastic full-fibre broadband sprouting in every household”; “more police”.

The Johnson-watchers verged between being worried and thrilled. Comments seem pitched to a sporting register: How will BJ perform on the field? Will he restrain himself, or be unduly foolish on the world stage? As if describing an unusual species, Lloyd Evans [remarked that](#), even at Oxford as a first-year student, he was “weirdly conspicuous – the ruddy jowls, the

stooped bullish stances, the booming Duke of Wellington voice, and the freakish white bob crowning his head like a heavenly spotlight.”

James Forsyth, [writing](#) in *The Spectator*, is hopeful the real Boris is partially caged, leaving another version to do get his hands dirty. “This is a risk; will his approach sound flippant when discussing serious issues?” On balance, however, Forsyth felt that there was something to be said about the man being let loose. “When he tried to be a different kind of figure, it didn’t work. It felt forced rather than natural.”

Finance commentator and regular forecaster of economic apocalypse Robert Peston [stated](#) the cold, mad justice of it all. As Johnson had been instrumental in creating Brexit, it was only fitting that he now try to own it.

Navigating the gong tormented sea of narratives on Johnson, a few career standouts remain, making his attempt to be Big, Bold and British, unconvincing. The new British PM and Tory leader is a piece of truly befuddled work, one who still manages to play the card of the electable clown.

As a journalist, he fabricated and teased records. In 1987, when employed by *The Times* courtesy of family connections, he was fired for a story on the discovery of the Rose Palace, built by Edward II. His godfather, Oxford historian Colin Lucas, featured. “The trouble,” [he recalled](#), “was that somewhere in my copy I managed to attribute to Colin the view that Edward II and Piers Gaveston would have been cavorting together in the Rose Palace.” Pity, then, that Gaveston was murdered by the time the Rose Palace was built.

After the sack, he ventured over to *The Telegraph*, and became a shock trooper for anti-EU sentiment in Brussels, [feeding](#) Eurosceptic fanaticism back in Britain and beyond with such choice titled pieces as “Snails are fish, says EU”, “Brussels recruits sniffers to ensure that EU-manure smells the same” and “Threat to British pink sausages”. Johnson’s [feeling](#) about it all? A “rather weird sense of power” that his copy had “this amazing, explosive effect on the Tory party”.

His casually racist remarks on foreign powers and peoples have given him an enormous inventory of the insulted over the years, producing degrees of consternation and rib-stitching hilarity. He has deemed Africa a country, its people “piccaninnies” with “watermelon smiles”, compared women who wear burqas to “bank robbers” and “letterboxes” and [appraised](#) the chaos within his own conservative party as akin to “Papua New Guinea-style orgies of cannibalism and chief killing.”

Other comments have caused less consternation, not least of all his views of the current US president, Donald Trump, whom Johnson deemed “unfit to hold the office of the United States” on account of his “stupefying ignorance”. This, from a man who himself said that becoming UK prime minister was “about as good as the chances of finding Elvis on Mars, or my being reincarnated as an olive.” We live in jaw-droppingly interesting times.

Britain is in a mess, and the Boris Broom is unlikely to be able to make its bristles more effective beyond tinkering with the May-EU Brexit plan as it stands. The EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier has [expressed](#) the view that some room is open on reworking “the agreed declaration on the new partnership” but that the “withdrawal agreement” would be more or less ratified in its current form.

On the diplomatic front, Johnson is bound to be confused, if his various stances on the Northern Ireland-Ireland border, or non-border, are anything to go by. Having scolded his predecessor for taking the view that having no firm border between the two would not be in the UK's interests, he subsequently veered, [telling](#) the House of Commons that "there can be no return to a hard border." BJ's slumbering giant may well continue to do a bit more slumbering. Over to you, dude!

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