

Boris Johnson's Lies Don't Harm Him Because the UK's Political System Is More Corrupt than He Is

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Britain's corporate media are suddenly awash with [stories](#) wondering whether, or to what extent, the UK's prime minister is dishonest. Predictably in the midst of this, the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg is still doing her determined best to act as media bodyguard to Boris Johnson.

In a [lengthy article](#) on the BBC's website over the weekend, she presents a series of soothing alternatives to avoid conceding the self-evident: that Johnson is a serial liar. According to Kuenssberg, or at least those she chooses to quote (those, let us remember, who give her unfettered “access” to the corridors of power), he is a well-intentioned, unpredictable, sometimes hapless, “untamed political animal”. A rough diamond.

In Kuenssberg's telling, Johnson's increasingly obvious flaws are actually his strengths:

“Yet what's suggested time and again is that the prime minister's attitude to the truth and facts is not based on what is real and what is not, but is driven by what he wants to achieve in that moment – what he desires, rather than what he believes. And there is no question, that approach, coupled with an intense force of personality can be enormously effective.

“In his political career, Boris Johnson has time and again overturned the odds, and that's a huge part of the reason why.”

The way Kuenssberg tells it, Johnson sounds exactly like someone you would want in your corner in a time of crisis. Not the narcissist creator of those crises, but the Nietzschean “Superman” who can solve them for you through sheer force of will and personality.

Lies piling up

Slightly less enamoured with Johnson than the BBC has been the liberal Guardian, Britain's supposedly chief “opposition” newspaper to the ruling Conservative government. But the Guardian has been surprisingly late to this party too. Typical of its newly aggressive approach to Johnson was a [piece](#) published on Saturday by its columnist Jonathan Freedland, titled “Scandal upon scandal: the charge sheet that should have felled Johnson years ago”.

As this article rightly documents, Johnson is an inveterate dissembler, and one whose lies have been visibly piling up since he entered 10 Downing Street. His propensity to lie is not new. It was well-known to anyone who worked with him in his earlier career in journalism or when he was an aspiring politician. It is not the “scandals” that are new, it’s the media’s interest in documenting them that is.

And when the liar-in-chef is also the prime minister, those lies invariably end up masking high-level corruption, the kind of corruption that has the capacity to destroy lives – many lives.

So why are Johnson’s well-known deceptions only becoming a “mainstream” issue now – and why, in particular, is a liberal outlet like the Guardian picking up the baton on this matter so late in the day? As Freedland rightly observes, these scandals have been around for many years, so why wasn’t the Guardian on Johnson’s case from the outset, setting the agenda?

Or put another way, why has the drive to expose Johnson been led not by liberal journalists like Freedland but chiefly by a disillusioned old-school conservative worried about the damage Johnson is doing to his political tradition? Freedland is riding on the coat-tails of former Telegraph journalist Peter Osborne, who wrote a recent book on Johnson’s fabrications, [The Assault on Truth](#). Further, Johnson’s deceptions have gone viral not because of the efforts of the Guardian but because of a video compilation on social media of some of Johnson’s biggest whoppers by lawyer and independent journalist Peter Stefanovic.

This shocking compilation of Boris Johnson misleading Parliament is now on 6.2 million views yet UK media continues to turn a blind eye

Help me send it to 7 million [@BBCNews](#) [@itvnews](#) [@Channel4News](#) [@SkyNews](#)
can’t ignore PM’s shameless conduct forever! pic.twitter.com/PlvEkEij1V

— Peter Stefanovic (@PeterStefanovi2) [March 30, 2021](#)

Politics rigged

Part of the answer, of course, is that until recently the Guardian, along with the rest of the corporate media, had a much more pressing task than holding Britain’s prime minister to account for lies – and the corruption they obscure – that have drained the Treasury of the nation’s wealth, redirecting it towards a bunch of Tory donors, and subsequently contributed to at least a proportion of Covid-19 deaths.

The Guardian was preoccupied with making sure that Johnson was not replaced by an opposition leader who spoke, for the first time in more than a generation, about the need for wealth redistribution and a fairer society.

On the political scales weighing what was most beneficial for the country, it was far more important to the Guardian to keep then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his democratic socialist agenda out of Downing Street than make sure Britain was run in accordance with the rule of law, let alone according to the principles of fairness and decency.

The Guardian's relentless attacks on Corbyn continue. We've compiled a list of over a 100 Guardian articles attacking Corbyn (a small sample). Take a look!

(And if you haven't already, it really is time to [#DumpTheGuardian.](https://t.co/zQDRqe1iyP))
<https://t.co/zQDRqe1iyP>

— FiveFilters.org [@fivefilters](#) [September 16, 2018](#)

Now with Corbyn long gone, the political conditions to take on Johnson are more favourable. Covid-19 cases in the UK have plummeted, freeing up a little space on front pages for other matters. And Corbyn's successor, Keir Starmer, has used the past year to prove over and over again to the media that he has been [scrupulous](#) about [purging socialism](#) from the Labour party.

We are back to the familiar and reassuring days of having two main parties that will not threaten the establishment. One, the Labour party, will leave the establishment's power and wealth untouched, but do so in a way that makes Britain once again look like a properly run country, conferring greater legitimacy on UK Plc. The other, the Conservative party, will do even better by the establishment, further enriching it with an unapologetic crony capitalism, even if that risks over the longer term provoking a popular backlash that may prove harder to defuse than the Corbyn one did.

For the time being at least, the elite prospers either way. The bottom line, for the establishment, is that the political system is once again rigged in its favour, whoever wins the next election. The establishment can risk making Johnson vulnerable only because the establishment interests he represents are no longer vulnerable.

Blame the voters

But for liberal media like the Guardian, the campaign to hold Johnson to account is potentially treacherous. Once the prime minister's serial lying is exposed and the people informed of what is going on, according to traditional liberal thinking, his popularity should wane. Once the people understand he is a conman, they will want to be rid of him. That should be all the more inevitable, if, as the Guardian contends, Starmer is an obviously safer and more honest pair of hands.

[📊](#) | NEW: Preferred Prime Minister poll:

Boris Johnson: 40% (+5)
Keir Starmer: 24% (-4)

Via [@BMGResearch](#), 22-26 April
Changes w March

— Politics For All ([@PoliticsForAll](#)) [April 29, 2021](#)

But the problem for the Guardian is that Johnson's polling figures are remarkably buoyant, despite the growing media criticism of him. He continues to outpoll Starmer. His Midas touch needs explaining. And the Guardian is growing ever more explicit about where the fault is to be found. With us.

Or as Freedland observes:

“Maybe the real scandal lies with us, the electorate, still seduced by a tousled-hair rebel shtick and faux bonhomie that should have palled years ago... For allowing this shameless man to keep riding high, some of the shame is on us.”

Freedland is far from alone in peddling this line. Kuenssberg, in her BBC piece, offers a variant:

“An insider told me: ‘He frequently leaves people with the belief that he has told them one thing, but he has given himself room for manoeuvre,’ believing that, ‘the fewer cast iron positions you hold the better, because you can always change political direction.’

“The verbal flourishes and rhetorical tricks are part of the reason why he has prospered. ‘A lot of his magic has been those off-the-cuff comments, that’s why a lot of the public like him,’ says an ally.”

In other words, we see what we want to see. Johnson is the vessel into which we pour our hopes and dreams, while he has the tough challenge of making our melange of hopes and dreams a tangible, workable reality.

Liberal journalists have been on this “blame the voters” path for a while. When it was Corbyn and his “dangerous” socialism being pitted against the Tories’ crony capitalism, the Guardian enthusiastically joined the smear campaign against Labour. That included [evidence-free claims](#) of an “institutional antisemitism” crisis under Corbyn’s leadership.

And yet despite the media’s best endeavours, Corbyn appalled journalists like Freedland at the 2017 general election by winning Labour’s [biggest rise in vote share](#) since 1945. Corbyn denied the Conservatives a majority and was a few thousand votes from winning outright – something Starmer can only dream of at the moment, despite Johnson’s exposure as an inveterate liar and conman. And Corbyn achieved this while the Labour party machine, and the entire corporate media, were [vehemently against him](#).

Dangerous populism

It was in the wake of Corbyn’s unexpected success at the polls in 2017 that the Guardian unleashed its “[New Populism](#)” series, seeking to warn of a supposedly dangerous new political phenomenon that lumped the then-Labour leader in with rightwing populists such as Donald Trump, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and Hungary’s Viktor Orban. They were all part of a new wave of authoritarian, cult-like leaders who barely concealed their sinister, racist agendas, gulled supporters with promises divorced from reality, and most likely had secret ties to Russia’s Vladimir Putin.

In short, the Guardian’s thesis was that “the people” kept voting for these leaders because they were stupid and easily duped by a smooth-tongued charlatan.

This narrative was aggressively promoted by the Guardian, even though Corbyn had nothing in common with the rightwing authoritarians with whom he was forced to share star billing. He had spent his long political career on the backbenches, cultivating a self-effacing politics of communal solidarity and “standing up for the little guy” rather than pursuing power. And far from being a nationalist or nativist, Corbyn had dedicated decades to internationalism and fighting racism – though admittedly, in challenging the anti-Palestinian racism of Israel and its Zionist supporters he had left himself prey to disingenuous claims of antisemitism.

But after several years of emotional and ideological investment in “the people are dumb” approach, the Guardian seems in no hurry to drop it – until, or unless, the people can be persuaded to vote for an eminently safe, status-quo candidate like Starmer. The paper’s target has simply switched from Corbyn to the more plausible figure of Boris Johnson.

The Guardian dares not contemplate any alternative explanation for why voters continue to prefer the narcissist, corrupt, lying Johnson over Labour’s “Clean Up Westminster” Keir Starmer. But its reluctance to consider other explanations does not mean they cannot be found.

I would clean up Westminster. [#Peston pic.twitter.com/FTpoHCsbrR](https://twitter.com/FTpoHCsbrR)

— Keir Starmer (@Keir_Starmer) [April 29, 2021](#)

A corrupt system

The problem is not that most voters have failed to understand that Johnson is corrupt, though given the corrupt nature of the British corporate media – the Guardian very much included – they are hardly well positioned to appreciate the extent of Johnson’s corruption.

It is not even that they know that he is corrupt but do not care.

Rather, the real problem is that significant sections of the electorate have rightly come to the realisation that the wider political system within which Johnson operates is corrupt too. So corrupt, in fact, that it may be impossible to fix. Johnson is simply more open, and honest, about how he exploits the corrupt system.

Over the past two decades, there have been several way-stations exposing the extent of the corruption of the UK’s political system, whichever party was in power.

Labour under Tony Blair overrode popular dissent, expressed in the largest marches ever seen in the UK, and lied his way to a war on Iraq in 2003 that led to the killing and ethnic cleansing of millions of Iraqis. UK soldiers were dragged into a war that, it quickly became clear, was really about securing western control over the Middle East’s oil. And the invasion and occupation of Iraq spawned a new nihilistic Islamic cult that rampaged across the region and whose embers have yet to be snuffed out.

Five years later, Gordon Brown oversaw the near-implosion of the British economy after Labour had spent more than a decade intensifying the financial deregulation begun under Margaret Thatcher. That process had turned the financial sector into the true power behind No 10. Both Brown and his Tory successor, David Cameron, not only refused to hold to account any of the white-collar criminals responsible for the collapse of the financial system, but instead rewarded them with massive bailouts. Ordinary people, meanwhile, were forced to tighten their belts through years of austerity to pay off the debts.

And in the background throughout this period, a global and local environmental catastrophe has been gradually unfolding that the political system has shown no capacity to address because it has been captured by corporations who benefit most from continuing the environmental degradation. The system has instead dissembled on the threats we face to justify inaction.

No price to pay

The truly astonishing thing is that those who lied us into the Iraq war, destabilising the Middle East and provoking an exodus from the region that has fuelled a surge in xenophobic politics across Europe; those who broke the financial system through their greed and incompetence and lied their way out of the consequences, forcing the rest of us to foot the bill; and those who lied about the ecological catastrophes unfolding over the past half century so that they could go on lining their own pockets; none of them paid any price at all for their mendacity, for their deceptions, for their corruption. Not only that, but they have grown richer, more powerful, more respected because of the lies.

One only needs to look at the fate of that unapologetic pair of war criminals, Tony Blair and George W Bush. The former has amassed wealth like a black hole sucks in light, and preposterously is still regularly called on by the media to [pontificate](#) on ethical issues in British politics. And the latter has been rehabilitated as a once-wayward, now beloved, irreverent uncle to the nation, one whose humanity has supposedly been underscored simply by making sure he was filmed "[sneaking](#)" [a sweet](#) to his presidential successor's wife.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, a remedy to Britain's self-evidently flawed political system was thrown up – in the form of Corbyn. He was a throwback, the very antithesis of the modern politicians who had brought us to the brink of ruin on multiple fronts. He was not venal, nor a narcissist. His concern was improving the lives of ordinary people, not the bank balances of corporate donors. He was against colonial-style wars to grab other countries' resources. The things that made him a laughing stock with the political elite – his cheap clothes, his simple life, his allotment – made him appealing to large sections of the electorate.

For many, Corbyn was the last gasp for a system they had given up on. He might prove their growing cynicism about politics wrong. His success might demonstrate that the system could be fixed, and that all was not lost.

Except that is not how it played out. The entire political and media class – even the [military](#) – turned on Corbyn. They played the man, not the ball – and when it came to the man, any and all character assassination was justified. He had been a Soviet agent. He was a threat to Britain's security. His IQ was too low to be prime minister. He was a secret antisemite.

Lying, cheating and stealing

In the United States, then-Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer [warned](#) Donald Trump back in 2017 that the US intelligence services would "have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you" should the president try to go up against them. Maybe Trump hoped that his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, would offer some protection. Pompeo, a former head of the CIA, understood the dishonest ways of the intelligence services only too well. He explained his agency's modus operandi to a group of students in Texas in an unusually frank manner in late 2019: "I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole. That's, it was like, we had entire training courses!"

With the campaign to destroy Corbyn, many saw how the British system was just as skilled and experienced as the US one in its capacity to lie, cheat and steal. Corbyn's treatment offered an undeniable confirmation of what they already suspected.

Over the past two decades, in an era when social media has emerged as an alternative information universe challenging that of the traditional corporate media, all these episodes – Iraq, the financial crash, ecological catastrophe, Corbyn’s political assassination – have had deeply damaging political ramifications. Because once people sensed that the system was corrupt, they became cynical. And once they were cynical, once they believed the system was rigged whoever won, they began voting cynically too.

This should be the main context for understanding Johnson’s continuing success and his invulnerability to criticism. In a rigged system, voters prefer an honestly dishonest politician – one who revels in the cynicism of the system and is open about exploiting it – over one who pretends he is playing fair, one who feigns a belief in the system’s ultimate decency, one who lies by claiming he can pursue the common good.

If the system is rigged, who is really more mendacious: Johnson, who plays dirty in a dirty system, or Starmer, who pretends he can clean up the Westminster cesspit when all he will really do is push the ordure out of view.

Johnson is transparently looking out for his mates and donors. Starmer is looking out for a rotten system, one that he intends to makeover so its corruption is less visible, less open to scrutiny.

Liberals are mystified by this reading of politics. They, after all, are emotionally invested in a supposedly meritocratic system from which they personally benefited for so long. They would rather believe the lie that a good political system is being corrupted by rotten politicians and a stupid electorate than the reality that a corrupt political system is being exploited by those best placed to navigate its corrupt ways.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook’s blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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