

Boris' Revenge: The Coming Assault on Britain's Democracy

Boris Johnson could prove to be more Trump than Trump. But he may yet face resistance to turning Britain into "Singapore-on-Thames"

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How resilient the human spirit is! Within hours of Boris Johnson's shock election triumph on Thursday night, the crushed 'metropolitan elite' had begun to console itself with an optimistic forecast. Boris, the idea circulated, is really a closet centrist, and the scale of his victory means that he can now turn his back on the radical right who put him into power, and govern as the One Nation Conservative he claims to be. Did he not, after all, re-enter Downing Street on Friday morning with the words "healing" and "unite" on his lips?

Alas, we have been there before – as Donald Trump approached the White House. Remember all those confident predictions that Trump was more interested in the trappings of power than its exercise? "More Berlusconi than Mussolini", we were assured. He would be "managed" by the "adults in the room". That worked out well, didn't it?



Johnson, of course, is a very different figure from Trump. But they have certain crucial characteristics in common, most obviously: mendacity, ruthlessness, and, it is becoming increasingly apparent, vindictiveness. Both men can be genial when things are going their way – but neither responds well to opposition, and each has a well-developed instinct for scapegoating when things go wrong.

And things will certainly go wrong for Boris. The great "Get Brexit Done" lie may have helped him back to Downing Street, but it left untouched the insoluble conundrum at the heart of Brexit – the fact that we can maintain the close economic relationship with the European Union on which Britain's prosperity depends; or we can go for the sort of low-cost, low-regulation "Singapore-on-Thames" that Johnson's financiers (oligarchs, hedge funds, expatriate media barons) demand; but we cannot have both. Looking ahead to negotiations on the "comprehensive free trade agreement" with the EU that Boris has sworn to deliver by next year's end, it is hard to see any outcome other than breakdown or capitulation. It will be tough to spin either as a success.

So, too, with the terms of the US trade deal that American healthcare and agricultural interests will then force on us. And so, too, with the looming disintegration of our once-United Kingdom, as Scotland's comprehensive rejection of both Brexit and Johnson precipitates Britain's own Catalonia-style crisis.

One could go on. As the respected Institute for Fiscal Studies made clear in its [analysis of the Conservative manifesto](#), apart from much-bruited pledges of more money for health and education what we have been promised is an economic future with austerity "baked in". In other words, the voters who put their faith in Johnson as the unlikely champion of the working class will find that the bulk of public services continue to deteriorate, and the holes in the welfare safety net will become ever harder to overlook. They may not react well.

So the going will get tough – and the tough will get nasty. Johnson's pieties on the steps of Downing Street were at once followed by a trip to Sedgefield, the newly Tory constituency once held by Tony Blair, for a little dance on the grave of the Labour Party. And of course the way ahead was clearly signposted by Johnson's autumn purge of 21 Conservative moderates who had voted to block a no-deal Brexit. Opposition will not be tolerated, or forgotten – and Johnson has a hit-list.

Some items were clearly foreshadowed in Johnson's manifesto: in a section with the Orwellian title "Protect our democracy", we are given a brief preview of what "the necessary task of restoring public trust in government and politics" will entail. Obviously, the First Past The Post voting system, which worked so well to disenfranchise Britain's "Remainers", will be preserved. Equally obviously, the media barons will get their payoff in the final abandonment of efforts to impose some minimum standards on the press. Such long-standing rightwing aspirations as voter ID and a dilution of the Human Rights Act are also promised.

What is new, however, is the proposal for a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission. There are no details, of course, on how it will be selected or operate, but among other things, it will target the judiciary, and even the Royal Prerogative. So the Supreme Court, which had the temerity to judge illegal Johnson's autumn attempt to shut down parliament, will have its wings clipped; and though the monarchy may have connived in that same illegal move, it will find itself punished for supporting the suggestion that Johnson lied to the Queen.

So much for what was advertised in advance. Post-election announcements have already identified two further pillars of Britain's traditional political dispensation that are to pay the price for insufficient enthusiasm for Johnson. The Svengali-like Dominic Cummings is to [drive a "radical reform" of the civil service](#), "including a review of processes for hiring and firing officials"; so Britain's widely admired public administration, with its 150-year tradition of political impartiality and "speaking truth unto power", is to get its comeuppance. And so too the BBC, where a review of whether to decriminalise failure to pay the licence fee is in effect a threat to cut that institution's financial legs off.

In sum, the political culture of Britain as we have known it for generations is earmarked for demolition. Anyone or anything that has tried, however ineffectually, to scrutinise Johnson's plans or hold him to account will reap the coming authoritarian whirlwind. Trump will no doubt represent himself as this revolution's enabler, and he will be right. But Johnson may well outdo even his mentor – Britain, after all, lacks the protection of a written constitution. A resilient human spirit that hopes for the best and adapts to circumstances looks sadly

inadequate for what is now in prospect.

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