

Using the Burka: Boris Johnson's Bid for Popularity

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Comedy, Boris Johnson, and the Tories – these three share a certain comforting, if chaotic affinity, lobbed together in some nightmarish union that risks consuming itself. But times are serious – profoundly so, we are told: Brexit exercises the nerves as if Britannia were a patient about to expire, and there is the cultural irritation posed by those naughty elements who refuse to do the good thing and integrate themselves into the land of her Britannic majesty.

Thus far, Britain has resisted the moves of other states in Europe to impose public bans on such religious coverings as the burka and some of its more expansive cognates. But there is a prevailing appetite for such measures in a climate suffused with notions of civilisation, irate outsiders and insecure insiders. France was a pioneer in that regard, initiating a ban in 2004. In Denmark, rough [measures](#) have been implemented punishing those who don such headdress in public spaces.

A perfect chance for Johnson, who remains a smouldering menace to Prime Minister Theresa May, to strike form, even if only to rile critics and keep the blogosphere busy.

“In Britain today there is only a tiny, tiny minority of women who wear these odd bits of headgear,” he noted in his regular Daily Telegraph column last week. Confidently, he claimed that, “One day, I am sure, they will go.”

His has little time for assuming that women have any choice in the matter.

“If you say that it is weird and bullying to expect women to cover their faces, then I totally agree – and I would add that I can find no scriptural authority for the practice in the Koran.”

Nothing is spared. The whole show is given, and any social or academic nicety is given over to a populist punchiness.

“I would go further and say that it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes.”

But Johnson returns to a traditional stance taken to such articles of wear: they should *not* be banned. The only resort, then, is to mock.

It becomes clear what this exercise was about. The burka, and Islamic dress, might well have found themselves objects of pure, unalloyed opportunism for yet another push for recognition from fellow Tories that Johnson remains a relevant contender for high office. He might have resigned from the front bench in an act of calculated sabotage, but he glows.

The Conservative Party has found itself in a bind. Something needed to be done, as the current wisdom goes, but what? An investigation is currently being taken, a fairly pointless exercise that serves to supply valuable oxygen to Johnson's flame of embellished martyrdom. Communities and Local Government Secretary James Brokenshire [told](#) BBC Breakfast that an investigation into complaints made about Johnson's comments was taking place and "that's the right approach".

If the investigation – being conducted by an individual officer – finds justification for the complaints, an independent panel will be convened (independence being in the eye of the beholders), which might decide to refer Johnson to the party's board. From there, the power of expulsion can come into play.

At this stage, these are meaningless hypothetical points, and expelling Johnson will add a few streaks of popularity to him. If that ever unreliable metric called polling can be drawn upon, Johnson has allies on the score of whether he should receive some form of disciplinary action. The Sunday Express, noting the [findings](#) of its ComRes poll, found 53 percent of respondents did not feel any such action should be taken.

The Muslim Council of Britain has also added to the exercise of giving Johnson form and profile, [sending a letter](#) to Prime Minister May that "no-one should be allowed to victimise minorities with impunity." The Council was "hopeful" that the Tories "will not allow any whitewashing of this specific inquiry currently in process".

A few murmurings of support have aired. That ever reliable period-piece Tory prop and member for North East Somerset Jacob Rees-Mogg [is certain](#) that the whole exercise against Johnson – a "show trial" no less – is tactical, a measure to protect May and see off a rival. There is envy in the leadership at his "many successes, popularity with voters and charisma". He speculates:

"Could it be that there is a nervousness that a once and probably future leadership contender is becoming too popular and needs to be stopped?"

Another element is the comedy line, suggesting the view that Johnson remains the permanent, immutable joke of British reaction. To censure Johnson would be to censure a certain type of eccentric, if indecent Britain. Rowan Atkinson, the genius behind Mr Bean and a range of comic adaptations, took the freedom-to-joke line [in a letter](#) to *The Times*.

"As a lifelong beneficiary of the freedom to make jokes about religion, I do think that Boris Johnson's joke about wearers of the burka resembling letterboxes is a pretty good one."

Pity that it has been a standard one for some time – was Atkinson perhaps referring to Johnson himself, the joke in harness?

It is all well and good to accept the necessary function of comedy to puncture, deflate and

generally mock the role of faith, credulous attitudes and the devout.

“All jokes about religion cause offence,” says Atkinson accurately, “so it’s pointless apologising for them.”

But Johnson has never been the font of sincerity in that regard, and his effusion was hardly intended as one of pure humour. He wishes to remain politically relevant, and persists sniping through his columns and from the back bench in the hope that he won’t be forgotten. As Britain leaves its awkward EU marriage, Johnson may well find himself presiding over the ruins of his own handiwork.

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