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Levelling down Jo Littler

From roundtable on Boris Johnson, *Renewal* 30:2, (2022) pp28-30

Robert Saunders's article takes Johnson seriously, casting him as 'the most powerful Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher', and asking what shape his Conservatism takes. Does it represent something completely new, a populist English nationalist party, led by a revolutionary bounder who is anything but Conservative, he asks? Saunders suggests not, noting that he draws on a variety of Tory traditions and prime ministerial personas, including Disraeli's anti-cosmopolitan populism, Churchill's bombastic lack of loyalty to his own party and Macmillan's theatrical doddering. Citing Johnson's ideological promiscuity – which has veered from a selective 'championing of immigration' and anti-Trump rhetoric as Mayor of London, through the racist mockery of Obama and border mania as Brexit campaigner, to the flagrant disregard for parliamentary rules as Prime Minister – Saunders argues that Johnson's great skill lies 'in holding together divergent materials than in giving them new direction': to both have his cake and eat it. Or, to extend the metaphor: we could say he wants to have, and to eat, *many* different kinds of cake, whilst taking over the bakery and firing half the staff.

The article is particularly astute in observing the rhetorical strategies and chameleon pragmatism of Johnsonism: at the 'rhetorical flares' sent up to 'awe and amaze' and distract us; at noting that, unlike the widespread political norm of performing sincerity, Johnson's MO is to 'perform insincerity'. His rhetorical exaggeration, comic phrases and knowing looks means that, as Saunders puts it, 'No other politician breaks "the fourth wall" as consistently as Johnson, inviting the public to be in on the joke of his own performance'. This is all true, and brilliantly observed. Yet we can of course also note other dimensions and contexts for the popularity of such a persona. I suggest that it is useful to supplement Saunders's account by, firstly, considering the wider global neoliberal political context which produces these characteristics, alongside the Tory tradition; and, secondly, by emphasising how these particular characteristics are moulding the political and cultural economy of the present.

For Johnson's performance of buffoonery and knowingness does not work merely, as Saunders puts it, 'to distract from the emptiness': it is a performance of 'anti-politics', a way to tap into popular discontent with 'Politics'. It can clearly be related to the rash of populist leaders who have gained power in recent years by portraying themselves as 'outsiders' to the political establishment. Such figures include, but are by no means limited to, the jocular pipe-smoking 'man of the people' Nigel Farage, *Apprentice* bruiser Donald Trump, Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who was a comic actor poking fun at the establishment before becoming Ukrainian President. All of these white men have presented themselves as offering, to some extent, a 'refreshing' 'rule-breaking' alternative to the technocratic establishment politics of the past four decades: personae they have honed through 'rule-breaking' wayward lines and extensive media participation.

Johnson's anti-establishment media persona is part of this wider context: in which there is both a broad and often amorphous discontent with the political establishment and different forms of inequality, and a right-wing populist project to surf and navigate these waves for its own benefit.ⁱ Therefore, the comment that Johnson's political compass 'points only at himself', and that his rhetorical flares serve to 'detract from the emptiness' are true only up to a point. His actions are not smooth; they lurch and jerk with events and the news agenda. But the thesis that they are ideologically 'empty' is misleading. It is a grasping survivalism that only the right know how to do this well, predicated as it is on an ideological individualism that has been honed to new manifestations of competitive ruthlessness over the past four decades. And thus Johnsonism has pursued a dual agenda of extending extreme economic inequality and maintaining power effectively amidst and through these chaotic and tumultuous times which he himself has helped to ferment. As Aeron Davis put it in the title of his book, being a *Reckless Opportunist* is now demanded of 'leaders' in public and business life.ⁱⁱ They are incited into valuing 'creative' destruction: to be anti-Establishment 'disrupters', change agents, short-term Schumpeterians trying to deliver the upward tick on the stock market graph for the shareholders and a snappy 'achievement narrative' on their CV. Small c conservatives they are not. There is a pattern at work here: being an individual maverick is part of a wider systemic pattern of what *The Care Manifesto* terms 'structural carelessness'.ⁱⁱⁱ The chaotic tenor of Johnson, of never quite knowing where you are with him, is part of this broader political package.

As Saunders notes, the vague yet potent language of 'levelling up' has become Johnson's slogan. It is important to ask both why and how. 'Levelling up' holds just the right amount of vagueness: relating to general dissatisfaction with patently unfair inequalities and promising to 'do something', whilst oscillating between geographical and economic inequality, and thus eluding its referent. Contemporary ideas of meritocracy are profoundly comfortable with the idea of an unequal playing field, as long as inequality doesn't go 'too far', and, crucially, that people appear, through highly selective media parables and occasional instances, to have 'the chance' to rise.^{iv} Johnson's 'smoke and mirrors' version of meritocratic intervention therefore has rhetorical power, even if in the larger scheme of things (i.e. levels of social and economic inequality) it is 'fake news'. It can work up to a point.

When that point is reached, and breached, is a key issue. Under Johnson, the Conservatives have been the party of parties and japes, of hedge funds and free ports, of pork-barrel politics and backhanders, of rebordering and climate inaction, of fuel poverty and foodbanks. Their political agenda mainly aims to get the super-rich to try to 'level up' further to the level of international oligarchs, and for those not in swing-vote constituencies to 'level down' their living standards. The time when it seemed possible that we were entering a phase of post-austerity politics is now out the window. Whilst Wales buttresses its foundational economy to support its citizens, whilst Scotland ends period poverty for schoolchildren and provides free university tuition to its students, whilst both offer social care that is free at the point of use, England, by contrast, offers no such social cushions for the poor, apart from the home-grown leftist pockets of community wealth building such as Preston.^v The chaotic, louche hedonism of 'Johnsonism' is creating an increasingly insular country with increasingly extensive capacities for both viciousness and inequality.

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Notes

ⁱ See Marie Moran and Jo Littler, 'Cultural populism in new populist times', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 23, No 6, pp857-873.

ⁱⁱ Aaron Davies, *Reckless Opportunists: Elites at the end of the Establishment*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, London, Verso 2020.

^{iv} Jo Littler, 'Young and old meritocracy: from radical critique to neoliberal tool', *Renewal*, Vol 26, No 1, 2018.

^v See for instance Rhian Jones, 'Levelling up vs democratic localism', in *Soundings* 80, spring 2022; Women's Budget Group, 'Response to the March statement', March 2022: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WBG-Spring-Statement-Response-March-2022-FINAL.pdf>.