

The politics of envy are alive in Boris Johnson

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Boris Johnson made a speech last night that will, I suspect, come to define his career. [As the Guardian put it:](#)

[Boris Johnson](#) has launched a bold bid to claim the mantle of [Margaret Thatcher](#) by declaring that inequality is essential to fostering "the spirit of envy" and hailed greed as a "valuable spur to economic activity".

In an attempt to shore up his support on the Tory right, as he positions himself as the natural successor to David Cameron, the London mayor called for the "Gordon Gekkos of London" to display their greed to promote economic growth.

He also claimed :

that it was "futile" to try to end inequality.

and:

mocked the 16% "of our species" with an IQ below 85 as he called for more to be done to help the 2% of the population who have an IQ above 130.

Now I am aware that the Telegraph noted that he tried to moderate these views, [reporting that he said:](#)

I hope that this time the Gordon Gekkos of London are conspicuous not just for their greed — valid motivator though greed may be for economic progress — as for what they give and do for the rest of the population, many of whom have experienced real falls in their incomes over the last five years

and

But I also hope that there is no return to that spirit of Loadsamoney heartlessness - figuratively riffling banknotes under the noses of the homeless.

But the [Mail seems completely in tune](#) with the Guardian interpretation of the speech, of which I cannot find a full text as yet. Indeed, they quoted this chunk, which seems key to me:

'I am afraid that violent economic centrifuge is operating on human beings who are already very far from equal in raw ability, if not spiritual worth.'

'Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests, it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16 per cent of our species have an IQ below 85, while about 2 per cent have an IQ above 130.'

'The harder you shake the pack, the easier it will be for some cornflakes to get to the top. And for one reason or another — boardroom greed or, as I am assured, the natural and God-given talent of boardroom inhabitants — the income gap between the top cornflakes and the bottom cornflakes is getting wider than ever.'

'I stress I don't believe that economic equality is possible. Indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity.'

What Johnson is clearly saying is that some have a natural right to earn more. And that some are destined to be at the bottom of the pile. And he thinks we should accept that. He also thinks, based on other quotes, that it is philanthropy that should be allowed to deal with the consequences, not tax. And that base instincts like greed and envy should be encouraged.

This is, of course, the politics of envy. And it is class warfare. But it is both declared from a perspective of the person sure he is the winner and sure that he only needs the support of the winners to maintain his position as the 'top cornflake'.

It's the politics of the person who forgets that cornflakes only come in packs: you can't buy them singly. And the broken ones at the bottom of the pack could very easily have started at the top.

This is the politics of abuse.

This is why those with concern for equality, for opportunity for all, for economic justice, for the right to live a fulfilled life whoever you are, have to make clear that this is unacceptable, and always has been and always will be.

But at least Johnson has told us what we're up against and we can name it. For he is not the embodiment of the politics of envy. He merely expressed what so many around him think.