

Johnson has gone, but the legacy of his lies remains

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I posted this Twitter thread this morning:

Johnson has gone, protesting his innocence to the end. To understand what has happened it is vital to understand one critical thing, which is that he is a pathological liar. He lies continuously and has not the slightest idea that he is. Nor does he recall doing so. A thread...

Boris Johnson's behaviour has always been inexplicable. His masters noted the fact at Eton. Yesterday's tirades, making accusations of a conspiracy, kangaroo courts and absence of evidence were much the same.

The Johnson phenomenon makes no sense unless it is simultaneously understood that he lied, was expedient, and straightforwardly misled but never once understood that he was doing so - because he could always convince himself he was telling the truth and then forgot all he said.

This has always been the Johnson way. When he wrote dodgy articles for newspapers he did not, in his opinion, make stuff up. He just met a deadline. And when he told the Commons there would be no border with Ireland in the Irish Sea, he honestly meant it.

In both cases, an untruth was said. It is just that Johnson did not recognise that. He had simply said or done what was required in the moment, and because it worked in that moment the truth of what was said was, to him, utterly inconsequential.

That's because, for Johnson, there is no past or future. All that matters is winning the moment. If a lie achieves that, then lying is OK. And without a past or future in his timeline Johnson did not recognise the relevance or meaning of lies: all that matters to him is the present.

The Johnson phenomenon was built on this. So big were the lies, and so bold the telling,

that people fell for them. Or rather, those that were similarly expedient did so. Most did not. The chancers saw an opportunity. The rest looked on in horror.

The trouble was there were sufficient chancers for a very long time. Their motives varied. The Red Wall saw Johnson as a way to snub the neoliberal elite. The right-wing Tories saw him as an extension of their own fantasies that are based on economic lies.

Those who needed a tool found one. Johnson's excesses were cover for their own false claims, whether that be that Brexit or austerity might work. So over the top was he that they thought they might just succeed in their own falsehoods, all designed to feather their own nests.

Johnson will never appreciate this. It has to be understood that he is incapable of doing so. The moral compass; the awareness of obligation; the worry about being found out; the concern for the future and the ability to comprehend that most of us have is unknown to him.

Instead, all he has is a self-belief that justifies, without scrutiny, everything he has ever said or done, whatever the truth of the claim that he might make about it.

As a result, we have to worry about three things.

The first is that the Tories were mad enough to let such a person become their leader when it was so obvious how deeply flawed his character was.

The second is that until some of those Tories appreciated the impossibility of working with him any longer and resigned less than a year ago — which was the moment of his real defenestration - there was nothing that could be done about this.

We have a system of government where a person out of touch with reality - as Johnson is, at all times - can govern with no effective checks and balances in place to stop him.

And third, that threat is not going away. Johnson will still lie. A whole TV channel (maybe more) now exists to spread his lies. The Telegraph is there to be bought to promote his drivel. And the Mail and Express are already making it clear that they are on his side.

The lies will continue, in other words. Just as Trump has moved politics in the US out of the White House, so will Johnson now try to move politics in the UK out of the Commons, which he sees as his enemy.

Have no doubt that the consequence of all this will be a renewed assault on democracy itself - which the liars will say cannot be trusted. There will be many who will support that. The far-right is alive and far too well in this country.

The trouble is that, as ever, there will be just enough of the truth in what they say for

them to get away with their lies. There is a problem with democracy in the UK. It is so flawed it let a man like Boris Johnson become prime minister.

That is precisely why we need proportional representation, so that never again can the government of this country be captured by someone so unfit to govern.

The opportunity to prevent that exists. Labour could deliver PR. The vast majority would welcome it. But there is a catch: they also want minority power. The desire to rule seemingly always exceeds that to do the right thing by democracy and the country.

And so we are at risk. The risk is that Johnson might be gone, but the lies remain. And not only do they remain, but the crippling incapacity within government that they create will continue to shackle us.

So we will be told there is no money, when that is not true.

And we will be told we cannot go back to the EUI when we can.

The hint that we will soon be told that we cannot afford to tackle climate change is now apparent.

And the idea that markets remain supreme when very clearly unfettered market power is destroying all that is of value will stay in place.

Each of these is a lie. They are lies of Johnsonesque proportion. And those telling themselves these lies are very obviously deluding themselves as much as Johnson ever did, and we all know it. But they are the people who want power.

Johnson's legacy has been created over twenty or more years. He has made lying normal. He has permitted the self-deception that now underpins too much of politics. And he created the contempt for the higher principles of public office that demean our democracy.

That means Johnson is far from gone. Even if he slipped silently into the night now (and I think that exceptionally unlikely) his wholly malign influence would remain.

There is, then, not much to celebrate today unless (and this is as unlikely as Johnson going away) the remaining political parties came together now to agree a constitutional programme to prevent someone like him, so unsuited for office, ever governing again.

I can dream that this might happen. But I do not delude myself, unlike Johnson. I think it unlikely. And we might all still pay a horrible price for that. The liars are still winning.