

“Taking back Control”:

Whose, and Back to When?

Logie Barrow

Logie Barrow (Bremen) interprets the Conservative Party’s approach to Brexit as a response to the traumatic loss of control suffered by the party during the 1940s-1970s. In the longer term, the Conservative Party has often attained and held onto power by promoting class-integrative myths, such as national greatness. Thus, Brexit may be seen as an attempt to contain class struggle by promising an enlarged ‘national cake’ to be shared in by all, at the cost of external others. Barrow argues that the Tories’ have been cushioned from the impact of their often misguided economic policies by Britain’s economic power, but that the country’s radically altered position in a globalised world makes this strategy more difficult to pull off. He further shows that the Conservatives’ handling of the Covid-19 crisis may be seen as symptomatic of the party’s neoliberal agenda, which includes privatisation, overcentralisation, and elitism, and as an opportunity to conceal the economic impact of Brexit behind the impact of the pandemic.

From around 1700, Britain’s political culture (unwritten constitution; self-image as moderate; other features so familiar to 1st-year students), often hard-fought but never destroyed, has been cushioned in economic success.

To indulge in reductionism: over generations, the Tories have helped British capitalism as demagogues and enforcers. But, had too much of the economic content of their demagogy become reality, it would have harmed overall profitability and stability. Such has repeatedly been the paradox since the mid-19th century. Now, for the first time, political triumph is knocking on the economic door. The main reasons for this are sometimes centuries old. But let’s begin with decades.

Interpret Brexit as part of a decades-long Tory endeavour to regain control of the British nation, after the post-1940 decades of factory-floor ‘anarchy’ climaxed traumatically in industrial and broader insubordination during

1967-74. I investigate, firstly, the shaping of much current debate by old Tory slogans and ideas and, secondly, why those remain so effective. Here I argue Britain has, off and on since 1846, been economically cushioned from the full effect of Tory policies over trade, partly because those policies were never fully applied and salutary lessons never materialised. Over generations, repeated failure or near-failure of Tory trade-agitations has left room for functionalist theories to flourish: 'above party', a ruling class can more or less accurately and profitably define its interests.

How rare exceptions may be is unclear. But currently we have a pretty clear one: some sort of Hard Brexit (leaving the EU with no agreement) seems increasingly probable on 31st December.2020, though not yet (2.8.2020) certain. Let most capitalists and pro-capitalists, not least *Financial Times* journalists, be as sane as you wish; politically they are as defeated as anyone else. Their occasional compliments to Labour (though not to Corbyn) during the late-2019 Election-campaign measure their desperation. Let us, as much as we like, see the EU as 'merely' the world's third-largest trading-bloc, squeezed between its American and Chinese rivals, while politically dominated by Germany and hence doctrinally cramped by ordoliberalism (for a definition, see below). Even so, a desirable alternative to that is surely not an archaic and territorially rickety state of a mere 66-million inhabitants, leading some 'free-trade' crusade against all three blocs. So far, recruits for that crusade have been rare: trade-agreements number less than twenty,

mostly with mini-states, plus a few middling ones such as Switzerland, South Korea or South Africa, with Turkey allegedly pending. Japan was added during September: a big fish but no big partner. Whether we see any Brexit as bringing catastrophe or mere medium-term hiccoughs and other indelicacies, its apparent imminence suggests how easily a dominant faction can hasten economic sado-masochism by debauching electoral majorities on irrelevancies. In Britain, the main irrelevance has, since 1940 at the latest, been nostalgia.

That presupposes believing you have lots to be nostalgic about. So Brexit depends on an imperialist whitewash of the bases of past success. If you romanticise these, you may obscure how unrepeatable they are. Revulsion aside (the point here is not to cheer for the immersion of one individual slaver's statue in Bristol Harbour), 21st-century Brexitanians can overestimate their room for manoeuvre the more easily, the more they forget the lasting benefits to English/British investors in piracy followed, from the late 17th century, by super-exploitation of generations of slaves and of early industrial workers. So, what is Hard Brexit based on? Near the end, we will hear Boris Johnson interpreting his December 2019 Election-triumph by indeed gesticulating back more than three centuries. Thereby he showed himself, not only morally obtuse, but also a bit madder than anyone fantasising, say, that the Chinese Admiral Zheng He (d. 1435) had had successors, one of whom had 'discovered', say, Bristol near the start of the Wars of the Roses (1455) or more profitably 'discovered' Lisbon after colliding

with Portuguese ships busy ‘discovering’ down the West African coast. However crassly, Johnson was hankering after the half-millennium that, into the 20th century, had seen ‘white’ empires enjoying the world-historical initiative. Was he aware how absurdly out-of-date he had become during his lifetime? Presumably not: why else would he have invited so many top diplomats to Greenwich on 3rd February to hear him indulge his historical fantasies and slavery-free myopia?

At the time of writing, all countries are grappling with Covid-19, plus its economic effects. But only today’s dominant faction of Tories could so much as threaten to add a Hard Brexit to that mixture. We can imagine ways that threat might dissolve. But, till it does, we must proceed on the assumption it will be realised. Even now, predictions seem premature as to how Johnson and his ministers would administer it to the electorate: few if any Brexiteers can be so saintly as never to have dreamt of hiding Brexit’s effects behind Covid’s. True, that may currently seem as easy as hiding a mouse behind an elephant. But the mouse may have grown mightily by January 2021.

We will see below how the ineptitude of Johnson and his ministers supplied the elephant with growth hormones. Brexit was also perhaps relevant to some of the government’s idiocies over Covid-19. Proportionately to population, these helped make Britain the most Covid-hit country in Europe, if we omit Putin’s much-censored Russia. They are bound to reverberate for years. In sum, we will see some effects of Brexit on Britain’s struggle with Covid, whereas Covid’s effects on Brexit are

still speculative. Admittedly everyone, masked or not, is now choking on air with dangerously high speculation-content.

Regaining Control: The Roots of Brexit Rhetoric

To summarise our opening trauma: from 1971, Edward Heath’s Tory government legislated to tame the Do-It-Yourself militancy that had flourished during three decades of full employment. Repeatedly, those laws boomeranged. In February 1972 and with coal-stocks thinned by a miners’ strike, much of Birmingham’s labour movement had marched to the gates of a coal-depot at Saltley (also called Nechells), and forced their closure. At the end of July came the release of five unofficially striking dockers’ leaders from Pentonville prison, after similarly widespread solidarity-strikes. In 1974, another miners’ strike – almost national, though still unofficial – persuaded Heath to decree a working week of three days. He then called an election as to “Who Rules?” – and narrowly lost. Rather as the French and Russian revolutions had been the defining nightmares of much ruling-class politics in most countries during subsequent generations, the years 1972-4 function similarly in Britain.

The 2019 Election saw some children and grandchildren of post-war Britain’s ‘insubordinates’ voting Tory if only for the sake of “getting Brexit done.” But who is “taking back control”? So far, the sole candidates are Tories, disproportionately ruling-class ones

made nonchalant by centuries of imperial luck, but still uneasily aware that the post-war decades had cost them much control.

Today's Brexit rhetoric is self-escalating: by now, if you support some 'Soft' Brexit, you may rank among the traitors. What fuels that rhetoric? One component is neoliberalism. Like many successful 'isms', this has many versions.¹ But they all boil down to: 'private enterprise = good; public services = bad.' Its worldwide influence has been growing since the 1970s, not least in Britain. Of course, in 2008-10 when states bailed out the international banking system, most neolib's applauded *that* public servicing. On Britain's relation to the E.E.C./E.U., they have taken a range of stances. Here, though, we must follow the extremists: increasingly disruptive from the 1990s; dominant with Boris Johnson from 2018, where we meet an unusual hollowness about aims, i.e. about the point of 'brexiting' at all. Commentators have wrongly personalised the uproar of 2016-19. The point was not the poker-faced Theresa "Maybot" *versus* the Incredible Boris Hulk, but rather that both were gorging the electorate on tautologies. May's "Brexit means Brexit" was duly succeeded by Johnson's "Get Brexit Done". Suspicion of abstraction is part of the Anglo-British self-image. Yet seldom has concreteness been so lacking. This vacuum remains more than a negotiating poker-ploy. So far, it has been filled mainly with counterfactual waffle.

Overall, Johnson may have assumed Britain could manoeuvre between Hsi's China and Trump's America. But he has antagonised Hsi. His reasons are only officially about political

principle, given that he resumed arms-deliveries to Saudi Arabia during the same days as he antagonised the Beijing regime over Hua Wei and Hong Kong. As for Trump, those who rely on him tend to finish like bullfrogs hitching a ride on an amnesiac alligator. And even were some less monomaniac candidate to win the White House, the price of negotiating a trade-agreement with America's agrochemical, pharma and private health lobbyists is sure to include trashing Johnson's paeans to the National Health Service, which the Tories have anyway been stealthily privatising throughout the 2010s.

In detail, too, vacuity often reigns. Not only for EU negotiators does it seem to make dealings with Johnson's team 'shambolic'. Even on the central issue of Northern Ireland, Johnson needs to reconcile some contradictory promises of his own: by 7th July, his International Trade minister turned out to be deadlocked with Brexit minister Michael Gove. In the *Guardian's* summary: "Johnson's border plans risked smuggling, damage to the UK's international reputation and could face a legal challenge from the World Trade Organisation." (O'Carroll 9.7.2020) WTO rules would govern trade with a Hard-Brexit UK – unless Brexitalia were to exit from even that, as one or two Tories hint. Can all this be blamed merely on the personalities of so many ministers – even of Johnson plus his PR-genius, Dominic Cummings – or is some longer-term hollowness at work? (The Cummings dimension should not be overdone: despite his arrogance and weirdness, he is not the first Downing Street PR-adviser to enjoy a pivotal role: remember Alasdair Campbell?).²

This is where our decades call up centuries. Tory intellectuals – from Benjamin Disraeli (flourishing from the 1840s to 1881) to Enoch Powell (fl. 1950s to ‘70s) to Jacob Rees-Mogg (for him, see below) have viewed their function as being to peddle myths that are ‘good’ in the sense of class-integrative, the better to fight ‘bad’ ones that are not (ranging from any kind of socialism to ... unforgettably revealing gaffes such as those we’ll hear from Mogg and an acolyte of his). Britain is now Brexitania because more and more Tories, reacting to that 1972-4 climax of class trauma, adopted Brexit as a ‘good’ myth and handed it on to eager successors.

They added it to two elements from their party’s long-term ideology. The first inflects neoliberalism in terms of a Tory ideal at least as old as Disraeli: making Britain a ‘property-owning democracy’. In 1967 – and this is why I date the climax of wartime insubordination as starting in that year – the Tory head of the Greater London Council, Horace Cutler, provoked a huge though unevenly militant movement of Council tenants by raising their rents. As sweetener, he reconfigured that Disraelian rhetoric as a right to buy your Council flat. This made him a practical pioneer of neoliberalism before the word. Only during the mid-1970s was Margaret Thatcher, Heath’s successor as Tory leader, to follow him in theory and, in Downing Street from 1979, to start putting that theory into practice. During the 1980s, she added shares in industries she was privatising. Many initial purchasers were humble: “Tell Sid”, one series

of advertisements for those shares shouted from bus-shelters in at least working-class areas. True, market-fluctuations and other inequities will long ago have gutted most of the gains humble purchasers made. But, at whatever speed that gutting occurred, every original purchase privatised and shrank the state’s economic role: neoliberalism’s central aim.

More immediately for some, it sweetened Thatcher’s smashing of the most disruptive of working-class organisations. Whether her victory over the National Union of Miners (1984-5) was closer-run than that over General Galtieri in the Falklands/Malvinas during 1982, the two triumphs helped make her premiership the longest for generations: 1979-90. But her ideology of individualist self-reliance was the more ‘positive’ aspect of her opposition to every form of collectivism, not least to trades unions.

One Anglophone wisecrack associated with the 2008-9 crash was “never let a serious crisis go to waste.” Whatever its origins, Tories such as David Cameron’s finance minister (‘Chancellor of the Exchequer’ from 2010 to ‘16) George Osborne certainly followed it. Osborne’s ‘austerity’ starved almost any public initiative, from social care to libraries to youth clubs to police and prisons to (as we will see) the National Health Service (NHS) – and left two brand-new aircraft carriers minus planes able to land on them and minus the intended radar. (Putin was heard to giggle.) Even worse, Brexiteers’ euphoria at the 2016 referendum-result encouraged what I have identified as their prioritising of ideological purity over economic

prosperity – to the point of seeing crisis as even worthwhile: out of the chaos there would emerge a ‘Singapore-on-Thames’, freed from the E.U.’s (I would say, watery) ‘social dimension’ and from E.U. financial controls. As often, our ‘Singaporean’ Tories have been aided by the British constitution: something critically defined in 1978 by John Griffith, one of the few left-wing professors then remaining at the London School of Economics, as “no more and no less than what happens.” (Griffith 1979, cf. also Gee and C. McCorkindale) Since the 2016 referendum, May and Johnson have exploited that flexibility, perhaps to destruction, by basing so much on tautological (logically circular) abstractions about Brexit.

Not that the dominant version of neoliberalism within the E.U., i.e. German ‘Ordoliberalism’ or budget balancing, is always more benign than versions dominant in Brexitania: remember Greece...Italy...Spain? Nor were the EU’s vaccinal preparations for a pandemic beyond criticism (Boffey 25.5.2020; Galbraith and Azmanova 23.6.2020). But in practice, the two forms of neoliberalism usually overlapped. Symbolically, both Osborne and Friedrich Merz went from government to roles at the world’s most influential hedge fund, Black Rock. Nevertheless, at least in core territories, the E.U. has so far enforced social rollbacks less speedily than Osborne did in Britain. Even more vital during decades of unprecedentedly global capitalism: any kind of internationalism-from-below may have more chances via E.U. terrain than via Brexitania’s disintegrating archipelago.

For the latter, the BBC has quietly launched a new synonym, “the four nations”, for today’s United Kingdom. Does this designation force everyone to see Northern Irish Unionists, i.e. Protestants, as a ‘nation’ alongside England, Scotland and Wales? (If so, that could re-invigorate a nest of hornets that scratched a few of Britain’s far-leftists off and on from the 1970s: one third of the residents of the Six Counties are Catholic and see themselves as Irish). Either way, the BBC’s phrase somehow rings late-Hapsburgian nowadays.

The second element of Toryism’s long-term ideology – unease or anger at any trading-constellation Britain currently finds itself in and soon perhaps even the WTO – also takes us back to the history of the party. Prominent or not, many Tories (and their ‘Liberal Unionist’ recruits such as Joseph Chamberlain) emphasised trade-questions from the late 1890s. Why seek out such risky terrain? Answer: because you concentrate minds on how to enlarge the national cake. Thereby, you upstage ‘mere sordid squabbles’ about how to divide and distribute it: again ‘good’ myths in preference to ‘bad’. And individually, you may even rise to become the next cake-chef.

Unless you are fixated on your own imperial past, you know that any trade agreement presupposes independent partners, i.e. people from outside your own brain. Nowadays, few if any big ones are likely to be as easily bullied as before the mid-20th century. Either you are top nation, as Britain during the centuries that ended in January 1942 (with Singapore’s fall to the Japanese): subordinating almost any country

to your industrialisation, outgunning rival Euro-Atlantic slave-systems, repeatedly screwing Ireland and India, winning two wars against China to confer the blessings of Free Trade in opium etc., grabbing Egypt as hinterland to the Suez Canal, swallowing most of Southern Africa for minerals – the list is notoriously longer. Or else the top nation tolerates you. Once the U.S. had helped frustrate Britain’s 1956 attempt to reconquer Egypt (the so-called Suez affair), Britain’s rhetoric on its ‘special relationship’ with its strongest ex-colonies was a transparent figleaf for dependence on them, even for ‘independent’ nuclear rocket-systems. And yet that naked junior Emperor proclaimed his foreign policy as blessed with three foci: Atlantic, Commonwealth and European. We will hear Johnson’s Greenwich gesticulations as an attempt to obscure the European with – nostalgic posturings.

Here he was in a Tory political tradition but, this time, with the economic stakes far more actual. From the late 1890s to the 1930s and again after 1945, our Tory trade-reformers were repeatedly slapdash in their relation to reality.

First, slogans such as ‘Empire Free Trade’ or ‘Tariff Reform’ presupposed enthusiasm or at least acquiescence from the ‘White Dominions’ (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, from 1910, ‘White’ South Africa). But that was far from automatic. Worse, trade-agitations threw firms, industries and even regions within the U.K. against each other. And indeed ‘Tariff Reform’ and similar slogans set the Tory party itself in uproar and compounded

its landslide defeat during 1905-6 (till the 1918 General Election, constituencies did not vote simultaneously). Interwar, the same slogans cost votes during the General Elections of 1923 and ‘9, and a bye-election during 1930 (Paddington South, where a Tory lost to an Empire Free Trader, backed by the owners of the *Daily Mail* and *Express*, and leaving Tory premier Stanley Baldwin contemplating resignation). True, the 1932 Ottawa Agreement — to keep tariffs between the Dominions lower than those with anywhere else — satisfied many Tariff Reformers, perhaps most. But others continued agitating through much of the decade. (Baldwin had recently compared tariff-reforming newspaper-owners to “harlots”, for seeking “power without responsibility”).

Second, within the very different situation of the 1950s, Tories tried to prevent or to stunt convergence between France, Italy, West Germany, and the Benelux countries. When ‘Europe’ politely ignored them, they felt slighted. But they retained a fear far older than the Spanish Armada (1588) of anything like a European super-power. Picking the best enemies to fear is part of statecraft. The more the Tories can blame evil Europeans for the economic effect of Brexit and the less they can play them off against each other, the more easily will they revive a ‘good’ myth older than the United Kingdom.

Of course, the Tories’ were neither alone in their Euroscepticism, nor have all Tories been Eurosceptics. On trade policy, Tories remained the prime post-war movers – after Suez, increasingly *towards* Western Europe and

soon the E.E.C. Indeed, when Heath's treaty for entering the E.E.C. came to the Commons for ratification (1972), 291 Tory M.P.s supported it with a mere 39 voting against. Even today, some Tories are Remainers, in internal or external exile from their party. Additionally, from the early 1990s, many of those Tories who labelled themselves 'Eurosceptic' had a line similar nowadays to that of Orbán and Co.: against 'widening' or 'deepening' the E.U., though not for leaving it.

But Labour, too, could assist in its own ways. Of course, during the nine decades before the advent of Tony Blair as leader in 1994, the Labour spectrum was broader than that of Europe's Social Democrats. But most of Labour's policies, whether on racism or imperialism or foreign policy, seldom more than tinkered with Tory architecture. (The main exceptions were sympathy for 'white labour' in South Africa and, consistently or not, distaste for Fascism,). What about Hugh Gaitskell, using his speech as Party leader at the 1962 annual conference to warn that joining the E.E.C. would end "a thousand years of history"? By then, Gaitskell was resoundingly no friend of comrades to the left of him, but when Harold Wilson's government held a referendum in 1975 on whether to remain in the E.E.C. (supported on the day by 67% of those voting), most leftwingers argued for leaving. A special Party conference had voted two-to-one for that, with one-third of Wilson's ministers among the majority. (He himself stayed neutral, more convincingly than Corbyn was able to, over four decades later). During the actual campaign,

leftwingers such as Barbara Castle (very rare among Labour MPs for campaigning against mass-torture in Kenya) even shared a platform with Powell, the Tory M.P. whose April 1968 "Rivers of Blood" polemic against non-white immigrants was still endearing him to many a working-class voter. (This was Powell's most successful 'good' myth, unlike his late-1940s proposal to reconquer India). During 1973 and again during 1974's two close-run General Elections, he had cast himself out from Tory ranks by declaring for Labour as the likelier of the two main parties to call that referendum. Some labour movement leftists, in their very different world, feared that Community as an extension of NATO, i.e. as a cover for 'West German revanchism' and/or for America's Cold Warriors. They therefore saw its very capitalist prosperity as making membership even more dangerous than exclusion. Many other labour activists we can see as reformist 'third worldies': euphoric about formal decolonisation and about the British Commonwealth, now that Apartheid South Africa had been pushed out. Many assumed working-class electors would somehow feel queasy about sharing institutions with Continentals. No wonder Labour remained officially for withdrawal from 'Europe' till 1989.

But the years around 1990 saw Labour and Conservatives exchanging their respective internal balance of stances on Europe. Thatcher began gravitating back towards Euroscepticism, in reaction to Labour leaders' enthusiasm for what was coming to be known as the E.U.'s 'Social Chapter': she saw that as a threat to her constructing a neoliberal Britain. True, in the

short term she got too far ahead of her party here. That was one factor that ended her premiership. (The other was massive popular rage against her poll tax, not least in Scotland where it had been trialled). But in the long, those of her ideologues who had previously, as she, applauded Heath’s negotiation of Britain’s entry to the then E.E.C. in 1973, soon joined those who had disliked it all along. From around 1990, those advocating Britain’s disentanglement from almost anything European (except, of course, from NATO which they saw as tethering any European habit of wandering off into neutrality) agitated as abstractly as we have noted, and no less repetitively. But their very repetitiveness, decade after decade, reverberated. By autumn 2019, “five or six” members of a focus-group “in the back room of a drab hotel in Bury”, Lancashire, (Payne 23.12.2019) could present Johnson with his election-mantra, “Get Brexit Done”. Seldom have mantras been so hollow but, repeated *ad nauseam* in response to questions on anything, it worked: boring promises to end boredom were the main factor triggering a landslide.

The Tory party has long been the main venue for neoliberals and Eurosceptics to sing ever more manic duets. One precondition was that Tories and Labour exchanged their predominant positions. By 1998 with Blair enjoying a big Commons majority, no more than 3% of Labour M.P.s supported withdrawal. The majority now saw the E.U. as hopeful terrain for furthering social justice – precisely the perception we have seen turning Thatcher against it, a decade earlier. The E.U.’s ‘Social Chapter’ might be weak; Gerhard Schröder’s

euphoria over “my friend Tony”’s “Third Way” might signal further dilution of social commitment in both their countries. But even the softest social reformism strengthened optimism, partly because all sides had grown accustomed to reform benefiting from a half-century of economic growth. Blairites therefore embraced Thatcher’s ‘Big Bang’ of deregulation in the City of London. During Labour’s mid-1990s ‘prawn cocktail offensive’ in the City, a leading Blairite, Peter Mandelson, famously described Blair’s New Labour project as “intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich.” And even New Labour’s love of capitalism contrasted with memories of Thatcher: not merely her degradation of unions, hence of working conditions, but also her gutting of many traditional industries, not least coal.

Imperial luck strengthens the impact of ideology

Here, Brexiteers are stuck in their own “economic farrago of leaving the world’s largest free-trade area in the name of more free trade.”³ That whole farrago is ideological and, as I have more than hinted, ultimately irrational. The escalating duet of Brexiteering with much neoliberalism may nauseate even some neoliberals. But neoliberalism remains a useful politico-economic tool in many countries. So neoliberalisation can bulldoze on, even while individuals try to jump out of the cab. Similarly, as noted, with Tory definitions of ‘Brexit’.

But the incoherencies of Brexit underline a basic question: how can truth-content stay so secondary for so long? One precondition is: not to collide too painfully with reality. My first argument has been about the importance of old slogans for Tory answers to the mass insubordination that had climaxed during 1967-74. My second, from here, is about generations of non-collision. My third will be about Covid-19 that has, so far, deepened the political solipsism so long endemic among Brexitanians, notably their rulers.

Britain's unusually long-lasting trading advantages are perhaps one reason why Tories have exhibited a greater yen for such agitations and risks: for so long, economic reality offered so much room for political careerism. Between, very roughly, 1700 and the 1870s, Britain had continued as, let's say, the Silicon Valley of an increasingly worldwide economy: not merely the furthest-flung Empire ever, but also planetary capitalism's chief technological motor, hence rule-setter. Centuries of economic invulnerability (even against Napoleon's Continental System, despite major social unrest) allowed, as we will now see, repeated political irresponsibility over questions of trade.

Here, some 19th-century basics are inescapable, however many historians may deride these as 'potted history'.

With the end of a quarter-century of war against revolutionary France (often a continuation of trade-wars against its absolutist predecessor), Tory landowners insisted on restoring protection for agriculture. The year

1842 saw a general strike (the world's first) that overlapped very much with 'physical force' Chartists (for the People's Charter for one-man-one-vote). After a repressive spasm against strike-leaders, Liberals and Tories competed in conciliating working-class opinion. The Liberals were evolving from Whigs, the other landowner-dominated party. ('Whig' versus 'Tory' had originated from long-half-forgotten polarisations around the 1688 'Glorious Revolution'). They now appealed increasingly to supporters of the free market. Liberal manufacturers and others attracted many 'moral force' Chartists into alliance with an Anti-Corn Law League for free trade in food. In 1846, Tory premier Sir Robert Peel gave in. His reluctant act of realism was speeded by famine in Ireland – though, as a convert to Free Trade, he did nothing to stop that island continuing as a net exporter of food. He turned out to have sprained his party's landed-protectionist backbone, disabling it from office for two decades. Not that there were sobs of working-class pity for landed aristocrats (though, as a novelist, the young Disraeli would have loved to unite aristocrats and workers against manufacturers). Rather, there was nothing to pity aristocrats for: British landowners were not 'due' to suffer from intercontinental food imports till the shipping revolution of the 1880s. The triumph of 'free trade in food' chanced soon after the start of the 19th century's longest boom, burying 'physical force' Chartist warnings that cheaper food would merely encourage employers to cut wages. So the 1840s polarisations over trade were to bring no negative lessons on the risks of changing a country's trade-policies.

Coincidentally, though, the 1880s also highlighted the one-sidedness of Free Trade with countries like Germany or the U.S.A. that had industrialised behind tariff-walls, and whose industries were now – oh, what blasphemy! – often more advanced than Britain’s. So, while the 1840s’ mobilisations with their dire effect on the Tory Party now merited a mere line or two in school history-textbooks, the time seemed ripe for trade-agitation in another, this time Tory, direction. If Britain was no longer the Workshop of the World, surely it could remain the workshop of its Empire, with the White Dominions concentrating on primary exports to the Motherland.

Trouble was, those Dominions were growing restive at such a role. So again, the agitations from the 1890s to the 1930s for Empire Free Trade brought no negative economic lessons either: this time, not because they succeeded during a lucky juncture (as the Liberals’ 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws), but because their success was at best partial (Ottawa 1932, as noted). So, to almost any voter between roughly 1960 and 2019, yarns from the 1840s to 1930s could again be left to the same school textbooks. Patriotically grumbling about Britain’s trading relations was one way of proving how Tory you were. Those grumblings’ relationship to reality might be incomplete. But, as we have seen,, British realities allowed far more than average room for manoeuvre between economic facts and political waffle ,because, as a *Financial Times* prophet called Simon Kuper (brought up in South Africa and then Uganda) diagnosed during September 2019, “many of today’s Britons ... have forgotten that history

can hurt.” (Kuper 19.9.2019)

The Future I: Brexit

We will see how long his present tense survives: coming months may reveal who is “getting ... done” most by Johnson’s Election-triumph of 12th December 2019. Even were ‘Singapore-on-Thames’ a coherent aim, Singapores on almost any other Brexitanian river are surely sci-fi – except, of course, in the sense of further de-regulation of labour-conditions. Conceivably, ‘Singapore’ may also denote ‘technological sovereignty” where Britain leads some merry band of countries against the planetary cybocracies of America and China after loudly rejecting the nearest and weakest of the three candidates, the EU. Yet that version too is a dream: in the commentator Paul Mason’s words, Britain “is not even in the game.” Plausibly, he instances the “abysmal collapse of its home-grown Covid-19 track-and-trace app [...] followed by the revelation that [the government] had invested in unproven satellite technology” (Mason 30.6.20). We are perhaps becoming accustomed to fantasy-based policies.

How is “history” about to “hurt”? How deeply will even Tory brains judder when reality hits them? Does Johnson dream of disengaging from the Hard Brexiteers who helped him into Downing Street? There seem precious few signs of that; but nobody seems sure whether he has ever been capable of average honesty, even to himself nor, as we will see near the end, whether he prizes coherence at all. Maybe the December (in practice, autumnal) 2020 deadline he has announced for ending

his E.U. negotiations is no mere poker-ploy. Maybe it is a promise to Brexiteers to crash out, come what may. Many of his Hard ones are full-throttle Neolibs who believe in a salutary crisis, allowing them to deregulate class-relations back to the 1930's or earlier. We may agree with Paul Mason that the "whole point of Brexit was to deregulate the labour market and reduce social protections and environmental standards, while scapegoating 'migrants' and 'Europe' for everything that went wrong." But he assumes too easily that Johnson and Co. will recognise the pandemic and its economic trauma as barring such endeavours (Mason 6.4.2020). We will also see how far they can divert blame from themselves for Britain suffering Europe's highest death-toll: the first week in July brought a sign that Johnson is seeking one plausible target already (Walker, Proctor and Syal 6.7.2020).

T rue, on winning the December 2019 Election, he did warn his party not to take for granted those working-class voters who had switched from Labour. Yet how he hopes to retain them is anybody's guess: till 3rd February (see below), the sole 'good' myths hinted at were xenophobia – this time against E.U. immigrants –, but no indications of what, beyond that,, may promote class integration after Brexit is 'done'. With regard to xenophobia, Johnson's record of wolf-whistling against veiled Muslim women and dark-skinned children bodes ill. But what his offer of British residency to three million Hong Kong residents (1st July 2020) suggests, is anybody's guess – perhaps his, too. Analogous to Johnsonian opportunism, newspaper-owners know sales rise with the unexpected: most London-based newspapers

have sometimes swiftly swung between EU-immigrants-as-spongers-on-welfare and EU-immigrants-as-saviour-of-whole-sectors-of-our-economy (if we exclude the consistently xenophobic *Express* papers).⁴ So far, top Tories have used racist remarks to claim terrain: as if to a building-site where planning permission is still pending. When Powell ventured further with that 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, Heath instantly sacked him from the shadow cabinet. Johnson currently has Muslims and Hindus in his cabinet. But Powell had been responding to a wave of 'black' immigration. So anti-Chinese racism can perhaps await revival till 'too many' of Johnson's three million begin testing his honesty.

G estures, whether racist or not, may clash with economics. Already, employers in a very wide range of sectors from care-homes to hotels and restaurants have reacted with horror to the government's proposal for an immigration-system that excludes the low-paid. So far, the sole official reply (from Home Secretary Priti Patel) has come strangely from Tory lips: you bosses should raise wages. As Tories have seldom been conspicuous for hiking minimum wages, we can assume her reaction was at best unreflected. So the intention is for British workers to be forced to take more of the worst and least secure jobs, whether or not at wage rates slightly higher than those that, say, Poles or Slovaks have had to accept. As, say, for meat-factories and seasonal agriculture, the dynamics of British hostels and production lines are at least as Covid-friendly as German or ... Singaporean. For Patel to push British workers into these is, in the negative sense, a

‘Singaporean’ prospect. Indeed it is already more than a prospect: some of the British students and others who have volunteered for seasonal farm-work (perhaps responding patriotically to Johnson’s appeal to “Pick for Britain”)⁵ are reporting grimly on hours and wages worse than promised, on abusive foremen one or two of whom, mafia-like, demand percentages, and on accommodation without running water.⁶ The list feels familiar from *Grapes of Wrath* to ... 2020 Germany.

Medically more directly dangerous, men aged between 20 and 40 are thought to be one major vector within Leicester’s late-June increase in Covid-19 cases. Extreme exploitation in “garment factories and food processing plants” has long been notorious. The at least local word for them, “sweatshops”,⁷ was more widely current in the late-19th century. Workers speak furtively of being told to continue coming into crowded workplaces despite suffering symptoms, and not to tell colleagues about a positive test-result. And on that front too, Patel has criticised those Leicester employers.⁸ Again, is she enunciating something like a principle or merely wolf-whistling?

That keyword of Brexit jargon, ‘sovereignty’, is more than rhetoric: it already informs policy. It was behind government plans to separate Brexitanian from Europe’s air-safety authority, to howls of incredulous horror from the industries affected. So far, the horror-struck, whether employers or current and potential employees, seem not to recognise themselves as victims of the salutary shock that at least some government ministers aim to hit them with. Near

the end of February 2020, Mason noted how “the debate over Brexit [had] simply transmuted [from economics] into a debate over sovereignty and immigration” (Mason 24.2.2020). Correct. But, let sovereignty and immigration be the angriest of bulldogs, economics can tug them harshly back on even the longest lead – until perhaps that lead snaps, with results even less predictable.

Worse, in some contexts, the Europeans themselves have used Brexit dogma to disable the basics, not merely of capitalist economics but even of post-1945 defence policy. In 2018, Brexit’s likelihood triggered Britain’s exclusion from the EU’s Galileo programme. This is a system of “twenty-four satellites to provide both an openly available navigation service as well as a highly encrypted positioning platform [...] for public service authorities or the military.” The government promised to replace this with something purely British. That project is now plagued by delays and cost overruns. In March 2020, one unnamed “space industry executive” identified the “problems” as being that the programme had been “launched in the political environment of Brexit, but there has been no discussion among stakeholders about what the requirement is.” A *Financial Times* report summarises the likeliest solution as being to “use openly available signals from US or European satellites to deliver the positioning, while a smaller subset of British satellites would refine and encrypt the data.” That sounds like dependence plus a recipe for occasional blackmail and mutual spying. Meanwhile, one “industry figure” is left lamenting how “the UK lacks the expertise to judge the industry

proposals so everything is taking much longer” (Hollinger and Pickard 1.3.2020). Anyone seeking to disperse dismay among UK firms is reduced to hoping Galileo will obsolesce faster than expected. By then the, as ever, uniquely inventive Brits will of course be ready to bestow the next generation of electronics on a grateful world market.

This seems like fording a stream while overlooking how many stepping-stones have been washed away. In our 21st-century world of large trading-blocks, we may suspect that this most rhetorical of British governments still expects “proud” centuries of Imperial luck to protect it somehow from the realities of Hard Brexit.

But meanwhile, Leicester and Patel have brought us to

The Future II: Covid-19

Who on earth, faced with Brexit *and* Covid *and* a possible world depression, can predict whether Britain’s rulers (let alone ordinary mortals) can, yet again, emerge lucky? Economically, in mid-April the semi-governmental Office for Budget Responsibility sketched its worst-case Covid scenario as Britain’s worst slump since 1709 (i.e., worse than that triggered by the South Sea Bubble of 1720). How would – no, will – such possibilities interact with any version of Brexit? By early-mid August there were unmistakable signs that the pandemic has hit Britain’s economy harder than most European ones.

Whatever any national variations in definitions behind international statistics, by mid-June 2020 Britain’s Covid-19 death-rate per head of population was the third highest in the world, after the USA and Brazil. The disastrous medical effects of the Covid crisis may serve to ‘mask’ Brexit’s economic consequences. Not that such masking is intentional: a culture of deeply ingrained confidentiality and elitism requires no conspiracy theory to explain the incompetence of even Johnson’s government. Worldwide, ideology seems to correlate little, if at all, with competence over Covid-19. What else do, say, Taiwan, Vietnam and (despite well-known local mistakes) Austria, Germany, South Korea and (till mid-August) New Zealand have in common? But malign interactions between the structure of UK governance and neoliberal policies during the 2010s helped worsen the impact of pandemic. Further, pressures of demagoguery made some lethal decisions likelier.

Before hazarding some explanations, what needs explaining?

Blundering for Britain

“Over the last few days” – on 16th March, Johnson was concluding one of his less brief Downing Street press “statements” – “I’ve been comparing notes and talking to leaders around the world and I can tell you that the UK is now leading a growing global campaign amongst all our friends and allies, whether in the G7, the G20, the UN, the IMF – all those bodies in which we play a significant role.” (Spot his omission). “We’re leading a campaign”, he

continued, “to fight back against this disease” (“Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 16 March 2020”).

That typical boast rounded off his grimmest announcement so far: lock-down would come very soon. By whistling so Brexitanically, he was perhaps trying to keep patriotic spirits up amid the pandemic dark: as he would find himself saying four days later, lock-down “seem[ed] to go against the freedom-loving instincts of the British people” (“Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 20 March 2020”). Coming from him, that sentence must have felt to all listeners and readers like further patriotic bluster. But it may signal some awareness from him as a historian that most 18th- and 19th-century Britishers had associated quarantine with a despotic Continent.

In the afterglow of his thoroughly Brexited electoral triumph on 12th December 2019, Johnson picked a cabinet – even more than before – on criteria of loyalty to himself and to Brexit. For too long, he continued to see foreign experiences, even with a new virus, as barely relevant: Covid-19 was simply another potential epidemic that Britain would vanquish in its own way. During January 2020, plans for any hypothetical lockdown were not reassessed. Ministers seemed relaxed: “the clinical advice”, Health Secretary (i.e. Minister) Matt Hancock assured everyone on 24th January, “is that the risk to the public remains low” (Melville 24.1.2020).

Far worse, the 18.1 million passengers who transited or entered via UK airports between 9th January and 23rd March were not in

any sense quarantined or even identified: there was merely ‘guidance’ that non-transiters should self-isolate. A mere 273 were even tested: they had been on three direct flights from Wuhan and on one from Japan. An instance of how insipid that ‘guidance’ was, is that as late as 21st February, with Italy entering pandemic crisis, the government was merely remarking that arrivals from much of that country should self-isolate: they were not listed and were therefore uncheckable. Needless to say, there was no sustained attempt to trace any contacts either. Any contact tracing that did occur was on local initiative and therefore chancy. Perhaps relatedly, during the first four months of 2020, 12% of UK immigration staff had Covid-19 symptoms.

That fateful 23rd March also saw the official withdrawal of even the ‘guidance’. The Commons’s Home Affairs Select Committee sees that as “contribut[ing] to the rapid increase in the spread of the virus and to the overall scale of the outbreak in the UK.” One possible factor was a “very serious” lack of clarity as to “who was making the decisions about borders in March” and on what information or criteria. As the Committee’s Labour chair points out, Britain had made itself “almost unique in having no border checks or quarantine arrangements at that time” (Grierson 29.5.2020; Grierson 5.8.2020).

On 13th March, or ten days before imposing lockdown, the government “stopped issuing guidance at the [U.K.] border to arrivals from specific countries – including from Italy and China – to self-isolate.” True, that was becoming less relevant: during April

arrivals by air were to total a mere 100,000. Yet on 8th June, the government began enforcing 14-day self-isolation on arrivals from anywhere abroad. Since that included countries with current infection-rates below Britain's, it deepens the mystery as to why such exclusion had not been imposed far earlier (Campbell 25.5.2020). That mystery was all the deeper to epidemiologists from, say, New Zealand where prompt quarantining had been fundamental to success in drastically limiting infection: Britain's June spasm, commented Sir David Skegg from Otago, should have been "done in February" (Grierson 10.6.2020). Ensuing weeks saw a routinisation of that absurdity by negotiations with some countries to mutually suspend quarantining. Any mutuality was officially hailed as an "air-bridge", as if tourists returning from holiday were so many boxes of cornflakes in some Great British re-enactment of the Berlin airlift.

The government repeatedly prioritised logistics over strategic necessity. On 13th March, it gave up testing and tracing. The official reason was that the virus was now too widespread for existing tracing systems to cope with. (Already, one batch of 50,000 samples had had to be sent to a laboratory in the USA). That overlooked hundreds of labs ready for work within the UK. (See below for ideological background to that oversight). A day earlier, on 12th March, the official epidemic threat-level had been lowered from "4" (the highest) to "3". The point of this apparently reassuring jargon-shift was to enable the lowering of standards of personal protective equipment ("PPE") for hospital nurses and other personnel

in those hospital wards where there was no Covid-19 or other infectious disease: verbally lessening shortages. Most scandalously: only on 23rd March did lockdown come into effect. That is why I dubbed that date "fateful". Some writers have claimed 30,000 lives could have been saved, had it been imposed a mere week earlier (Scally, Jacobson and Abbas 15.5.2020; Monbiot 19.5.2020).

Whatever the statistical might-have-beens, most commentators seem to agree on a five-figure number: possibly tens of thousands of unnecessary tragedies. As the *British Medical Journal* summarised editorially, government policy amounted to "too little, too late, too flawed."

But this was no matter of mere short-term stupidity. With of course near-total hindsight, we can see Tory policies and habits since 2010 and often long before as smoothing four tangling paths to a British version of viral disaster: privatisation, cuts, secrecy and overcentralisation, and entitlement.

1) Privatisation

The first of these paths is privatisation of state functions, hence their parcelisation, both local (counties, cities, boroughs) and national (U.K-wide or within each of our "four nations"). Under Thatcher and even more during the 2010s, central and local state-functions have, on neoliberal grounds, been plucked, split and shuffled for private profit. In particular, the National Health Service was territorially

and sometimes functionally re-organised into “Clinical Commissioning Groups”. These were soon obliged to commission services from the cheapest bidder, whether in-house or, increasingly, from outside. In or outside the NHS, contracts go to large companies, often global.

Thus “Moriato, a subsidiary of a US healthcare giant” was “contracted to run the government’s [PPE] ...stockpiles.” Relevantly or not, it “had failed to make a profit for eight years before winning a contract, and ... had recently lost several large contracts.” In 2018, it had won the PPE one “to manage and distribute the stockpile, which was valued at more than £500m [sic].” It had moved the whole of that to a “temporary warehouse which was still being decontaminated” after a near-blaze. That two-day event had freed “quantities of asbestos dust” plus at least one other delectable substance. In April, Moriato was sold on to a French company. The supplies, and hence batches despatched from them, were so disordered that the army was called in to sort everything out. Though the “Department [ex-Ministry] of Health and Social Care” “repeatedly said the UK was ‘one of the most prepared countries in the world for pandemics”, hospitals were “turn[ing] to schools for donations of science goggles while some NHS staff [were} ... improvis[ing] masks out of snorkels and kit bought from hardware stores” (Davies 14.5.2020).

Let us take one local example randomly, from the Isle of Skye. By early summer, no inhabitant had tested positive. Exceptionally though, at Home Farm care home in the island’s

capital of Portree, ten residents had died of Covid-19. A company called HC-One ran that home along with “over fifty” in “Scotland and a great many more in England. It is owned by Libra Intermediate, based in ... Jersey and Libra Intermediate is owned by FC Skyfall LP, based in ... the Cayman Islands. HC-One’s highest paid director earns £808,000 a year.” By the start of May, 30 of Home Farm’s 34 residents had tested positive, as also 27 of its staff. An unstated proportion of the latter were part-timers, who did not live locally and were also working elsewhere. Though the origins of the Home Farm epidemic remain unclear, one asymptomatic carrier among them could have sufficed. In the words of one union officer, private homes had “been running on minuscule budgets, cutting corners and the crisis has just highlighted the disease that has been austerity for years.” By July, care homes accounted for 1,934 of Scotland’s 4,155 Covid-19 deaths.

Whether for neoliberally ‘fair’ reasons – and conceivably (to speculate) after individual or corporate donations (direct or not) to the Conservative Party – names of many big contractors can crop up in almost any field: Serco’s from, say, prisons to Shetland ferries to railways to detention-centres for deportees. Google its name and begin your “career” on most continents in “Defence, Transport, Justice, Immigration, Healthcare [including “Psychological Services”] and Citizen Services.” By June, it was “recruiting 10,000 of the new 25,000 contact-tracers after being awarded an initial fee of £45.8m[illion], which could rise to £90m.” In an e-mail, mistakenly circulated to too many staff but never denied, its “chief executive”

Rupert Soames rejoiced, not over those sums but strategically: if the project succeeded, “it will go a long way to cementing the position of private sector companies in the public sector supply chain. Some of the [anti-privatisation] nay-sayers recognise this, which is why they will take every opportunity to undermine us.” He was soon dealing with farcical elements in the start-up of testing and tracing, as we will see when we come to overcentralisation. Not even the most evil “nay-sayers” could have dreamt those up.

Soames was correct that the stakes are high. As we are about to see, months of tragic farce were to ensue. During September, the critical economist Aditya Chakraborty summarised the key paradox: “The system that is labelled ‘NHS test and trace’ has hardly anything to do with the NHS. Each fragment of the system is contracted out to big private companies that often turn to subcontractors. So Deloitte handles the huge Lighthouse laboratories that can’t get through the tests, while Serco oversees the contact-tracing system that regularly misses government targets ... [for an] initial fee of £108 million. ... Then there are the consultants” such as McKinsey who received “£560,000 for six weeks’ work creating the ‘vision, purpose and narrative’ of the new public health authority” (Chakraborty 17.9.2020). Presumably those three words denote the grandiloquently-named “National Institute for Health Protection”, created during August by merging “Public Health England” (which ministers were seeking to scapegoat for as many fiascos as possible) with NHS Test and Trace.

All that verbal confetti stores up more than problems for unhappy newsreaders. It gives a glimpse of how far the pandemic has accelerated those Tory versions of neoliberalism that offer “jobs for the boys” and girls, sometimes to the posh and ideologically impeccable. The head of the merged body is Baroness “Dido” Harding. Ennobled by her Oxford friend Cameron and honed at Harvard Business School, she had met her husband (now a Tory M.P. with connections as landowning-aristocratic as hers) while both were “working at McKinsey.” She had since late 2017 headed “NHS Improvement”, responsible for all NHS hospitals and for many others. Her direct experience in healthcare was of course zero; but her performance outside the sector had not been universally reassuring either: she had for many years been CEO of TalkTalk when, in late 2015, a cyberattack had milked that company of the “personal and banking details of up to four million customers.” When asked whether these were encrypted, she had at least come clean: “The awful truth is that I don’t know.” She had lasted at TalkTalk for a further two years, leaving so as “to focus more on her public service activities.” No mean horse-rider herself, she remained on the Board of the Jockey Club, responsible for organising big race-meetings such as the Cheltenham Festival (*Wikipedia*. “Dido Harding”; *Wikipedia*. “John Penrose”, [accessed 18.8.2020]). In early 2020 that was one of two or three massively attended sporting-events that, being held during the final weeks before lockdown despite many a warning, are widely blamed for widening the pandemic. Whatever her personal role in the decision to go ahead, she certainly shared some corporate responsibility.

On the ground, grim farce multiplied. By 21st April, there were, on paper, twenty-seven testing-centres. But Unison (one of the relevant unions) and the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing (both of which now see themselves as unions) complained of care and NHS staff “having to drive hundreds of miles to reach their nearest [test] sites.” One leading health bureaucrat irrefutably added (as the BBC summarised her) that some NHS staff were “missing out because ... too unwell to drive.” Given that these centres were mostly drive-in, they excluded people arriving on foot or public transport. (The latter, given how confused the government line on masking remained into late July, was anyway highly inadvisable). By mid-April, the government was claiming an all-UK testing capacity of 40-thousand tests per day, and blaming the total of merely half that on “lack of demand.” Its testing focus was now on “key workers who are off work either because they have symptoms or someone in their household does” (*BBC News* 21.4.2020).

Those who reached a testing-centre (run of course by Serco or some similar company) were sometimes due for further shocks. “After ringing in with symptoms” one care-worker was told by her management to “get a test.” Her job entitled her to a test “at one of the government’s networks of drive-in regional testing-centres.” Here, she reported, “none of the workers seemed to know what they were doing.

They resembled more security guards than medical personnel.” After she had waited an hour, “a worker told her to wind her window down but ‘not

to move’ or ‘try to grab the testing kit.’

She threw the kit, gloves and tissues and asked me to park up again. ...

I then had to do the test myself reading the instruction, which was confusing. I don’t think I swabbed myself properly (BBC News 1.5.2020).

At whatever speed, testing-staff were themselves becoming aware of the absurdities of the system they were administering. By autumn at the latest, some were responding by multiplying those for the sake of would-be testees. Even after the system had had months to sort itself out, not only were some people with Covid-like symptoms being officially sent to testing-centres absurdly far away (while the hapless Health Minister was measuring “the average distance travelled ... [as] 5.8 miles.”). But many on the ground heard or knew differently. Thus, when one poorly Yorkshireman drove to his nearest testing-centre, he found “a distressed member of staff... turning away the cars in front of mine.

He asked if I had an appointment and informed me that ‘the government’ had said they could not accept people without appointments. He acknowledged the [testing] centre was not busy, and seemed fed up. ... [But another] staff member advised him to park in a layby and try to make a booking online. A supervisor then came over and said to use a fake postcode ... [as if from] elsewhere. ... He went on to tell the rest of the cars waiting in the layby. I tried postcodes in Preston, Manchester, Doncaster, Leeds, Guildford and Sheffield before finding an appointment using a postcode from Glasgow

I was then allowed straight in as there were no queues. A member of staff approached me and asked for the postcode I had used so that they could pass that on to other people. I obliged. ... The whole thing was farcical. (Busby 15.9.2020)

His (negative) result came within 24 hours. “You’ve got to hack the system”, he concludes concisely, “to get a test.” Rightly, though, he was soon wondering whether he might have helped boost bureaucrats’ perception of Prestwick as a centre of infection.

Tracing without testing is unnecessarily chancy; but testing without tracing is absurdly ignorant. And privatisation tended to break both those links. There were, in the words of one of “nearly 70” virologists protesting on 3rd August against their laboratories being “sidelined”, “always new tests being developed. ...almost as a sort of magic bullet... It’s more [about] ... getting stuff out to actually reassure the public rather than the more boring but really hard work of doing proper contact tracing.” No wonder they felt “excluded from discussions” about the “DnaNudge ... tests that the government is contracting to buy” (Boseley 4.8.2020).

At humbler levels, the absurdity was clear by mid-May, when Hancock proudly reported the total of volunteer testers as exceeding his initial target of 18,000. They were, he boasted, undergoing “rigorous training”. More or less during the same days, some of those volunteers were reporting anything but rigour: they too were becoming aware they were involved in farce. One of them had

applied for a job as a ‘Work at Home – Customer Service Advisor’ for £10 an hour. ... He got an e-mail checking he had the right software ... and ... took part in a day of online training run by [a company called] Sitel ... where there was one trainer for about 100 people.

Predictably,

the first hour and a half ... was just people writing ‘I can’t hear anything.’

The trainer said [these problems] were normal ...

He said at one point ‘does anyone know what this job is about?’ No one really had any idea.

After the full day of training, people were still asking the most basic things. Someone also asked what they should do if they spoke to someone whose relative had died of the virus and the [instructor] said we should look on YouTube where there are lots of videos about empathy and sympathy.

He spent the next day, as instructed: awaiting an e-mail on his £10 per hour, vainly (Perraudin 20.5.2020). “Day after day”, another recruit reported, “I’ve personally sat in my garden sunbathing, and drinking and chilling with my pals for two-and-a-half weeks now, occasionally going inside to stop my computer going to sleep.” By June, Britain’s test-and-trace system, launched with loud fanfare, was not expected to be fully functional till late September. By then, as ever, it would be “world class”, according to its chief operator, a “senior banker” who himself was due to leave for a top job at Santander. Rhetoric and reality were so far apart, that Hancock was “laugh[ing] off claims ... that he had rushed to introduce the system

amid the political row over the alleged breach of lockdown rules by Dominic Cummings” (Marsh 4.6.2020). (We will see how that breach was more than “alleged”).

Some of this may feel familiar to many EU-based readers. But they can usefully glance across to Brexitania to glimpse where everything is heading.

2) Cuts to Local Government and Public Services

By 23rd March, the *BMJ* article quoted above (Scally, Jacobson and Abbas 15.5.2020) thunders, “almost two months of potential preparation and prevention time had been squandered. ... How did a country with an international reputation for public health ... get it so wrong?” One set of reasons was that the 2012 Health and Social Care Act had abolished the often powerful Health Protection Agency as well as “regional public health teams” and “observatories”. Their “remnants” had been “incorporated into a slimmed down” and weaker organisation, Public Health England. True, some local functions had been “transferred back to local authorities”. But the rest of the decade brought massive cuts to local government in general.

There has been a steep drop in medical personnel of every kind and in publicly-funded hospital-provision. (Private hospitals, mostly new, are another matter). There have also been cuts in related services that used to back the NHS up: in home care, day-centres

and other social provision by local authorities. The number of general practitioners has also slumped. So sufferers prefer more and more to go directly to a hospital’s ‘Accident and Emergency’ department. What used to be annual winter flu-crises have lengthened towards year-round ones. Also lengthened, of course, has been the average time spent by patients on beds in ‘A and E’ corridors. That background is now giving epidemiologists nightmares over the effects of low (or even lower) uptake of flu-vaccination coinciding with a second wave of Covid-19: again, a problem not peculiar to Britain, but notably ominous there.

During recent years, there had been much discussion of ‘bed blockers’, i.e. mostly elderly patients no longer needing hospital treatment for their original complaint, but who were now losing the ability to care for themselves at home without visits from (decreasingly available) home carers. These people now had nowhere else to go outside their hospital bed. During years of growing shortages in the NHS, they became known as ‘bed blockers’. Multi-bed wards remain something of a British tradition. They are also another possible vector (viral multiplier): my healthily 95-year-old mother, hospitalised “just in case” after a trivial accident, died of *Clostridium Difficile* in 2006. At what turned out to be our last meeting and before she caught it, I counted at least 22 beds in her ward. Once the pandemic arrived, any build-up of irritation at bed-blockers was likely to become lethal, particularly for some of those who were *not* blocking beds, because lucky enough to have found places in care-homes. Government pressured such homes to re-admit those of

their residents who had been hospitalised for other reasons, who were now well again and showing no Covid symptoms. The problem was, this being early-2020 Brexitania, they had never been tested. Many went on to develop symptoms after returning to those homes (see Portree, perhaps).

We have seen how few staff-members at Portree and elsewhere were living in. Here, although we shall see that the government had known about the problem since late March, official advice verged on the meaningless: employers should help staff “minimise risk of picking up Covid-19 outside of work.” Worse, many were paid by the hour. Hence they received no sick pay to help persuade them to stay at home when they or any co-habitants were suffering Covid symptoms. Advice almost as meaningless was a belated government suggestion that “subject to maintaining safe staffing levels, [care-home] providers should employ staff to work at a single location” (Booth 28.5.2020). Any “should” was powerless against a reality where part-time employment was indispensable to a company’s business plan, and where researchers could find indirectly employed staff “1.58 times more likely” to catch Covid-19 “than those in homes that did not use such staff” (Siddique 3.7.2020). Hence care-homes’ over-representation in pandemic-statistics: the UK’s “proportion of care-home deaths” was computable during early July to be “13 times higher than in Germany” (Walker, Proctor and Syal 6.7.2020).

3) Secrecy and Overcentralisation

Scandalously, many or most problems had long been foreseen, very near the top. Yet only in 2020 was a certain “Exercise Cygnus” revealed to have taken place as long ago as October 2016, with its official report circulated during July 2017 to “all major government departments, NHS England” and to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish administrations. In the words of *Guardian* reporters whose threats of legal action seem to have triggered the report being leaked, Cygnus included “four dummy meetings of Cobra, the government’s emergency response system, over three days as ministers and officials were tasked with imagining the UK was facing” a flu pandemic, obviously on the scale of 1918-19, as up to 400,000 deaths were posited.

True, no-one could be expected to extrapolate from recent experience with other Corona viruses such as SARS and MERS into basing Cygnus, not on flu with its familiar vectors though variable lethality, but on something like the virus whose attributes are still becoming clear with Covid-19 (perhaps alongside less visibly virulent cousins): half-understood but multiple vectors, a perhaps large proportion of symptomless spreaders, some super-spreaders, occasionally radical effects in the short and perhaps long term on unexpected bodily organs, and of course an unknown speed of mutation, hence an unknowable duration of immunity after recovery or vaccination. Yet even in the doubtful light of Cygnus’s inevitably ignorant re-run of the flu-pandemic of 1918-19, the *Guardian* can summarise the report as “recommend[ing] that the social care system

needed to be able to expand ... and that money be ringfenced to provide extra care and support to the NHS”. Needless to say, neither of these recommendations were carried out.

Trouble was, Cygnus entered Britain’s culture of secrecy. Its “report”, to quote a Department of Health response when *Guardian* journalists made that “freedom of information request” to see it, “needed to be kept secret so as to inform policy development.” Apparently, the Department housed not a glimmer of an idea that “policy formation” might benefit from the experience of those near or on what was coming to be called “the front line”. Relevant organisations such as Care England or the “Association of Directors of Adult Social Services” were kept in the dark about Cygnus till May 2020. As a result, lessons were not learnt, and preparations not enhanced. Yet Cygnus had shown that

Some organisations’ plans were [already in 2016] severely out of date and sometimes referred to coordinating their response with bodies that no longer existed. Other organisations were ... relying on an institutional memory of fighting the 2009 swine-flu pandemic that was slowly fading.

Coordination between hospitals and care homes was anyway “extremely difficult ... partly because the latter were “almost entirely privately run”, as we have seen. Blissfully optimistic, PHE was, into March, still predicting that care home-residents were “very unlikely” to catch Covid-19.⁹ Again, 30th April had seen PHE being informed of an unknown number of agency care-workers as spreaders between homes, but doing nothing to flag this

up during the following fortnight. Liz Kendall, as Labour’s Shadow Health Minister, recalled Johnson being informed while in the full glare of Prime Minister’s Questions on 25th March (Booth 18.5.2020).

Not only the results of Exercise Cygnus were kept from those working on the ‘frontlines’ as well as the general public. Still at the apex of scientific influence, on 2nd August, the Nobel-prizewinning Paul Nurse brought us to what he, as so many, call “secrecy”. Decisions on Covid-19 were, in Nurse’s vocabulary, “too often shrouded in secrecy”, partly so as to boost chances for Johnson’s cabinet to dodge blame for mistakes. Early on, by ineptly or dishonestly claiming that all necessary tests were already being done, they “seemed not to want to admit that they weren’t prepared, that they were unable to do the testing properly, because that would have been an admission of failure from square one.” Nurse, as head of the Francis Crick Institute and former President of the Royal Society, certainly valued debate – in clear contrast to some members of the government. He was summarised as bemoaning the paralysing confidentiality around “the basis on which [decisions] were reached.” This had blocked mechanisms for “challeng[ing] emerging policy.” It had also “fuelled poor decisions and put public trust at risk.” Nurse was backed by Professor Chris Higgins who proposed that scientists should have “their discussions in public, all the data being made available immediately, so people can see for themselves all the information ... available for ministers to make decisions” (Sample 2.8.2020).

Concerns regarding the reliability of tests, and the shortages of PPE, too, were to be kept out of the public eye. And the validity of the tests may still sometimes be questionable. At the start of June, one Sir David Norgrove who heads the UK Statistics Authority warned Hancock that the “aim” of the official figures for tests “seems to be to show the largest possible number of tests, even at the expense of understanding.” He was summarised accusing “the government of mixing up the number of tests carried out with testing kits sent out by post.” There were, he warned, “no data on how many of the tests posted out are in fact successfully completed.” (Referring back to our instance from a drive-in testing centre, we can say some kits were being chucked in through the window). There was no clarity either as to how many people were being tested more than once. And in the final statistics – surely one of the aims of the whole exercise – “many of the key numbers make little sense without recourse to the technical notes, which are themselves hard to follow” (Boseley 2.6.2020). Worse, statistics were sometimes suppressed. During mid-May, the “Hospital Consultants’ and Specialists’ Association” criticised the “shroud of secrecy” about the proportion of tests producing incorrect results. Between 25 and 29% of swab-tests were producing false negatives. This was all the more serious for the HCSA’s members and colleagues, as one study for the body running the NHS, Public Health England (PHA), had just found hospital to have been the place of infection for 20% of in-patients and 90% of staff (Campbell 25.5.20).

“Doctors and nurses”, according to the “Doctors’

Association of the UK” (DAUK) had, by the end of March, faced “‘threatening’ e-mails, the possibility of disciplinary action and in two cases being sent home from work” after revealing their concerns about PPE shortages.

An intensive care doctor who voiced unease about facemasks was told by their hospital that ‘if we hear of these concerns going outside these four walls your career and your position here will be untenable.’ ... A consultant paediatrician in Yorkshire was told in an email from their hospital that their social media output was being monitored and they should be careful. A GP who appealed to her community on social media for more supplies of PPE was then barred by her local NHS clinical commissioning group from speaking out. ‘I was being warned I wasn’t toeing the party line,’ she said. (Campbell 1.4.2020)

Less than a week later, the DAUK had gathered “500 reports from 193 hospital trusts and GP practices”, according to which “72% of doctors [could] not get hold of” the right kind of mask, “77% report[ed] shortages of long-sleeved gowns” and 44% could not rely on timely access to “a visor or goggles”. Doctors allegedly felt “bullied and shamed”, and others were “being told to hold their breath to avoid getting infected because of persistent shortages” of PPE. A BMA survey “of over 1,500 medics” found that “over half felt pressurised to work” despite PPE shortages. One hospital doctor described the quality of the PPE being provided as “like a tick-box exercise just for psychological reassurance.”

On 22nd March, the chair of the DAUK gathered all aspects into four words: the

government was abandoning NHS staff like “lambs to the slaughter.” His phrase instantly echoed across the media from the *Guardian* to the BBC to even the *Sun*, and resounded so much further as not to need footnoting. “One GP” who felt “betrayed by the government” brings us back to the chaos of secrecy: he diagnosed the whole ruling apparatus as “not transparent enough to say ... they do not have the ideal supplies” (Campbell 7.4.2020).

The culture of secrecy goes hand in hand with increasing overcentralisation. Important information kept confidential leaves not only those working on the front line and the general public in the dark, it also inhibits effective policy-making at levels other than central government, including the civil service as well as local councils as power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of loyal members of cabinet and their advisers. Cummings, aided (so far) by Brexit Minister Michael Gove, has introduced a record number of “special advisers” and other aides whose focus is far less on the ministries they are officially attached to than on coordinating them for the Brexit project and now, sometimes also, for limiting any damage to the government from Covid-19. The “apolitical” civil servants, a treasured cliché since the 1860s, are being by-passed and increasingly excluded. Dave Penman, who heads their semi-trade union (the First Division Association), speaks of the new appointees as enjoying “little security of employment” and “being directly managed by No 10 through” Cummings. He reports that they have to attend weekly meetings chaired by Cummings, whose “conduct” of them was “overly confrontational.”

They were seen as “No 10 narks”, there to spy on ministers, civil servants and other advisers. After winning the referendum, we are told that Cummings “left politics to advise an artificial intelligence start-up (which subsequently won lots of NHS contracts ...).” But, on becoming Premier, Johnson instantly brought him and many other “Vote Leave” veterans into Downing Street. Cummings’ underlings are said to view him, not merely as a loyal superior demanding utter loyalty from them, but also as almost messianically indispensable to Brexit and now to policy on Covid-19. Hence his otherwise inexplicable survival when he was pilloried for defying his own lockdown-regulations, as we will see (Geoghegan 14.6.2020; Syal 24.6.2020).

Meanwhile, how many senior civil servants have become too battered, anxious, forgetful or genuinely inexperienced to organise even the proverbial “booze-up in a brewery”?¹⁰ That ancient joke ceases to amuse. Tensions with Cummings led to the sacking of one aide to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sadiq Khan: one day in August 2019, Cummings simply summoned an armed security-man to march her out of her Downing Street office. Suspicions of wobbly loyalty to Johnson and to Cummings led to Khan’s own resignation on 13th February 2020, a mere few weeks before budget-day. For Cummings (and Johnson?) his crowning sin was refusal to instantly sack all his own five advisers when Cummings told him to.

The culture of confidentiality between and often within levels (with resultant tradings of blame) has made coordination and basic coherence harder, let alone contingency-

planning and democratic control. Only in late-mid July were local councils empowered, with great fanfare, to impose local lockdowns. But worse (to linger briefly on local councils), coordination presupposes something coherent at the local level to coordinate. Even a decade or two ago, there were perhaps thousands of local civil servants with some experience or idea of how to organise in their areas against medical emergencies.¹¹ But now there are far fewer. For decades, local government had become increasingly hooked on central finance (“government grants”), thanks to stalemates over the staple form of local sourcing: “rates” and, since 1992, the “council tax” are graduated on property-values. Under whatever name, they have always been effective for mobilising property against local spending, social not least. But now a decade of centrally imposed “austerity” has joined worldwide trends (towards electronic and out-of-town shopping) in wreaking havoc on every conceivable sector, not least in those services that assist the NHS. More than eight out of ten of larger councils (131 by late-mid June) found themselves on financial cliff-edges of various heights (Proctor 23.6.2020 and 11.6.2020). If this was the predicament of most of those with managerial responsibilities at any level, we can easily imagine what treatment anyone on the front line might expect. That their readiness to sacrifice their and their families’ lives was applauded every week by millions, soon including Johnson and his ministers, was irrelevant.

In the context of both Brexit and Covid-19, worries about Tory centralism are growing in both Cardiff and Edinburgh.¹² Neither problem

is Uniting the Kingdom. Locally, the impact could add up to lethal farce. Let the *Financial Times* of 1st July summarise the saga of Leicester during the previous weeks:

Communication has been shabby. Government ministers were talking 10 days ago of a surge in the city and possible reimposition of tougher restrictions – without, apparently, consulting local leaders. [Sir] Peter Soulsby, the city mayor, said he was finally emailed [sic] ‘cobbled together’ recommendations from Whitehall in the middle of the night. City authorities knew deaths and hospital admission figures were creeping up but could only cross-reference those with testing-data when the central government finally provided it, after days of pleading.

Testing-and-tracing was indispensable, but conducted chaotically. The government insisted on the absurdest centralisation, despite those “hundreds” of existing labs. It suffered further strain from unusual conceptual hair-splittings imposed from Whitehall. At the time of writing, tests are divided into two categories. In the official jargon, “Pillar 1” now (after, as seen, many tragic weeks of delay during the early spring) covers hospital patients and workers plus other healthcare workers. “Pillar 2” denotes tests of anyone else. The latter are, to the extent that problems in the hospital and care-sector are being sorted out, becoming far more numerous. But local authorities have often tardily discovered a requirement to sign data-sharing agreements before central authorities will reveal the whereabouts and identities of those testing positive. One local “public health

director, who asked not to be named” described this as “like looking for a needle in a haystack” (Sample 1.7.2020; Weaver, Otte and Bland 1.7.2020; Booth, Sabbagh, Stewart and Kirk 1.7.2020; Kirk, Booth and Sabbagh 1.7.2020).

Thus, the chaos of secrecy interacted with that of overcentralisation. This is one reason why grand announcements from Whitehall or the Commons were followed by little or nothing. Bad coordination between governmental levels was nothing new. Johnson’s yen for demagogic phrases merely spotlighted it better than the tight-lipped May had.

4) Entitlement and Herding

Ruling groups feel entitled to rule, more or less. Usually, this is particularly true of Britain’s. Two very different Tories’ treatment of a pre-Covid disaster focussed attention on their party as the fulcrum of this. In the midst of a General Election, this looked terminal – but for no more than a few hours.

Britain’s wealthiest local authority, the Tory-dominated Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, had lined the façade of a tower block called Grenfell Tower with a handsome but cheap alloy. One night in June 2017, as some readers may recall, that lining had accelerated flames up the façade. Not least because there was only one staircase, Fire Brigade advice (repeated many times to residents who were soon phoning with flames or smoke in sight) was to “stay put” till rescued – even though the topmost floors were beyond reach of any ladder. Like anywhere

in the Borough’s working-class areas, the Tower included an above-average number of people of, in the current phrase, ‘minority ethnic background’.

Two years later, and barely more than five weeks before the General Election of December 2019, Johnson’s Commons party manager and fellow-Old Etonian Jacob Rees-Mogg, son of a former editor of *The Times*, suddenly conjured up Grenfell’s ghosts. Needless, he implied in a BBC radio-interview that he – unlike the 72 who had perished that night – would have had the “common sense” to disregard that Fire Brigade advice. True, within twelve hours, he was offering “a profound apology” – and remained silent till Election Day. Yet within hours, a pro-Brexit backbencher, Andrew Bridgen – audibly lacking Jacob’s posh accent – resurrected what Rees-Mogg had just been trying to re-bury. When a BBC interviewer summarised Moggian logic as “I wouldn’t have died because I would have been cleverer than the people who took the fire-brigade’s advice”, Bridgen spluttered: “But we want very clever people running the country, don’t we? ... That’s a byproduct of what Jacob is and that’s why he is in a position of authority.” Clearly, like perhaps most Tories, he still believes in hierarchies of intelligence: less than a year earlier when some of his colleagues had called him “as thick as [brewers’] mash”, his pain had been so unbearable, that he had briefly threatened to vote against the government (Kate Proctor: “Rees-Mogg sorry for saying Grenfell victims lacked common sense”; Kate Proctor, Robert Booth: “Stormzy joins backlash against Rees-Mogg over Grenfell apology”; Simon Murphy:

“Jacob Rees-Mogg opts for low profile amid Grenfell remarks fury”; brief soundbite from the BBC *Today* Programme, all via *Guardian*, 5.11.2019; Wikipedia). Incidentally or not, even conventional definitions might have ranked one or two Grenfell victims as “intelligent”: they included, for instance, a 24-year-old Gambian-born photographer called Khadja Saye, who was becoming known at the British pavilion of the Venice Biennale.

Those two interviews speak – not merely the proverbial “volumes” but whole encyclopaedias of Britain’s class-history. Where Mogg had let himself be caught viewing most people as more stupid than himself, Bridgen had underlined the function of elitist arrogance: a claim of entitlement to rule (and, implicitly, that one’s own life is nearly always more ‘important’ than others’). Entitlement rests on an assumption that, if person ‘x’ is cleverer than person ‘y’, then ‘y’ should allow ‘x’ to make most or all decisions for both. Sometimes, of course, ‘y’s’ stupidity will extend to contesting that entitlement: those times are to be postponed for as many generations as possible. Tact is one precondition for postponement; Mogg’s mask of tact had slipped, all too publicly. The clumsy Bridgen, trying to help him put it back on, had loudly snapped its elastic. Of course, elitism is no absolute precondition for entitlement –

For the Bridgens of the Brexitanian cosmos, the converse of our logic is no less seductive: the fact that ‘x’ usually does rule proves entitlement by superior intelligence. That is why elitism boosts elite-members’ ‘normal’ feeling of entitlement. On the evening Cummings says he

returned from his controversial trip to Durham, about which more below, he still had sufficient energy to tamper with a blogpost he had ‘posted’ on 4th March 2019 about a “possible threat of coronavirus”. He narrowed that last noun by inserting the word “Sars” before it. Even were that insertion by some friend rather than by him, its effect was to make him uniquely prophetic among at least amateur virologists. The same insertion of “Sars” anyway altered the original focus of his blog: on an article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* about possible releases from virological laboratories. By spring 2020, that topic was a red-hot one in propaganda wars between Washington and Beijing. Whatever the rights and wrongs there, Cummings was surely implying he was, within the dimensions of a looming Pacific Cold War, soundly anti-Chinese. More weightily for us here, it also made him a scientist among scientists, an example of his self-image as extraordinary.

In England if not in Scotland, those 15- or 16-year-old apprentice members of the elite who do not choose to specialise in maths or science, know precious little about either – and least of all about researchers’ conceptual uncertainties. That ignorance is seldom seen as disabling, even though it may have helped unbalance Johnson’s policy-discussions on Covid-19, at least during the first half of 2020. Worse, it can strengthen the overconfidence associated with “entitlement”. We can plausibly see it as one factor in the stasis in government policy during January and much of February 2020, i.e. the crucial months in which individual Chinese researchers and soon the WHO were pleading with foreign colleagues to prepare

for the worst. As editor of *The Lancet*, Richard Horton claims to have published five papers during January on the need for “test-trace-isolate”, to no avail.

An elitist estimate of the populace as stupid seemed to play into the government’s reluctance to take effective action during the early stages of the pandemic. One specialist, John Edmunds, sees official reluctance to heed his “very serious” warnings about the imminence of the pandemic in Britain as caused by “a bit of a worry in terms you [sic] don’t want to unnecessarily panic people.” You could hear that worry on 16th April, when Hancock almost desperately pleaded to a BBC interviewer on the morning *Today* programme – backed some hours later by his junior minister Nadine Dorries – that any mention of an exit-strategy would confuse the “lock-down” message.

The most unusual features of Britain’s to Covid-19 are somehow (i.e. in ways still not fully revealed) linked to the phrase “herd immunity”. Somewhere in the background of these discussions lay a tension, understandable in any country, between epidemiological precautions (lockdowns, etc) and economic prosperity. The logic of such “immunity” ran: infecting, say, 60% of the population would mean the infection was less likely to reach the rest. Unfortunately, that percentage varied with the infectiveness of each illness, and the complexities of Covid-19 were at first underestimated. Worse, extending the phrase from animals to humans presupposed that the symptoms were nearly always mild. The phrase clearly equates humans with animals: everyone

knows the elitist phrase “the common herd”. Why alternative words were not sought is a mystery: why not “crowd” or “societal”?

For too long, Vallance, Whitty and probably others around Johnson assumed Covid-19 would be “an annual seasonal infection”, as Vallance phrased it to a BBC “Today Programme” interviewer, early on 13th March. For that, some societal level of immunity might well be a desirable aim for the long term. True, that level was increasingly recognised as unknown, given growing awareness that Covid-19 boasted unfamiliar aspects. But – never mind: the more its spread could be engineered to occur during spring and summer, the less the NHS would – again, presumably – be overloaded during winter 2020-21. (We have seen how overload had become particularly spectacular at that time anyway). In public, the talk was of “flattening the curve” or “broadening the peak” in the total number of infections. But, in the same interview, Vallance did at last go public. He linked his clever flattenings and broadenings to that phrase that now exploded in official faces: “herd immunity” (Steward and Busby 13.3.2020).

The phrase comes from the world of vaccines. But Covid-19 was a disease for which thousands of specialists had just begun desperately *searching* for a vaccine. “I’m an epidemiologist”, one researcher spluttered in a *Guardian* headline. “When I heard about Britain’s ‘herd immunity’ ... plan, I thought it was satire”: he might have said “Pythonesque”. His Harvard colleagues, he reported, “assumed” it to be “an example of the wry humour for which ... [Britain] ... is famed. ... Even though

the mortality rate is quite low, a small fraction of a very large number [of people infected] is still a large number.” Also, those Covid patients who became seriously ill “tended to remain so for a long time, which increases the burden” on the NHS. The UK, he concluded, should not be trying to create herd immunity, that will take care of itself. ... This” was “not a tornado, it is a hurricane” (Hanage 15.3.2020).

One seismic incident of the elitist entitlement that shaped policy boomeranging was Cummings’s very personal press conference in the unusual location of the Downing Street Rose Garden. He felt the media to be crucifying him for driving his wife and four-year-old son from London to Durham City: there, while she and he himself got through their own Covid symptoms, his parents would care for the child. He also felt perfectly entitled to drive another few tens of miles to Barnard Castle (where, unfortunately, some ordinary mortal was mean enough to recognise him), so as to “test his eyes.” Throughout those journeys, he was blatantly defying rules he had recently helped formulate and which millions were obeying, often at emotional costs similar to those he was avoiding. But clearly, obedience was beneath the dignity of such a rule-setting genius – unlike for one or two other medical advisers who had resigned after lesser infringements. The political shock of Cummings’s trips is still reverberating among millions of people.¹³

Incompetence and elitism coupled disastrously with fear of being seen within two metres of the EU: “between February 13 [sic] and March 30, Britain missed a total of eight conference

calls or meetings about the coronavirus between EU heads of state or health ministers – meetings that Britain was entitled to join”, and why it also “missed a deadline to participate in a common purchase scheme for ventilators, to which it was invited. ... Johnson’s spokesman blamed an administrative error.”¹⁴ Worse the discussions were broader: about procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) in general (Rankin 30.3.2020; but Boffey and Booth 13.4.2020; Wintour and Boffey 21.4.2020). The excuse has been refuted. Surely, a government of Brexiteers was also snubbing the Continentals. Individual ministers may have feared to be seen bringing their policies within one-and-a-half metres of any Continental ones.

This is all the more striking when, in other respects, the government is prepared to wobble demagogically so as not to seem arrogant. Thus Sunak’s budget of 11th March is the most expansive since Chancellor Norman Lamont’s in 1992 – which helped expel the £-sterling from the then club of top E.U. currencies, and Lamont into obscurity. In 2020, by contrast, Covid-19 was not singling Britain out, but all of the world’s economies more or less simultaneously. Sunak, appointed on 13th February 2020, inherited a decade of George Osborne’s policy of ‘austerity’. But now Britain’s own unprecedentedly steep falls in production necessitated screechingly sharp U-turns in fiscal policy, with deficits on the scale of 1940-5 and presumably requiring as long to pay back as those did. No-one can predict future levels of unemployment, once Britain’s hastily improvised equivalent of *Kurzarbeit* begins “tapering off” from the start of August. And yet

Sunak has been gently criticised by Osborne, of all “austere” predecessors, for guaranteeing Covid-emergency bank-loans to medium and small businesses by ‘merely’ 80% instead of by 100 (BBC Radio 4 14.4.2020) – as, incidentally, in Switzerland and Germany.

Roaring for Brexitopia

While Imperial greatness will no longer cushion Britain from the impact of Tory myths and policies, visions of greatness continue to inform decisions. Ultimately, this myth is the main precondition for the others: Greatness is treated as the precondition for “prosperity” on any scale whatever. More rational Tories – not a very loud group, currently – may recognise it as, in 21st-century reality, an archaic self-deception.

We can only speculate whether any ministers may be among them. But, if any are, they need to bite their lips. For, into the Covid-crisis, their boss and chief ideologue loudly hailed Brexit as liberating Britain’s quest for Greatness. He did so by addressing a posh international audience on 3rd February. Here, Johnson devoted the merest clause to the looming pandemic. Why spend longer on some impending deaths, amid his long-term historical vacuities celebrating the third day of Brexit?

The place he chose was Greenwich, formerly (1692-1869) a rest-home for deserving sailors and then (into the mid-20th century) the so-called ‘university of the navy’. For Johnson, its hall had been built at the start of Great Britain’s two most successful centuries.

For him, it formed a perfect venue for what we have called ‘good myths’, here larded with jingoistic mixed metaphors. So, after a mere ten words, he “invited” his audience to contemplate the ceiling. Though admitting that its “gorgeous” fresco was “slightly bonkers“, he hailed it as symbolising the cosmic significance of Brexit: in 1707, “we [had] settled a long-running question of sovereign authority“ in favour of a United Kingdom when the Scottish parliament had reluctantly voted for absorption into a British one. Now again

we know where we want to go and that is out into the world... leaving [our] chrysalis... emerging after decades of hibernation as a campaigner for global free trade. ... seafaring ancestors immortalised above us whose exploits brought not just riches but something even more important than that—and that was a global perspective.

That is our ambition.

There lies the port, the vessel puffs her sail ... [his ‘...’] the wind sits in the mast.

That wind ended his rant.

Minutes earlier, listening to his praise of free trade for “uniting people in the bonds of peace” (a messianic phrase, beloved of Anti-Corn Law Leaguers back in the ... 1840’s), some E.U. diplomats in the audience had conceivably fantasised his speechwriters as pro-E.U. infiltrators. But till the 1880s, free trade had clearly been to the advantage of Britain – not merely as, in our comparison, the Georgian and Victorian equivalent of Silicon Valley, but also as the pacemaker of European imperialisms

as well as the largest of them. That advantage is now a matter of Johnson's nostalgia for the irrecoverable world of pre-1942

Johnson had next waffled on to his sole mention of Covid-19, but embedded it into an economic context where he also implicitly refuted – not any old autarkist, but his friend Donald Trump himself.¹⁵

From Brussels to China to Washington, tariffs are being waved around ... even in debates on foreign policy where frankly they have no place. ...

And in that context, we're starting to hear some bizarre autarkic rhetoric, ... when there's a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational and ... [do] unnecessary economic damage, then at that moment humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange ... to champion ... the right of the populations [sic] of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other.

His own "rhetoric" was obscuring vast distinctions between "making" an ideological "case" and swiftly negotiating profitable free trade for one medium-sized country in a world of trade-blocs. Here Tory mythmaking collides with post-1942 realities to the verge of insanity. On profits or any other practicalities, Johnson was reduced to enthusing about the technical triumphs associated with Greenwich – back in the 18th century. As a historian of grandly patriotic cast, he must

recognise that century, more than any other, as having seen Britain at intercontinental war with European rivals, climaxing in surrender at Yorktown (1781). But on he stumbled, proliferating promises he may one day trip over: those fearing that the NHS would be negotiated-away in the name of free trade were "conspiracy theorists"; likewise, he could reassure the E.U. that Britain would "not engage in some cut-throat race to the bottom" in social or ecological standards. Most grandly of all, he saw himself as heading a "people's government" which, via the slogan festooning his podium, was "Unleashing Britain's Potential". The bursting of those vacuities is likely to impoverish the lives of coming generations: Hard Brexit offers little else. True, some observers are now arguing that, except over fishing, "the economic difference between a no-deal Brexit and the one envisaged by the British government is not particularly large" (Bush 24.7.2020). But the width of that gap may also govern how radical the British plan may be.

Just Roaring?

Adding further uncertainties is Johnson's own political chaos. The start of the Brexit referendum saw him hesitating before committing himself to Brexit. Once he had, though, it became another of his grandiose Big Projects, driven with all his powers of exaggeration: Brexit freeing £350,000,000 a week for the NHS, etc., etc. Typically, he sought to belittle a pro-Remain article he had supplied to his old paper, the *Telegraph*, as "semi-parodic" – once it was revealed. There,

the EU was “a market on our doorstep. ... The membership fee seems rather small. ... Why are we so determined to turn our back on it?” and, worse, divergent majorities in England and Scotland might endanger the Union (Elgot 16.10.2016; see also, unlike me, Shipman 2017; see also: Savage and Graham-Harrison 15.9.2019 quoting the latter’s newly published memoirs). (Given his extreme opportunism we can, incidentally, understand why some ultra-Brexiteers such as Nigel Farage have not joined the Tory party, though complying with advice from some of Trump’s tacticians to pipe down during the December 2019 Election).

Is all this merely megalomaniac opportunism? His record may suggest this. “Build, build, build” was his early-July slogan for galvanising the British out of the strict lockdown he had tardily had to impose. Consistently with that, he proposed during early August to streamline or dump most of the planning-laws, so as to undermine local restraints and standards: the neoliberal qualities of that are obvious. He has long hopped from one grandiosity to the next, sometimes gesticulating on top of more than one at a time. We can, again easily, cite:-

- His 4-runway super-airport on the Kent shore of the Thames Estuary. Here, few have cited rising sea levels, but airspace soon turned out to be scarce. There was also the little matter of relocating Europe’s largest liquid natural gas-depot, with “the largest above-ground storage-tanks of their kind in the world.” That particular brainwave of his milked the public purse of over £3 million. Had it ever been realised, it would anyway have cost “five times more” than the

other three options around London for airport expansion;

- His Garden Bridge for better-off pedestrians to pay to cross the Thames between Waterloo and Blackfriars Bridges. Merely formulating what one architectural critic dubbed a “landmark to the post-truth era” cost London ratepayers perhaps £43 million before his Labour successor as Mayor scrapped it (Moore 16.4.2017. His word “Monument” implies that “Era” to be over!).

Whatever else, therefore, the time that this Tory spent as London’s Mayor made as if to prove all neoliberals correct: public spending was nonchalantly wasteful.

But, even as Foreign Secretary, he carried on, proposing a Channel Bridge to President Macron. In 2018, on a visit to Northern Ireland, he proposed a 28-mile bridge between there and Scotland. That would have to negotiate or avoid Beaufort’s Dyke, a 200-300 metre deep and 50-kilometre-long natural trench. The Dyke is the largest munitions-dump in British waters: “more than one million tons of conventional and chemical weapons” had been dumped there after the end of World War II, followed by some local civilian “radio-active waste”. Construction-work, so explosives consultants warned, “would pose an unacceptable level of risk” (*Wikipedia*. “Beaufort’s Dyke” [accessed 20.6.2020]). The waters are often rough, so some dumping-crews may have missed the Dyke. But so what? “Why don’t we? Why don’t we?” he intoned.

T rue, each project surely has other factors behind it. Thus his Thames airport would

have taken the heat off Heathrow. Later, as a local M.P., Johnson had notoriously promised to “lie down in front of the bulldozers” to stop a 3rd runway being built there. So, when the Commons came to vote on *that* runway, he spent the day on a Foreign Secretary’s trip (shepherded by three diplomats) to Kabul to be televised with Messrs Ghani and Karzai. Those pictures cost the public a microscopic £20,000 whereas estimated costs of his Beaufort folly range from £20 billion to three times that: no mean sum for, in the words of an *Irish Times* reporter, a “Post Brexit ... symbol of Northern Ireland’s place within the Union.”¹⁶ Needless to say, he had not discussed his brilliant brainwave with official circles in either Scotland or Northern Ireland before trumpeting it.

If Johnson’s superficial motives are usually transparent, the mere listing of his blunders (astonishingly, there are more) obscures his overall strategy – or rather, what we can call his habit of stratagem: as one economic journalist sighs, “he knows the more time we spend talking” about grand bulldozings, “the less we spend examining things that matter in the real world (Peat 3.7.2020). We have seen how his lurches of strategy against Covid-19 were possibly governed by a need to distract. Historically we can now see him as caricaturing, not merely himself, not merely even his instinctive sense of ruling-class entitlement (never mind at whose cost), but also a generations-old Tory habit of mythmaking. Together they make a terrible trio amid today’s mixture of pandemic, slump and Brexit. If, as the *Guardian* journalist Nesrin Malik surmised at the end of May, Brexitania is now “run by a small, tight-knit group of

arrogant and talentless entitlements”, they leave us ordinary mortals worse-informed than usual. But we may agree with her that, as Sunak’s special measures “taper off” (his phrase) and so boost unemployment, “the power that employers have over zero-hours workers ... will produce more and more abuses, especially for undocumented workers” (Malik 31.5.2020).

The Outlook

Almost anything written amidst the medical and economic crises of 2020 risks swift obsolescence, which multiplies with the economic uncertainties. Millions of jobs are in a pre-depression limbo: probably lost but not certainly – till after 1st August when unprecedented levels of government support begin, as noted, to “taper off”. We can imagine how easily the factors discussed here may combine to wreck Johnson’s premiership, if not his party.

But another part of the outlook is even less clear. Labour’s new leaders seem at best to be biding their time. Under Jeremy Corbyn, membership grew massively among the young and impatient: will they stay in and fight? What will they be allowed to fight for? Outside Labour, broader radicalisms are as ever strong on ideas, but strategically far from crystallised.

If Johnson persists in “preferring the second rate to the second thought” (Jenkins 6.4.2020), all sides will stay in the dark, conceivably in Downing Street itself too. The level of chaos inside his team and resulting

loss of credibility may hasten further Covid-19 outbreaks. To take an average week, that in mid-July saw the Academy of Medical Sciences warning that a second wave of infections would kill up to 120,000 people; three days later Johnson “floated the possibility of a return to normality by Christmas and announced that from 1 August [sic] the instruction to work from home wherever possible would be lifted, in apparent conflict with ... Vallance, who told MPs he could see ‘absolutely no reason to change.’” Johnson’s attempt to reassure those medically vulnerable people whom his announcement might bring sacking as absentees was a classic of circular waffle: “We want to encourage people to think [not “know”] it is safe to come into work, provided employers have done the work ... to make their premises Covid-secure.” Who would define or inspect such employers’ “work” (Booth 20.7.2020)?

Brexit has become overwhelmingly a neoliberal Tory project, whatever the proportions of habitual Labour voters who supported it during the 2016 referendum or the 2019 General Election. Those Tories commandeered a more than century-old yen for agitating to sharpen and refocus Britain’s trading-relations with the rest of the world. The neoliberalised aim of Brexit became: to deliver a salutary shock, bigger than Thatcher’s “Big Bang” which had so liberated City financiers. The restraints to be broken this time were not merely those from trade unions but also from all kinds of public control on private accumulation in any sector: planning, environment and, not least, health.

Johnson, or those around him, seized on Covid-19 to deliver salutary shocks of its own. Whatever his incoherent instincts and presentation, the sole discernible thread in his policies suggests him seizing on it to further neoliberalisation. That came smoothly. The Tory 2010s had anyway depleted the capacity of local and central authorities, whether elected or otherwise public, to defend public health. So his government had merely to ignore them – “Carry On Withering”, to adapt some old British film-titles – while showering juicy contracts on private firms, irrespective of how inexperienced in relevant fields. Such a ‘response’ harmonised with overcentralisation, even while distinguishing central government mainly for Johnsonian bombast, followed sooner or later by press-statement excuses from this or that ministry.

We have heard Serco’s head, Rupert Soames, enthusing over such possibilities. (One of his grandfathers was Winston Churchill: the symbolism, if nothing else, points in contradictory directions). Again and again, responses to Covid-19 were shaped for privatisation and profit. The lives of employees anywhere near health-provision – from those on the front line to local health officials – have been turned upside-down, shoved aside or needlessly snuffed out for the greater glory of private contractors and their spokespeople in and out of government. Weighed against corporate profit, Ordinary Lives did NOT Matter. They were merely clapped, once a week for a few weeks.

Cummings’s breath-taking arrogance over his trips to and around North East

England more or less coincided with awareness that the presentation and sometimes even the timing of vital policy were dominated by how much truth the public were judged capable of swallowing: first the dimensions of the looming threat, soon also the inadequacy of existing stocks (of PPE, etc), of procedures (e.g. testing- and-tracing) and, not least, of networking between experts and between the UK's segments, or between Whitehall and local government – where the latter was brought in at all. Above all, 2020's opening months would have been a golden opportunity to quarantine people arriving from the then most affected countries. That – plus policies already being advocated prominently but outside the official circles of policy-making – could perhaps have kept the long-term reservoir of infection low. Instead its level rose, thanks to laid-back policies in many fields. Those circles seem to have been dominated during early 2020 by statistical theorisings about curve-flattening and, we may plausibly assume, by at first confidential talk of “herd immunity”. So the level will remain high into at least Winter 2020-21.

Soames and younger neoliberal Tories will need to work overtime. True, we may have to wait till, say, early 2021 to see whether Brexit costs them legitimacy, let alone how much. But Johnson's loyalty to Cummings seems to have crystallised a slow rage over the government's often lethal posturings over Covid-19. And the current snarl-up over school exam-marks suggests contempt seething unusually near the surface.

Even at the very top, Johnson and his acolytes are already opposed by some leading members of the scientific Establishment who, early in May, constituted themselves as “Independent Sage” with an avowedly open format contrasting avowedly with the existing Sage. Remains to be seen whether its leadership by Sir David King, Chief Scientific Adviser to the British government during 2001-7, portends anything or nothing. But perhaps we should fish out Gary Werskey's history of his “Visible College”, his phrase for that alliance between some scientists and the British left during the 1930s and '40s, so as to note some of its strengths and (often Stalinist) pitfalls.¹⁷

Is there no way out? During May's doomed premiership, Steve Bell, the occasionally brilliant *Guardian* cartoonist often depicted her obsessively driving a Victorian hearse towards the brink of the White Cliffs of Dover. His appositeness came partly from feelings that Britain's famous unwritten constitution allows no way to halt that hearse. Such was the basis of her premiership: May, who had argued for Remain, accepted that “the People Have [sic] Spoken”: a referendum would always override any changeable balance between parties in the House of Commons. Apparently only blasphemers could imagine referendum-results as equally transitory. To any Swiss readers, such reasoning must seem mind-blowingly primitive. But, for Leavers and for converts to Leaving, anything else was irrelevant – even the fact that younger voters had inclined towards Remaining and probably still do, while many older Leave voters may meanwhile have Left more than Britain. Given Corbyn's reluctance to

demand a second referendum and the contempt that greeted his muffled change of heart, any conjunctures that might legitimise, let alone encourage, such a referendum are hard to imagine. The British constitution shoves a now perhaps clear majority back into that hearse. History is full of ruling classes whose attempts to further their perceived interest end in failure or disaster. Conceivably, one equivalent of today’s British ruling class is their pre-1914 Hapsburg equivalent. To adapt the Old Testament warning against “Pride”, nostalgia comes before the fall. Sixty-four long years ago, that should have been the lesson of Suez. But it wasn’t – or not widely enough.

Into early 2020, further neoliberalisation was supposed to follow Brexit. Covid-19 has brought a lethal foretaste, not least because deterioration in the fields of health, local government, social services and elsewhere had already gone so far. In that limited sense, effect has preceded cause.

When Mark Drakeford, Wales’s First Minister, accused Johnson and colleagues of “making an announcement first, and then trying to work out what you meant by it”, he had been trying to understand the latest quarantinings of visitors and returnees from abroad (Press Association 2020. “UK Government publishes confirmed list of countries exempt from quarantine.” *South Wales Guardian*, 3.7.2020). But we can hear him as nutshelling government policy over Covid-19 in general. Even more broadly, we can now see some analogies with the logic of Brexit ideology

and, from the 2016 referendum at the latest, with that of Brexit politics.

Many thanks for invaluable feedback from Sebastian Berg and Georgia Christinidis (despite intermittent incompatibilities between our computer-programmes).

* This essay takes into account developments up to 31 October 2020. My sourcing is overwhelmingly from the *Guardian*, with the *Financial Times* among occasional exceptions. This stems, not merely from the *Guardian*’s audacious decision to avoid imposing any pay-wall, but also from its consistent commitment to investigative journalism. My own disagreements with that daily are miles from Brexit or Covid-19. The *FT* is now the sole London daily available on the European mainland, where Covid-19 happens to find me. For over six decades, I have regarded it as easily “the best capitalist newspaper.”

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Endnotes

- 1 For two entries into the field: Mirowski (2013), Mirowski and Plehwe (2009); Swarts (2013) on Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Mirowski's *Science Mart: Privatising American Science* (2011) had listed at least eleven cumulative criteria of neoliberalism. By now, we can perhaps imagine him wanting to add a few more: his target is mobile.
- 2 I owe this point to Jimmy Grealey.
- 3 Anthony Barnett's blogged phrase of mid-March 2019. For an apotheosis of that "farrago", see Johnson's speech near the end of this paper.
- 4 Morrison 27.9.2019. That the paper also carries the name of the editor, Dr Roch Dunin-Wasowicz, is presumably no claim of joint authorship.
- 5 www.express.co.uk>News>UK dates this appeal (or this report on it) as 27.3.2020.
- 6 BBC Radio 4, 18.7.2020, 06.45 approx., *Farming Today*. That gender dimensions go unmentioned may or may not be significant in some ways.
- 7 I owe this point to one very ex-local, the Vienna linguist Richard Alexander.
- 8 Bland and Campbell 30.6.2020. That "report" turns out to be a large-print 20-pager by Dominique Mueller from an organisation called "Labour Behind the Label". *BBC News*, 6.7.2020.
- 9 Pegg 7.5.2020; Pegg, Booth and Conn, 7.5.2020; Booth: "Ministers were warned two years ago of care homes' exposure to pandemics", but this time citing "Detailed reports by social care directors in England" and not Cygnus, 13.5.2020.
- 10 I owe this point to Hugo Radice, minus the comparison.
- 11 Berridge 20.5.2020. Many thanks to her for sending a very short article whose main focus, is elsewhere.
- 12 *Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 20 March 2020*. Note for future historians: so far, these documents seem to transliterate honestly, as if the transcribers had trained for *Hansard's* parliamentary debates, not for PR. Let's hope no-one tells Cummings; Brooks, Morris and O'Carroll 23.7.2020; Brooks 23.7.2020.
- 13 One of many ways into the impact of the Cummings episode on opinion-polls: McKie, Helm and Savage. "Dominic Cummings has broken Covid-19 public trust, say top scientists" [i.e. "26 senior UK academics and health administrators"] *Guardian*, 30.5.2020; more polemically: Kettle 24.5.2020; more detailed: Bland. "Dominic Cummings timeline: what we know about his movements" is outdated in some details but useful in exemplifying the style of government denials ("Fake news", or "a stream of false allegations from campaigning newspapers") 24.5.2020; Syal, Weaver, Walker 24.5.2020; Geoghegan

14.6.2020; Syal 24.6.2020; Weaver

2.8.2020.

14 Anonymous, but electronically available into July 2020 under Reuters 7.4.2020, unpaginated. Its nearly 12 small-printed pages claim to be based on “[i]nterviews with more than 20 British scientists, key officials and senior sources in ... [the] Conservative Party, and a study of minutes of advisory committee meetings and public testimony and documents.” I am very grateful to Tom Wakeford, Frances Wakeford and Gail Vines for alerting me to this.

15 Here, Paul Mason wrongly reverses the microscope: for him, Johnson’s “entire narrative [is] framed around a response to the coronavirus.” Mason 6.4.2020.

16 McClements 23.2.2020; she may (to judge from her wording) be paraphrasing either a D.U.P. MP or an SNP Member of the Scottish Parliament.

17 Werskey 1978, with its Marx-epigram that “one basis for life and another for science is *a priori* a lie.”