



50 THINGS ABOUT US
MARK THOMAS



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PREFACE

Every serious person should wake up screaming at least once a week at the thought that Boris Johnson became a prime minister, let alone our Prime Minister.

Our Prime Minister. A man with all the gravitas of a wet wipe and the intellectual agility of a mobility scooter. His every public appearance is a humiliation. He stands at the dispatch box in the Commons spouting lies, evasions, crap jokes, bluster and incompetence, a blond blundering fib pudding of entitlement, droning on and on, like a shit best man at his own wedding. Every Prime Minister's Questions is a televisual car crash, involving a Massey Ferguson of reality and the clown car that is Johnson's mind. In a just world Johnson wouldn't be Prime Minister, but would be doing the job he was actually born to do as an overly familiar estate agent driving a Foxton's Mini around Chelsea and bumming a bump off of Govey.

Britain has a collapsing economy, the most catastrophic response to a public health crisis in the Western world bar the era of Trump's America, rising child poverty and a non-functioning democracy that allows a cabal of hard-right free marketeers to bypass parliament. We have ended up living in a country with less international standing than a bag of Haribo.

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We are a joke led by a man who makes the classic error of the desperate attention seeker, confusing ‘laughing with’ with ‘laughed at’ and thinking that as long as people are smiling they like him. They don’t.

How on earth did we get to this point?

The shortest answer to this question is Eton. So if you’re the sort of person who’s light on reading and big on supposition you can flick to the end.

Some 20 out of the past 55 Prime Ministers went to Eton. It is as remarkable as it is despicable that in a representative democracy over a third of the country’s PMs went to one school – we live in an Etocracy. Boris Johnson: Eton. His right-hand man and Leader of the House, Jacob Rees-Mogg: Eton. The latter is a man who carries such an aura of superiority that he makes the Queen feel middle class. I bet she twitches at the nets when he visits and yells over her shoulder, ‘Get the posh biscuits, he’s here.’ I’ll go further and bet that when he walks into the room the Queen curtseys. All told, there is something deeply jarring when Johnson and Rees-Mogg wrap themselves in the flag of populism, claiming kinship with the working class and winning seats in Labour’s former heartlands in the North.

Of course Rees-Mogg doesn’t actually care about Wakefield or Doncaster. As far as he’s concerned, he’d put them all down the pit again (not for profit, just for fun). His type of small-state Toryism loves deregulation and regards industrial accidents as being a natural expression

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of the free market. The more people die at work, the freer we are. Johnson and the North are not natural allies. It was Brexit that did the heavy lifting for the Tories.

Now before you peg me as an EU flag-waver, let me hold you right there. I was a reluctant Remain voter. There are perfectly reasonable critiques of the EU, which has hardly proved itself to be a benign democratic force when it comes to Greece, Spain and Ireland, forcing democratically elected governments and public policy to change at the whim of finance. I attended one Remain march and felt immediately out of place. The place looked full of people with up-to-date CVs. Not my tribe at all. I voted Remain because I thought Leave was reliant on appealing to racists and Little Englanders.

Patriotism is often the point where history and advertising intersect, and it was that brand of nationalism that Rees-Mogg and Johnson attempted to sell. It is a brand that can only hark backwards; a nostalgic nationalism built on half histories and wishes. Remember when Theresa May, four months after the referendum, described her vision of the future as a 'red, white and blue Brexit'? Of course, she would choose those colours, as she was hardly likely to say she wanted 'a shite brown Brexit'. May hoped to chime with a non-specific blurry vision of national pride – the church fetes and cricket of John Major and the 'things were better before they arrived here' of Nigel Farage. The kind of patriotism where the poetry of John Betjeman sits alongside blaming migrants for TB.

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But that is not our story. In fact, it is far from the narrative so many of us are a part of.

Now, I personally think we should name lockdowns in the way we name storms and hurricanes. During Lockdown Cummings (the first one), I spent my time with my 85-year-old mother in South London. Obviously I love her or I wouldn't have spent five months living in a two-bedroom ground-floor flat with her and her adopted mongrel hound, which is a basket case in every sense and has its own emotional support dog.

In many ways, my mum epitomises a 1940s childhood. She cannot relax unless there is a faint whiff of Dettol in the air, she doesn't believe in sell-by dates ('What do you think God gave you a nose for?'), and she always overstocks everything ('Because you never know who's coming round'). I once said to her in exasperation, 'You could feed a regiment for a week!' To which she replied, 'Well, we've got a big family, love.'

To be fair, she has many amazing qualities. She's incredibly generous and surprisingly kind. She used to be a nurse, training for her midwifery in Glasgow, and so was our neighbourhood first-aid post. Most of the kids in our street were at some point bandaged, swabbed or taken to hospital by my mum. She also swears like a squaddie's parrot. On one occasion during lockdown she shuffled into the kitchen and shouted, 'Bollocky bollocky bollocky, bollocky, bollocks!'

'What's up?' I said.

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There was a pause and then she said, ‘Oh fuck, I’ve forgotten why I was swearing.’

During the five months of Lockdown Cummings, we annoyed the hell out of each other, deliberately winding each other up. Out of nowhere, she would pronounce, ‘I know you don’t like him, but Boris Johnson is in a very difficult position.’

Each time, as I inhaled sharply before reacting, I would catch her with a grin on her face that said, ‘Gotcha!’ She wanted a fight. Any fight. Just to cut through the boredom. I was not entirely without fault either. Each day, as she sat in her chair watching the morning news, I would perform an improvised modern ballet in my pants and t-shirt in front of the telly. Finally, she would shout, ‘Will you fuck off! I don’t want to see the elephant tango. I want to see the fucking news.’

But each Thursday after tea she would look at the clock and say, ‘Don’t forget your pot and spoon.’ And each Thursday, I would borrow a saucepan and a wooden spoon, stand outside, and bash the hell out of it during the Clap for Carers. I would re-enter the kitchen and she would glance down at the battered wooden spoon, observing, ‘When this is over, you’re getting me some new ones.’

I found the spontaneous outpouring of support and love for the NHS and care workers in the face of an incompetent government incredibly moving. If I was to have a brand of nationalism, this would be it. Cheering the underdog.

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Clapping for the migrants, the low paid and those who are normally ignored and unloved. While in the background would sit my mum's overstuffed cupboard in case they popped in for tea.

Perhaps I feel a more intense love for the NHS due to it featuring more prominently in my life. I am now a 57-year-old man, entering what is commonly known as 'the probing era'. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the fool Jacques gives his famous 'seven ages of man' speech, in which he talks us through life's journey from birth to death. As literature it is truly magnificent, but not once does he mention the stage where anyone in a white coat and mask gets to look up your bottom. This includes everybody from medical specialists to Batman-o-grams to Deliveroo scooter drivers.

Over the course of the past eighteen months, I have seen a lot – and I do mean a lot – of consultants. And although at the time of writing I feel fine (thank you for asking), I'm beginning to feel as if I'm in a Dr Seuss medical book involving Grinch-like creatures wielding fantastical trombones with box cameras attached by springs, while cheeky voles holding stripy nitrous-oxide tanks frolic about spraying cartoon 'Z's:

Have you had a camera here?

Yes, I've had a camera here.

Have you had a camera there?

I have had them here and there.

I have had them everywhere.

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They peak at leaks, they peak at seeps.

They peak at leaks and seeps and weeps.

They look for lumps, they look for bumps.

They look for clumps of lumps and bumps.

Perhaps because I've had cause to rely on it a lot recently, I see the NHS through rose-tinted goggles. But try as the Tories might, the affection we as a nation have for our truly radical and caring institution remains, by and large, intact.

Throughout the book, I mention Britain, Great Britain, the United Kingdom and England. The separation of these various entities, and indeed the merging of them, often informs us of someone's politics. For some, there is an assumption that Britain and England are one and the same. For others, England is a separate nation and the semantic division is but a forerunner of the real thing. Whether you regard 'us' as being the United Kingdom or some combination of its national component parts, a struggle involving how we define ourselves has started in parts of our four nations. The run up to the Scottish independence referendum a case in point. For me, I suppose the issue is summed up by the question of how we can reconcile the nation that voted for Johnson with the nation that claps for carers. So, this book is my non-comprehensive and random attempt to find a few ways (50, to be precise) of looking at us differently.

Enjoy! And if you're ever near my mum's post-Covid, do pop in if you're hungry. Oh, and don't worry – the smell of the food will soon overcome the smell of disinfectant.

MARK THOMAS, November 2020

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“The United Kingdom has historically played a leading role in developing parliamentary democracy.”

United Kingdom Country Profile
CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, 2020

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Never ever stop being shocked that Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. Do not be tempted to settle for acceptance. Acceptance is political methadone. The fact that he became our democratic leader is *inscrutabilis, inmensus, immensusprofundus, indespectus, impenetrabilis, inexplebilis et incircumsriptus*. Or for non-Latin readers: Fucking unbelievable!

The word minister should never be attached to Johnson, be it Prime, Foreign or, especially, church.

We elected a man-child who has been sacked twice for lying. He can not even say publicly how many children he has spawned, and has wasted millions of pounds of public money on projects doomed to fail: a bridge that was not built, water cannons that ended as scrap metal, cable cars that have less passengers than the one in *Where Eagles Dare*. He has talked to his friend Darius Guppy of beating up a journalist. He is a narcissist with a sideline in homophobia and racism, describing Muslim women as 'letter boxes' and black people as having 'watermelon smiles'. He is a man who, when he does apologise for any

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wrong-doing, is forced to do it on a monumental scale – namely, to the entire city of Liverpool. He is a bully who for youthful kicks destroyed restaurants. He has the moral principles of a hippo and the scruples of syphilis.

Johnson didn't win people over with his boyish charm. For a start, he is more infantile than boyish. Then there is the fact that 'boyishness' has ... well, to put it bluntly, a weight limit. And he is over it. As for the charm, he has the veneer of manners bought at Eton, but beyond that some of the media seem to have interpreted 'charm' as the ability to lie and get away with it. So it was not his youthful charm or, indeed, given that he appears constantly on the verge of hibernating, his 'youthful energy'. No, Johnson won an 80-seat majority because he told Brexit supporters he was the only person who could fix Theresa May's broken Brexit deal. This was entirely believable as he was the one who broke it. That and the fact that for four years the *Daily Mail* and a gaggle of assorted offshore media outlets screamed that Jeremy Corbyn was going to steal our gardens and make Gerry Adams head of the Queen's personal security.

But for all of that elections in the UK are won by money being targeted at a small section of the electorate. Johnson got a good return for his – or rather his backers' – cash. A mere £16 million (less than May spent in her ill-fated general election campaign) bought an extra 240,000 votes.

In a nation of 47 million eligible voters, 240,000 – or 0.5 per cent – of the electorate is what swung it. A total of

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3,000 people in 80 constituencies changed the face of our country and elected the most corrupt, inept, uncaring and monumentally stupid government since the war.

It is surely too small a section of the electorate to have created such a big change – 0.5 per cent of anything doesn't suggest a landslide, it suggests a dribble. With those kinds of figures the headlines should have read, 'Johnson wins by a stain!' It hardly feels an example of precision-engineered democracy, more that the whole thing is being held together with gaffa tape and a pair of tights.

For a country so obsessed with referendums and their importance to democracy, it speaks volumes that all our referendums have been about Europe, with the exception of one. We had a referendum over the Alternative Voting (AV) system. Again, not a perfect answer but still more representative than First Past the Post. In hindsight, we should have seen what was coming in the subsequent Brexit referendum: a good idea presented badly (in this case a fairer voting system) campaigned for by a fair-weather politician (Nick Clegg), a Labour Party that got splinters on its arse straddling the fence, and a No campaign using scare tactics that stopped just short of taking hostages. The most famous poster the No campaign deployed was a picture of a new-born baby bearing the slogan, 'She needs a new cardiac facility NOT an alternative voting system'. The suggestion – huh, who am I kidding? – the *assertion* being that if you voted for AV, you'd be taking money away from hospitals, which

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in turn would mean there wouldn't be enough cardiac facilities, which in turn would mean babies would die.

To summarise: If you voted for AV you were a baby killer.

All things considered, it is remarkable that over 6 million people supported infanticide at the ballot box. Not so surprising was the 13-odd million people backing the status quo.

And thus we arrive at the first of the *Things About Us ...*



If we had used a proportional system for the 2019 election, the Tories would have 77 fewer seats, the Greens would have 11 more, and there would have been no overall majority, forcing parties to form a coalition. Okay, deep sigh and pained face emoji: I know we are not big on coalitions. Indeed, look at the last one, where the Libs Dems proved to be the most eager human shields ever and wrote a new chapter in the history of Stockholm syndrome.

However, the fact remains that Johnson would not be Prime Minister. Instead, he would have been relegated to loser and forced to return to his former life as Bumbling-Eton-Farage swimming the ever-shallower

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waters of a *Telegraph* column. And if we really want to enter the realm of alternative reality, only two elections since 1935 have produced a government the majority of the electorate voted for.

Think about that for a second.

No Thatcher, no Blair ...

There are many more representative ways of voting, from Proportional Representation (PR) to Single Transferable Vote, all of which offer a better system than the one we have. The Borda System, for example – a system of voting that has been described as halfway between PR and first-past-the-post – allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, with the highest-scoring candidate winning. This would enable Green voters to support their first choice while also choosing the Lib Dems or Labour ahead of the Tories and UKIP (and vice versa). The advantage of this is that it creates common ground, and if landslides are to occur then it would take considerably more than 0.5 per cent of the electorate to create them.

There is a very good example of how the Borda System works in practice: the Eurovision Song Contest. This, it turns out, has a more representative voting system than our Mother of Parliaments. Although I personally favour the Single Transferable Vote, I would be satisfied with the Borda System *if* we could have Eurovision-style general election coverage alongside it. The election results would be anchored by Graham Norton sipping

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wine and brandishing an improbable marital aid, while every time a party got *douze points* some Euro-Claudia Winkleman would rush over to their sofa and wave a Viking helmet or enormous plastic Edam cheese. Meanwhile, we, the electorate, would watch the results in drag while playing bingo drinking games.

“Location:

Western Europe, islands – including the northern one-sixth of the island of Ireland – between the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea; northwest of France.

Geographic Coordinates:

54 00 N, 2 00 W.”

United Kingdom Country Profile
CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, 2020

***“When Britain first, at heaven’s command,
Arose from out the azure main.”***

Rule, Britannia
JAMES THOMSON

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Our sense of national history is timeless. By which, I mean we literally have no sense of our nation's past – most of us don't even know how old we are as a nation. This is not a question of knowing the exact hour of our national inception but being able to hazard a rough educated guess. The kind of guess Boris Johnson might make regarding when his children's birthdays are: not exact, but near enough (the right year would do).

It's not that I'm trying to be clever or a know-it-all – those are just character attributes already in my possession. Neither am I trying to catch anyone out (though to be fair when someone comes up with the right answer straightaway I do feel a little light go out in my happy heart place).

Generally, answers to the question 'How old are we?' fall into two distinct categories. There are those that answer in thousands and those that answer in hundreds. Those who go for a figure like '10,000 years' often look as if they watch a lot of fantasy on Netflix.

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Their answer is wrong. Very wrong. But at least I can see a working method for how they got to this answer. The historical maths for this is roughly:

Birth of Christ + extra Romans \times continental shift = 10,000.

The other popular answer runs along the lines of '300 and something', which is not a bad guess. It is true that the 1707 Acts of Union saw the Scottish and English Parliaments join to form one Parliament: the Parliament of Great Britain. England then promptly defined Scotland's future relationship with its 'partner' by moving the merged Parliament to London.

However, keener civics students among us will know that, come 2022, our nation will be 100 years old. So not very old at all. Quite young in fact. And not only do we not know how old we are, we tend not to know who we are. Great Britain (or as racists like to say, Great Britain) is comprised of England, Wales and Scotland. However, we live, as proudly proclaimed on our blue passports, in the United Kingdom, which is England, Scotland, Wales and the recently (in epoch terms) invented Northern Ireland.

It was Michael Collins, revolutionary, soldier and Intelligence Director of the IRA, who came to London in 1921 to meet Jeremy Corbyn. Yes, Jeremy Corbyn, who was then just a backbencher. Naturally, they were joined by Hamas, Hezbollah and Diane Abbott, who sat drinking mojitos. At that meeting, Hamas tried to sell the IRA some homemade bombs and Jeremy Corbyn agreed that Ireland should get the Cotswolds as

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compensation for the British occupation. For readers of certain newspapers who have casually picked up this book or been given it by a spiteful relative, I might have made that last bit up.

What is slightly more certain is that in 1921 Michael Collins (IRA) met with Winston Churchill (then Secretary of State for the Colonies), who was leading the British negotiators in what was to become the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The very man whose image the far-right ‘statue defenders’ / plinth shaggers gather under in Parliament Square to sing ‘No surrender to the IRA’ did in fact surrender to the IRA. More than that, he helped negotiate the surrender. Okay, technically it was a truce, but still he did negotiate with the IRA. Oh, and later he advocated for a united Ireland. In one of his less-remembered speeches, Churchill proclaimed, ‘We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall never surrender, *Tiocfaidh ár lá* and fuck the Brits’. Again, I may have made that speech up.

Out of the 32 counties of Ireland, six would become Northern Ireland. So the United Kingdom was created in 1922. Meaning that when I ask this question in 2020, our nation is not yet a hundred years old. We have not even had a telegram from Mrs Windsor. It is therefore not surprising that the UK is regarded internationally as a wayward brat – it’s only just got hair under its armpits.



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Technically, in terms of nationhood we are nearly the same age as Jordan, and about ten years older than Iraq and Saudi Arabia (1932). We should also note that America (1776) is older than us as a nation by 150 years. I would politely stress that we should not point this out to America, as we'd never hear the end of it.