

## BOJO COMES TO HOLYROOD

By

Donald Smith

Fresh from his coronation by adoring Tories from the English shires, and MPs cowed by threat of de-selection, Boris Johnson came to Edinburgh. As self-appointed Minister for the Union he was determined to show immediate face in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where his support levels ranged from modest to negligible. Those who claimed that the new PM knew little of Scotland, and cared less, would be countered, in media coverage at least.

It was a perfect September day in the Scottish capital. The August Festivals bandwagon had rolled out of town, leaving clear air and the streets crisp and clean. The exuberant parliament building gleamed in unexpected angles beneath the mature greens of Holyrood Park. The Palace of Holyroodhouse was itself mellow in ancient stone while visitors strolled amiably between courtyard, garden and plaza, innocent of the political caravanserai preparing to descend. Satellite vans lined up beside the front entrance, ready to beam their signal, were the only warning sign.

Jude Osborne was shiny and new-minted as the Downing Street press minder, but this morning controlled breathing was his weapon against incipient panic. This Scottish jaunt was a nightmare no longer in waiting. The PM had instructed a press briefing first thing but where the hell was that supposed to happen? Tory HQ was a joke. The Scottish Parliament – no bloody fear. So he had turned it into a press breakfast, before discovering that BJ was indulging in a celebratory dinner with old chums who were either languishing or ancestrally bogged down in the Caledonian heartlands. Would the great leader make his morning after the night before, and in what condition?

‘I’m here, so stop flapping. What do the Jocks want me to talk about?’

‘Scottish independence, Brexit negotiations, powers for the Scottish Parliament, and chlorinated chicken.’

‘Jesus, are they deaf up here or just dumb? I’m not talking about any of that.’

‘Ok, so our key hits are defending the Union above all else, and keeping the Barnett formula for - ’

‘Meantime.’

‘The foreseeable future.’

‘And the benefits of no-deal.’

‘The Scottish political classes haven’t perceived these yet, Prime Minister.’

‘So I’m here to change minds.’

And the hacks want to know if your love affair is still on.’

‘Wish I knew myself. No titbits for the jackals there, Jude.’

‘Would you like some coffee, Prime Minsister?’

‘Black and sweet like - ’

‘We’re in the conference suite; I’ll let them know you’re coming.’

‘He’s giving a press conference first thing. Solo.’

‘But you’re the Conservative leader here, Ruth.’

‘There’s only one Conservative leader now. I’m not sure how I’m going to get through this.’

‘Don’t give up, darling. He could still implode.’

‘Explode more like, covering us all in shite.’

‘That went well. Smashing to see the tartan redtops baying for Corbyn’s blood.’

‘Making Scotland great again?’

‘Defending the Union, keeping the nukes, spending our own money after Brexit: they liked that stuff.’

‘The Sun and Mail liked it. But you’ve won the leadership; we have to reach out to the centre ground if we’re to win an election.’

‘Against Comrade Corbyn? Come off it, Jude.’

‘And Farage?’

‘Nigel has to play ball if he wants Brexit. If need be I’ll eviscerate them both.’

‘In Scotland?’

‘Well that’s trickier. We need to get Ruthee back on board, quickly.’

‘By cutting her out of this morning’s briefing?’

‘Onside, I said, not upstage. She fancies herself as PM - butch lesb in suits. Just kidding. What’s next?’

‘Meeting the Conservative group in Parliament.’

‘Conservative and Unionist, Jude, don’t forget that bit.’

‘No, Prime Minister.’

‘God, I hate that building. It’s like an upturned turd. Don’t they have any English architects here?’

‘He was a Catalan genius – Enrico Miralles.’

‘There you are then, a European mishmash. What else can you expect?’

‘I think you’re teasing me, PM.’

‘Winding up they call it here, Jude. Tell the car to wait. I need ten.’

‘John Lamont’s here to see you. The Scottish MP who voted for you.’

‘Avis Rara. Bacon roll, please. Beginning to feel peckish.’

‘He’s unhappy that you didn’t reinstate Greig McNaughtie as Scottish Secretary. And Ruth wants five minutes before the meeting.’

‘Two rolls, and more coffee.’

‘Through here, Prime Minister.’

‘You must be joking.’

‘It’s a thinking pod, Boris, a sit-ooterie for intellectual politicians.’

‘Don’t go all native on me, Ruth. Have a bacon roll.’

Johnson squeezed into the dinkie window seat in Ruth Davidson’s office, while she sat on her desk. Between mouthfuls, the Prime Minister swallowed some straight talking.

‘Putting Ian Gall into the Scotland Office was a mistake. The Scottish party wants Greig re-instated.’

‘Well, bully for them. McNaughtie’s a moaner and sniveller, not least on Brexit. Dave couldn’t stand him either. One of the few things we agree on.’

‘Any threat to Scotland’s finances and I withdraw my support.’

‘We may all have to take a hit for the greater cause.’

‘Don’t go no-deal, Boris. Scotland will be hammered.’

‘It’s what the people want, Ruthee.’

‘Don’t call me that, and, anyway, no-one voted to crash out.’

‘We don’t need to be friends if you don’t want, but we have to be allies.’

‘Courtesy would be a useful start.’

‘Why are the Scots so prickly? Is it an inferiority complex?’

‘Try me.’

‘Alright, simmer down. Ms Davidson, but get this. We have to torpedo wee Nicky. She’s turning into a lesser saint. Below the waterline.’

‘How?’

‘For not being ready.’

‘Don’t go there; I’ve told you already. Are you listening at all?’

‘Exactly, unprepared for no-deal. Scottish Government’s fault all along.’

‘It won’t wash.’

‘Are you going to eat that roll?’

Boris was ushered out the back into a limo so that he could arrive again at the front. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s First Minister, was standing in the glorious sunshine to greet him. She was flanked by Cabinet Secretary Catherine Bell wearing her External Affairs hat, with a press pack corralled on one side and a bunch of booing protestors barricaded on the other.

As Johnson emerged from his car Sturgeon stepped forward trimly and extended her hand. He swallowed it in a double paw.

‘Welcome to the Scottish Parliament, Prime Minister.’

He swung round for the cameras still gripping her hand.

‘Wonderful to be here, amazing.’

After a few moments of camera clinch, they turned and went in together.

The Parliament Chamber was airy and awash with light. The curved rows of members seats were full, the sweeping public gallery packed. Yet the mood was quiet, expectant but resigned.

The Mace was carried in followed by the Presiding Officer. It was placed solemnly before the elegant high desk from where proceedings were conducted and towards which every member had an equal view.

The Presiding Officer remained standing till Boris Johnson took his place at the end of the top table, while Nicola Sturgeon took hers in the members' front row. Everyone then sat down and the Presiding Officer declared the Parliament in session. Johnson acknowledged the chamber with a flap of his hand.

After a gap of two hundred and ninety two years this institution seemed to have resumed its place in Scottish life without fuss or demur. It could not now be prorogued by any UK Prime Minister or Monarch.

The Presiding Officer welcomed Mr. Johnson, referring courteously to his recent election, as well as to the exceptional and historic challenges of present times. He then invited the Prime Minister to address Parliament in extraordinary session.

Johnson rose and took up position behind the guest speaker lectern, bracing himself like an elite swimmer ready to take the plunge.

'Thankyou, Honourable.... Presiding, obliged. Wonderful to address you here in this amazing chamber, at this combined...special sitting. As Her Majesty does on such occasions, ceremonials, a great honour, humbling for me as your new Prime Minister. That's the 'my wife and I' moment – you're allowed to applaud if you like....

'We all understand, truly I think, the significance for our country, our United Kingdom, of this moment, time of exceptional change. And frankly we've flunked it so far. So let me assure you now – look in my eyes – I'm not flunking any longer. Deal or no deal, we're coming out of the EU. That's the way of course to get a deal, million to one. No more home baked Brexit fudge – no more gooey Brussels jam. Cooking the books and so forth.

'But that's not what I want to talk about today. Our nation voted for Brexit and Brexit it will have, come what may, do or die. My theme is our future unity. The time for division is past, in Ireland and here in Scotland. The time for united will and action is now. Our United Kingdom showing the spirit of Dunkirk, that spirit we displayed under a great wartime leader can now at last win us the peace.

'Our Union is the most successful political and economic union in history. We are a global brand, the envy of our American cousins, and together we are safer, stronger, and more prosperous. So as we prepare for our bright future after Brexit, let us renew the ties that bind us closer. I'm proud to be in Scotland today to make clear how passionate a believer I am and to ensure that every decision I make promotes and strengthens our glorious Union. Let's look to the future horizon, as this chamber looks

out to the hills. “Breathes there a man with soul so dead, who never to himself has said – this is my own, my native land.” Two nations; one kingdom.’

The Prime Minister was getting into his stride, filling the video screens as he prowled round the lectern. Thickset, and a head shorter than the Presiding Officer, the orator wore his thatch of blond hair like a crest beneath which nose, mouth and chin jutted forward. His arms wound out and his broad hands, extended beyond wide cuffs, had a life of their own, flapping, jabbing, pointing. The voice was melodious baritone but marred for this audience by posh blah. Yet the journalist in Johnson evaded formality, riffing on metaphors, in the hope that something might chime with a wider public, whichever one he was trying to sway. Any initial inhibitions were being shed as Boris warmed to his own performance.

‘The negativity has to end. No more gurrning, dear friends. We’ve had a bellyful of defeatism, and it’s time to turn the nation round. Press positive; change channels, get off the hamster wheel of doom.

‘Because, honestly, in the wider scheme of things Bexit is a distraction. Let’s get it done and move on as a united nation. End the navel gazing; start the naval full speed ahead. Because, I repeat, the future is bright.

‘Look at our backlist. Trafalgar – you’ve got the first Nelson Monument right here above your Parliament – Waterloo, Dunkirk, El Alamein, D-Day. And our inventions – the Stock Exchange, jet engines, radar, the internet, to name but a few. The EU has put the brakes on all that, sapping our self-belief. Now its full speed ahead, full steam ahead. You invented the Flying Scotsman. We’re going to be turbo-charged.

‘In this chamber today, I pledge prosperity for Britain, and for Scotland. Yes, the Brexit hiccup requires short-term medication, and I shall provide it. Like treating a hangover, or a mild dose of flu, and then you’re tiptop. An end to hypochondria. Now government has the right medicine, non-EU prescribed, we’ll look back wondering what ailed us.

‘There are conditions for prosperity, of course. There always are. We require unity of purpose, an end to divisive referenda. Our Union must be strong and Scotland must play its full part. My government will invest in Scotland but we shall also counter false propaganda and divisive scaremongering. End the delusions of independence.’

Murmurs became growls of dissent. A couple of Tory members hazarded ‘Hear, hear.’

‘Yes, I know, it takes courage to say that here. Margaret Thatcher brought you the Good Samaritan; I’m Daniel in the Lion’s Den. But I am here as your Prime Minister to speak the truth, as a friend to Scotland. Don’t swim against the British tide.’

At the Junction Bar the main door stood open to lazy afternoon light. There was a desultory click of snooker in the background, while scattered regulars sat at tables in two's and three's. Sunshine in Leith.

On one wall, instead of the usual sport, Sky News was running, with the sound turned down.

'Whit a chancer.'

'He's no in the Scottish Parlienuo, is he?'

'Naw it's a state visit kin o thing, frae Lunnon.'

The almost silent screen was filled with Boris in close-up, a sardonic half-grin hovering beneath the hair and nose.

'Bojo. Whit a clown.'

'Aye, but he's a devious bastart wi it.'

'Hae tae watch him then.'

'Aa this nae-deal blarney.'

'No in Ireland?'

'Naw, disnae gie a shit about Ireland. He's aifter an election.'

'Hoo come?'

'Pit Corbyn tae bed and an blame aabody bar himsel when it aa gaes tits up.'

'Suppose. Sae, Tam, ahm no really wantin tae ask this.'

'Why no?'

'Yi get aa het up. Ah'm feart ye'll conk oot wi yir dicky hert. Richt here oan the Junction flair.'

'Dinnae gie me gyp, Jimmy. There's waur places tae lay yersel doun. Whit's buggin yi?'

'Are we gonnae be independent noo? Scotland.'

Tam sipped his pint.

'Ken the cuddies, Jimmy?'

'Aye.'

'Whan a horse, no the favourite mind, comes up oan the inside.'

‘Fast.’

‘Faster than oanybodie kens.’

‘Aye?’

‘Weill noo ye ken.’

‘Tam, kin ah tell yi somethin?’

‘Aye, nae grief, man.’

‘Ah see whit ye mean.’

‘An?’

‘Ah’m votin yes neist time, gin we get anither vote.’

‘Frae Bojo.’

‘He’ll nae kin stop us noo.’

‘Naw, we’re frae Leith.’

‘Whit a chancer.’

‘Devious bastart.’

The pints slipped down simultaneously.

‘In unity is strength. Strength is rooted in the nation. From strength comes freedom. British ships will keep the Gulf open for shipping. British planes stationed on Cyprus will protect Syrian civilians from gas attacks. British aircraft carriers – Queen Elizabeth II pride of the fleet – will guard our interests in Singapore and the China Sea.

‘Through our strength we will build successful trade across the globe. Forget the paltry EU market; think multiple markets, stretching Britain’s reach beyond our former Empire. From Antarctic mining to newly opened Arctic shipping lanes, we can capitalise on global warming. We have the resources but do we have the bottle? That, my Scottish friends, is what I intend to provide. We’re a slumbering giant struggling to pull free from Europe’s guy ropes, and Scotland can be the lion to gnaw them through. The lion waiting to roar.’

Oblivious to the pall of puzzled looks, the Prime Minister returned to his cue sheet and ploughed on.

‘And already beside us, cheering us on, is our closest ally, the most powerful nation on earth, the United States of America. Of course President Trump is known to you

here in the home of golf, and he is also known to me personally as the staunchest friend Brexit Britain could have. Naturally there are blips in any relationship, even in loving - special ones. But don't be deceived by the tweet storms because Donald Trump is a true friend to freedom.'

Some laughter, politely subdued rippled through the chamber.

'Britain and America espouse freedom, and together we can realise those ideals. Freedom to choose, freedom to trade, freedom to travel. A modern freedom that rejects old restrictions. Freedom from all those pettifogging regulations. What's wrong with American chicken? KFC is a great global brand. What's wrong with affordable alcohol and fizzy drinks? This is the country that invented Irn Bru. Leave working people alone to live their lives as they choose.'

'Just this morning one of your Conservative members, Conservative and Unionist members – and there's going to be more of them soon – gave me this.'

The Prime Minister pulled a polythene wrapped fish from his suit pocket, and waved it above his head.

'It's a smokie, amazing at breakfast, depending on what you drank the night before, with poached eggs and salmon. But to send it through the post you have to provide a bed of ice, according to the EU. They've been producing these for centuries in Arbroath but now the price has rocketed because of bloated Brussels bureaucracy.'

'That's the kind of madness we're going to stop, along with dumping fish back into the sea because they're not EU approved. What an insult to Scotland's fishermen – and we will end it. Freedom is coming. Robert the Bruce would back Brexit. No EU declarations in Arbroath!

'In fact I would like to share a Scottish toast with you today. Alright, the whisky's not really flowing; you're remarkably dry, but you get my drift. Freedom's our do or die cause, and I need your co-operation. We must entrench and intensify our Union of peoples. The Saltire flies bravely in the Union Jack. We need your resources and grit but in return I shall not fail you on board the good ship Global Britain. Slainte! We want the full Scottish - black pudding, haggis, salmon and all the trimmings.'

'Yet I have not come here today empty handed, or cap-in-hand. I come with an unbeatable pledge to Scotland – to seal the deal. We are investing 300 million pounds in Scottish towns, along with Wales and Northern Ireland. The future is bright; the future is British. We want all parts in working order, and I as your Prime Minister will deliver. Should old acquaintance be forgotten, to coin a phrase. Forward together! Slainte!'

One cuffed hand went airborne for the cameras in mock toast, as the audience looked on bemused. There was some polite applause from the chamber but the public gallery was mute.

‘This special session is now closed,’ pronounced the Presiding Officer before anything unseemly might ensue.

Mr Johnson looked around, like someone woken from a dream before realising it was over. He ambled out warily after the officials.

To avoid the swelling crowd of demonstrators, The Prime Minister was ushered through the back door and whisked away. Ruth Davidson fled to her pod. Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party had become the career deadend she feared worst of all. Nicola Sturgeon and Catherine Bell came out to face a voracious press.

‘Is Johnson a foreign head of state?’ taunted one hack.

‘No, but he treated it like a state visit,’ responded Catherine, ‘and he was given a courteous hearing by the Scottish Parliament.’

‘What did you think of the Boris speech, First Minister?’ shouted another.

‘We’re very grateful to Boris Johnson for setting out his stall so – frankly. But he’s not able to deliver the promised goods, and anyway the Scottish people don’t want his shoddy merchandise.’

‘Are you calling the Prime Minister a conman?’

‘No comment,’ closed Sturgeon decisively, and she and Catherine Bell went back inside. High profile was over for the day, and the press dispersed to make the most of this latest ‘pledge to the Scots’.

‘Went rather well. Hard to read their eyes in that barn.’

‘You were in good form, Prime Minister, though the fish thing was risky. It’s a UK regulation, nothing to do with the EU.’

‘Really? Slippery subject, Jude, but it made my point. Images better than words and all that. “Pledge to the Scots” should catch on though.’

‘At least it’s not another solemn vow.’

‘Worked for Dave, mind you. Must be a kind of presbyterian thing. They love a whiff of religion.’

‘At the time. This might not be so easy – once bitten and all that.’

‘Bloody Jocks. Maybe life would be easier without them.’