

Chums

How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK

By Simon Kuper (2022)

Having done no preparation walk into your school (Eton, of course) or university (Oxford, where else?) debating chamber and amuse an audience by opposing arguments that are backed up by evidence; by witty insults at the expense of your opponents; by a confident assertion that the Earth is flat; and by flaunting your well-constructed eccentric personal traits; then bask in all the consequent adulation. Next become an MP and do the same in the Chamber of the House of Commons, surrounded by old school and university mates: the Chums.

In the days of Cameron, Gove, Johnson and many others this had also been the approved style at weekly Oxford tutorials. Essays were so often dashed off at the last minute and winging it was expected. If you were clever at winging it you would be thought to be intelligent. Kuper, the author of this book, also falls into the trap of believing that the ability to extemporise indicates intelligence. Cleverness perhaps but 'intelligence' would not be my preferred word. Nevertheless, this is a book by someone who is enough of an insider to shock us by illustrating just how distant are the attitudes and values of our rulers from those they presume to rule. We allow this. We have been taken over.

Kuper provides us with a reason for Brexit. From the beginning it was clear to me that the EU referendum was called only to settle an internal Tory struggle. Kuper points out that older Tory MPs with the same school and university background had experience of sometimes two World Wars and a deep Depression. They had a history of battles fought, lost and won. Harold Macmillan might have become a Bertie Wooster but sharing trenches with working class lads and representing a constituency coping with unemployment transformed him and marks out the difference between him and his like from the Johnson generation of Chums.

What Great War was there for the Chums of Cameron's generation to fight? Nigel Farage was never a member of the Chumocracy but he and others offered a reminder that membership of the EU meant that Great Britain could no longer sail the seas and impose its will upon weaker nations. Some Chums saw the EU as a constraint. So, LEAVE became their Battle Cry. And, just as they had behaved in their debating societies, telling the truth was never going to be a priority. Such fun it must have been to do on a national scale what they had done at Eton and Oxford. £350 million a week extra for the NHS? Who cares if that is a lie? It is all part of the jolly jape. Johnson, we are reminded, had no deep preference for LEAVE against REMAIN. His concern was for himself: for his chance to become Leader of the Tory Party and Prime Minister. In his book, FOR THE RECORD (2019), Cameron makes clear that even he, a fellow Chum, totally underestimated Johnson's self-focus. Chums may fall out a bit and take different sides on small matters, but surely, thought Cameron, everyone belongs in the club.

Possibly Brexit revealed the true nature of the Tory split. On the one hand we had those represented by Cameron who lived securely and sedately inside a class

boundary, giving sufficient nutritious scraps from the tables of the rich so that the poor would stay away from the barricades. And on the other hand were the impatient imperialists urging each other to rebuild an Empire Upon Which The Sun Never Set. That was the side Johnson took. It is why one day we can be told that the North of Ireland Protocol is the finest thing since sliced bread but later, having read it properly, he decides that it must be scrapped. International law? It means no more than the Ministerial Code or Covid Rules. The "Tiny Caste" plus hangers on such as the Cabinet have the power now. What they say goes.

And, Kuper reminds us, there are also Labour Chums who attended the same Oxford and are on first name terms with the Camerons, the Osbornes and the Johnsons. Starmer may have come late to the Oxford game but I, at least, have a suspicion that no matter which side of the EU Struggle between the Chums he preferred he saw them both through deferential eyes. Corbyn? Sorry old friend, you were simply not ever going to be 'one of them'. That, says me, is why so much effort was devoted to casting him as a modern day Robespierre. There is a difference between an estate and an allotment.

Kuper makes many references to Brideshead Revisited (1945). Surely that was set in prewar days, a novel about a long ago past that became a television series? Fiction. For Kuper it is a constant reference point as he explains the workings of the Tory Caste of Chums. Rees-Mogg is surely a character thought up by Evelyn Waugh. Perhaps, looking at what has happened to the Bullingdon Club in recent years, we may hope for something better from future governments. My own view is that the Tories are fast consuming themselves while Starmer seeks to emulate them, more nicely of course.

As for Oxford, we are reading about a 'Tiny Caste' from a past.

What I have written I only claim to be a response to the book. There are 220 pages of text and every page offers something of value. Borrowing from WH Auden's list of classifications, This is a good book and I like it.

Cliff Jones 16th. June 2022

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