

## **More Students' Union than European Union**

**Ten questions on**

### **UNLEASHING DEMONS**

**The**

**Inside Story**

**Of Brexit**

**By**

**(Now Sir) CRAIG OLIVER**

#### **1. Who likes this book?**

Endorsing the book are John Simpson, *Fascinating*, Nick Robinson, *Compelling*, Robert Peston, *Gripping* and from Anthony Seldon, ...*vivid, frank and exciting*.... Naturally they were keen to read an inside account of a story they had spent a lot of effort trying to uncover and decipher. They were in an outer bubble while the author was deep within the innermost bubble. To have him (one of their own, with the slight exception of Seldon) emerge from that bursting bubble clutching his diary must have been an early Christmas for them.

Before working for David Cameron as his Director of Politics and Communications, or spin-doctor, Craig Oliver's job as a journalist had included the detection, unravelling and the re-spinning of spin. The same was true of his predecessor, Andy Coulson. In recent years it had been Tony Blair's New Labour that set the standard for politics as narrative: stories with traction regardless of their veracity. This is, of course, not the same as telling lies. Is it?

#### **2. Was the referendum that was supposed to be about our membership of the European Union in fact a meeting of the school debating society, the winner hoping to be appointed Head Prefect with the power to choose the other prefects?**

I believe that it was. The book also has more Students' Union about it than European Union. Those endorsements were not wrong. The book is exciting. We want to know who is going to be President of Guild; who is going to be Head Prefect; who is going to stay mates with whom; and who

shall practise to deceive. Walter Scott would have been able to point to lots and lots of deliberately woven tangled webs.

### **3. Why did the Head Boy of the secondary modern down the road seem so reluctant to join in and say what was wanted?**

Our Craig realises that for Remain to be effective he must reach out to other parties. With many (New) Labour Party members he had little difficulty connecting. Will Straw, Peter Mandelson and Tony Blair spoke the same language. Jeremy Corbyn, however, was different. In his book Blair uses the phrase 'get it' a lot to distinguish between those that have embraced his religion and those that are guilty of apostasy and fail to 'get it'.

In the liturgy used by Remain it was necessary for the priests to chant 'Loss of jobs, loss of money, loss of jobs, loss of money'. Keeping jobs and having money, they emphasised, are the benefits of EU membership. A little late they realised that immigration was also an issue even although it formed the basis of pre-referendum negotiations with fellow members of the EU. As with all such issues they can also be seen as narratives that gain and lose and gain and lose traction. Narratives that include verifiable facts are a bonus. I don't think that the government ever quite understood that their policies over the years were also an issue.

Among the positive reasons for remaining as members of the EU Corbyn emphasised human rights, workers' rights and the prevention of exploitation. That was not the chosen narrative.

It is also during this time that Corbyn ran into the artificially constructed anti-Semitism crisis in which supporting the Semitic Palestinians is presented as being anti-Semitic. Israel is run mostly by non-Semitic people but they have captured the insult in order to classify criticism of its actions as anti-Semitic (a devastatingly sticky label). Perhaps that was perceived to be too complicated an argument to make but, for me, Corbyn ought to have made it. The Labour Friends of Israel would have gone up the wall but it is about time that they emptied their heads of falsehoods and learned some history and there are plenty of Israeli academics and plenty of British Jews who would have spoken along with Corbyn had he chosen to take on those people. It is a pity that he did not.

Conservative Party Remainers always found it difficult to conceal their glee when their carefully scripted jokes at his expense went down well at Prime Minister's Questions and any perceived difficulty for Corbyn was celebrated. Craig Oliver does recognise the two-facedness (not his word) of simultaneously wishing that Corbyn would ensure that they (Conservative Remainers) won while jumping for joy when anything happened that could be presented as a loss for Corbyn: another tangled web woven by those practising to deceive. They knew they needed him but did not know how to connect other than on their own terms.

What none of them appear to have considered for a moment is that Corbyn's approach, which, to me, acknowledged real disadvantages in EU membership such as its encouragement of greedy capitalism and its appalling treatment of Greece had little connection with Conservative philosophy. He was not ever going to rationalise greed and privilege.

Another Secondary Modern old boy mentioned as a potential supporter is Gordon Brown. I detect respect by Conservative Remainers for his intellect and serious voice but he disappoints them for being insufficiently 'on message'. I don't think he was ever likely to become a purveyor of narratives emanating from Cameron's No.10 or even from Will Straw's Stronger In group.

#### **4. Whose idea was it to hold a referendum?**

This question is asked self-deprecatingly by David Cameron (known to the author as DC). No doubt he and his team needed to cheer themselves up from time to time but how can we forget his thoughtlessness in promising a referendum? Today it appears that he presents it as a decision that it was inevitable for the nation to have to take.

It was not inevitable. Neither was it thought through. Management and control of the Tory Party was all that mattered to him and we were made to participate in **Charade Democracy** in order to sort out his personal party domestic strife. It was sorted and he suffered but his cultural, social and psychological distance from the vast majority of voters means that his suffering shall be of a different order. Do not lose sleep worrying about him.

#### **5. Why was the BBC so stuck on the idea of balanced reporting?**

Craig Oliver is beset by this question. He is right to be so. Instead of asking probing questions that would easily have revealed the paucity and falsity of Leave's assertions it opted for 'balance'. I am reminded of Jeremy Bowen describing the murderous Ariel Sharon as 'controversial'. Choosing such a word comes from the BBC's perceived need for what it thinks is 'objectivity' and being 'fair' to both sides. In the case of the referendum campaign it meant giving equal space, time and respect to two sets of narratives. The fact that the Leave narrative was more heavily based upon assertion did not prompt questioning. Punches were pulled for the sake of 'balance'.

Nasty man that Hitler but, on the other hand, he was fond of dogs.  
Balance!

#### **6. Why did so many newspapers deal in lies, prejudice and hatred?**

The author relates casual chats between him and old mates from Fleet Street.

**My paraphrase:**

“How are you doing? That story you put out was really good. It certainly destroyed the story put out by Leave. We are still going to trash it in the morning. Fancy a drink?”

Reading the book you might find disgusting the simple-minded nastiness of the attacks upon immigrants and foreigners. It contrasts with the early certainty of Remainers that the most powerful motivator for voters was economic self-interest.

There is, however, no chance of escaping the conclusion that the Leavers who had little to say that was either cogent or coherent were happy to run stories that stirred up prejudice against ‘others’. Becoming President of Guild or gaining a Head Prefect’s badge was far more important than telling the truth or opposing racism and hatred or fear of foreigners.

As for our newspapers, who can remember when The Sun was the Daily Herald edited by George Lansbury who went on to become leader of the Labour Party? Closer still, we might recall the Daily Mirror of Hugh Cudlip and so many great journalists that had the skill to distil matters of great moment into short telling phrases without compromising the meaning.

If I sound as though I am regretting a fall in journalistic standards accompanied by a drift rightwards since ‘my day’ then, yes, I am. I am afraid that during the referendum voters were let down by the media.

**7. Why are there so many shits in our school?**

Grayling? An idiot shit. Gove? An ultra polite and charming shit. Mrs. Gove? A deceitful shit. Boris? An amusing, shambolic and far from efficient shit. IDS? A bemused and incompetent shit. Theresa May? A deceitful and totally untrustworthy shit.

I think that is a good summary of the thinking in No.10 as expressed in this book. And if there is one thing of current relevance that stands out from the book it is that Theresa May keeps things close, likes to control and has no mates. David Cameron’s inadequacy as Prime Minister may have derived from the openness of his shallowness. Theresa May’s inadequacy possibly derives from a shallowness that she tries hard to hide.

These are merely, of course, my impressions. Another impression was that the damage done by the policies of such people operating as members of government (partially excepting Mrs. Gove) was not a factor that bothered DC. They were all, including Remainer Osborne, uncaring and incompetent. Osborne far exceeded the depths reached by the previous worst ever Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill. And not even Kenneth Baker managed educational waste laying on the scale of Gove. The effect upon the voters of their years of social fracking did not penetrate Cameron’s clique. But then why should it have? Their purpose

was to preserve and promote the kind of society in which 'chaps like us' can have a private scrap over who gets power.

### **8. And so? To the victors the soiled spoils: to the vanquished the honours list and the after dinner circuit.**

'And so?' is the title of Craig Oliver's *Epilogue*. In it he prepares the way for the defence currently being developed by DC. There had to be a referendum because not only was there pressure from inside the Conservative Party but also from the country at large. Earlier in the book/diary he has, however, admitted that little was ever done to demonstrate and explain the EU to the voters. If there had to be a campaign, he suggests, it ought not to have been switched on suddenly.

It is perhaps natural for him to defend Cameron, the boss who was so generous with honours and dosh to his close supporters just before he left office. I doubt, however, that he shall succeed in altering the judgment of Cameron as an appallingly bad Prime Minister, not only for the sheer nastiness of his policies but also for having chosen to fight, and lose, an unnecessary battle with insufficient preparation.

It was, furthermore, not just the Brexiters that had no clear notion of what might happen after the referendum. The Remainers in Downing Street were fully aware that senior Conservative Leavers **were only supposed to blow the bloody doors off** in the famous quote from *The Italian Job* and attributed by herself to Mrs. Gove when she told her husband the result of the vote. They expected to lose, which explains their lack of compunction when telling huge lies and also their rapid revision of those lies once they had won and became responsible for fulfilling promises.

But what were the plans for the Remainers had they won? Reshuffles certainly. And there was clear acknowledgment that a close win would not release the pressure from within the Conservative Party. It was well accepted that Gove and Boris were in it to position themselves for more power within the Party. What there never was, at anytime, was a plan or policy to pursue increased democracy in the EU or to encourage it to move away from nasty selfish capitalism. Having stirred up anti immigrant racism the plan was simply to say, 'Look, we don't like foreigners either', hoping that would be sufficient to damp down internal dissent.

### **9. Democracy? What is that?**

'The people have spoken', 'It is the will of the people', 'We must respect the result' and, often expressed very powerfully as a threatening question, '**Just what is it about democracy that you don't understand?**'

What I do fail to understand is how the concept of democracy, which we have elevated and even venerated, retains its purity and power to legitimise decisions when it becomes disconnected from the concept of truth.

Neither side was free of guilt but not only were so many of Leave's prominent campaigners in it for what they could secure for themselves but they told some whoppers.

And neither side seems to have had the slightest inclination to reveal that our governments have for decades been reducing the numbers of civil servants and losing experience, expertise and corporate memory. Introducing consultants on short term contracts to cope with crises can actually make things worse.

Leaving the EU imposes such a strain upon our capacity to draft and scrutinise the legislation necessary to simply run the country that recourse will have to be made to more and more unscrutinised delegated legislation. Who gets to debate an order in council? Those shouting loudest for the implementation of a decision on the basis that this is what the **Goddess Demokratia** demands are blind to the inescapable fact that a decision to leave the EU is already making our government more absolutist.

We have changed goddesses. It is to **Oligarkia** that we must now bring our votive offerings.

#### **10. Is the book remaindered (Geddit?) or is that a pun too far?**

Really, the ConDem government, the Cameroons and, now, the entire country have been remaindered. Make Britain Great Again? A likely story!

Not to worry, the world is queuing up to buy our weapons. That should bring in a few bob.

But what shall be the impact of the book? It may have provided DC with a few bones to construct a wobbly skeleton upon which he can build his argument that he had no choice but to hold a referendum. It has certainly provided political junkies with a rattling good yarn. What, however, is its big message to us? I am sure that the author did not intend to but he has clearly told us never to over estimate the knowledge, cleverness or the values of those in government, particularly if they are members of the Conservative Party.

When Anthony King and Ivor Crewe wrote ***The BLUNDERS of our GOVERNMENTS*** they had little idea how much worse it could get.

And somehow I don't think I shall ever be the same now that I know that on his wall Michael Gove had a picture of ... pausing for effect... **Lenin**. Unity of Purpose anyone?

**Cliff Jones, 1<sup>st</sup>. January 2017.**

**P.S. I have not once used the 'F' word: Nigel.**

