

## The 'Leadership' Question (3)



What is leadership?

Boris Johnson, who still fancies himself as a 'political leader', bid his farewell with a declarative "*Hasta la vista, baby*", a demeaning utterance in the context of a retiring prime minister speaking to the mother of all parliaments, if ever there was one.

On first reaction it reaffirmed for many the image of Johnson as someone unable take anything except himself seriously and to act as a 'grown-up' adult rather than in his trademark juvenile boorish way of the English public school and Oxford Bullingdon Club.

On second thought, however, the question arises as to whether Johnson, ever the showman and charlatan, did this spontaneously on the spur of the moment or

planned the well-known catchphrase of the Terminator character in a science fiction action film for the end his speech?

It's tempting *not to stop and think* and dismiss it all as a "here he goes again, what has he done now" type of thing. That would be a waste. Everyday examples like this give us useful material for *thinking*. We look at it as an opportunity and a prompt to think what we are doing, as Hannah Arendt urged on us, and thereby increasing self-awareness *how we think*. It's not about Johnson – he just gives us the material to practice thinking.

In thinking about his use of this as his sign-off, we can ask: what do we know of Boris Johnson?

We can observe from years of public behaviour that he takes himself very seriously and that he is high on the spectrum of narcissism. So we conclude he did it deliberately and wonder why again make a fool of himself.

The temptation is to think about Johnson in personal terms, in his own terms, in terms of his lack of integrity, dissembling and evasiveness, and craving for fealty.

Suppose, however, we turn to Hannah Arendt who generally tends not to think about individuals and their personal psychology but rather think in terms of the conditions in which individuals live and operate. What are the conditions in which Johnson is operating? What do we see when we look to the conditions in which this Johnsonian behaviour is happening?

By coincidence on the same evening, watching an episode of the excellent Danish political drama *Borgen* on Netflix, we see the speech writer, Kaspar, looking for inspiration for the opening of parliament speech for Prime Minister, Birgitte Nyborg. In one scene, where he is jogging and listening to John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech, we hear Kennedy's voice speaking one of the most memorable lines of one of the greatest speeches - "*ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country*" (<https://bit.ly/3RRDg4I>).

Nothing like the spirit of that speech has ever come from Johnson and yet Johnson's bit of triteness caught the news media's attention and set it and the twitterati buzzing as to what he could have meant. A quick search of the phrase online since then brings up, not the film or its character, but Johnson.

So did Johnson, always the attention seeker, achieve something he planned? If so, what is going on? What has happened from JFK to Boris?

The big change is speeches mattered at the time of the time of Kennedy. Whole speeches mattered, not just a part of a speech, for its ideas, its themes, structure, and character.

But what of today? What are the conditions for politician's expressing their thoughts? Are they those of JFK?

Obviously not. We are not in a world of JFK where whole speeches mattered. We are now in the noisy and confusing world of social media where there is only space for the sound-bite. The smart and cunning phrase is now what gets attention and all that matters.

Today there is no room for the whole speech, the careful expression of a line of thought, for thoughtfulness, ideas, and for talking to others in a dialogue. (Examples can be found in books with titles like *Speeches That Changed the World* which can often be picked up cheaply in local newsagents and shopping centres.)

The sound-bite may catch the attention of people in a hurry and it gets a desired and planned emotional and sub-conscious reaction from people in the midst of their haste. A conscious and thinking response is the last thing that is wanted from people.

So we suggest, yes, Johnson did plan his sound-bite, the demeaning 'baby' and the whole manner of it. In a world of social media, the easy way to be remembered is to have your attention-grabbing, perhaps shocking, sound-bite. Johnson who visibly can hardly express a coherent thought when speaking and certainly cannot express, even read, a coherent speech is in his element here.

Do you think this is 'leadership'? Is it good enough for you?

We believe it is not good enough and that it's time to go back to the great political speeches to counter the corrupting, dumbing down effect of the social media businesses.

Whatever the expression of 'leadership' is, it surely is not a sound-bite. Too many politicians are now getting away with not articulating thoughtful ideas in the conditions of today, and not having to construct any coherent expressions of their thinking. They just have to find a catchy sound-bite that slices through the social media fog.

Have you noticed how sound-bites have increasingly driven out thoughtful speech in the professional, political, and social realms of your life?

They can hardly be the expression of 'leadership' in the way that Robert Kennedy's great speech on the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968 is a manifestation of 'leadership'.

For your own reflection and contemplation, see Robert Kennedy's speech [here](#) and read the transcript of his speech [here](#).

What do you observe in Robert Kennedy's speech? What thoughts does it bring up for you about 'leadership'?

*Our forthcoming book **The Leadership Mind** addresses the very important question of what is 'leadership'? Sign up to our newsletter and keep up to date [eepurl.com/bp\\_AI5](http://eepurl.com/bp_AI5) with our work at The Keynes Centre.*

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