

Max Hastings vs Boris Johnson: I know who I'd trust more

Max's campaign against Boris is cowardly

by Conrad Black



Sir Max Hastings, whom I engaged as editor of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1986 and who stayed in that role for about nine years, seems to have installed himself at the head of the rabid mob of journalistic haters of Boris Johnson.

In recent pieces in *The Spectator* and the *Guardian* he has described Boris as 'a tasteless joke' interested only in 'fame and gratification... a scoundrel or a mere rogue' (a subtle distinction), and in any case a man afflicted by 'moral bankruptcy'.

Max concedes that Boris is likely to be the next prime minister and preemptively accuses him of conducting a

'celebrity government as in Ukraine and the US'. His government will 'reveal contempt for rules, precedent, order and stability', yet 'his graver vice is cowardice... and a weak character'.

There is certainly room for debate about Boris Johnson as prime minister. But he possesses a number of remarkable qualities considerably beyond the talents Hastings accords him as an entertainer and a clown. He was such an effective correspondent for us in Brussels that he greatly influenced British opinion on this country's relations with Europe. He was an undoubtedly effective editor of *The Spectator* even though he was simultaneously a member of parliament. He liberated London from the onerous leftist government of Ken Livingstone, contributed importantly to the success of the Olympic Games, and his administration must stand as the most successful London has had in a very long time. All sane Londoners would take him back tomorrow in place of the unrelievedly obnoxious Sadiq Khan.

It will not do to dismiss so flippantly the accomplishments of someone who has moved so surefootedly from Brussels correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in less than 20 years to potential prime minister.

As the former employer of both of them, and although their positions were of un-equal importance and challenges, on balance I must declare Boris to be more reliable and trustworthy than Max. Hastings went to South Africa for a few days and returned in favour of effectively throwing the white population out of that country. He spent a few days in Northern Ireland and returned as champion of a 'troops out' approach and, despite the wishes of its majority, has said the British would shed few tears when Northern Ireland 'inevitably' leaves the UK.

He was an unconditional euro-integrationist but eventually, after he left us, he recanted and said it had all been a

horrible mistake. He has now returned to his earlier version of the British national interest, and proposes headfirst immersion in Europe. He is a well-oiled weathervane. Boris has been consistent and even courageous on this most important issue.

There is a greater problem. I stood by Mr Hastings, despite differences, despite problems he needlessly created (such as antagonising the family of the then prime minister Margaret Thatcher), and through great misfortune. I raised his income for compassionate as well as meritorious reasons, took him into my confidence and even asked him to help organise my small wedding to Barbara Amiel in 1992.

When Mr Murdoch launched the cover price war in 1993, Max, the liberator of Port Stanley, made a few purposeful noises and then scurried out the back door into the tall grass, self-demoting to the *Evening Standard*, a dwarfish title compared to the one from which he defected. (We won the price war without him.)

When my legal difficulties arose, he publicly threw in his lot with my chief defamer and, I am told, predicted that Barbara would quickly decamp for greener pastures. The spurious case against me failed and has been withdrawn and expunged, and no one has ever had a more loyal and indomitably supportive wife than Barbara.

Boris's peccadilloes were more absurd, complicated and over-publicised than the shambles of the personal lives of other journalists. But his editorial opinions were sensible and consistent. His schtick grew tiresome, like an over-familiar vaudeville act, but he was at all times a person of goodwill and his foibles were deployed to the benefit of the enterprise.

He had his lapses, but he was capable, successful and reliable when it counted, and he is, as he appears, a pleasant man. Max

is an ill-tempered snob with a short attention span. He has his talents, but it pains me to report that when seriously tested, he was a coward and a flake. I think Boris will be fine.

Conrad Black was proprietor of the Daily Telegraph and The Spectator from 1985 to 2004. Max Hastings edited the Daily Telegraph from 1986 to 1995. Boris Johnson joined the Daily Telegraph in 1988 and edited The Spectator from 1999 to 2005.

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