Who Dares Wins: learning to be entrepreneurial as a conservative social justice discourse

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Abstract

In 2019, when Boris Johnson became Conservative leader and triumphed in that year's mid-December general election, the Party's identity was wrapped in success stories of opportunity and aspiration. These stories, themed around entrepreneurialism, presented success as a result of learning to take chances and embrace risk. Even when communicated to a bourgeois audience, these stories had a social justice dimension: the idea of learning to be entrepreneurial was projected onto subordinated groups—women and girls, working-class people and ethnic minorities—and seen as liberating for them. Using a corpus mostly of *Telegraph* newspaper articles published in the summer and autumn of 2019, this article offers a constructionist discourse analysis of that depiction of reality. Via a process of 'sceptical reading', it explores 'true blue' Conservatism's underpinning discourse about learning to be entrepreneurial: that Britain's post-Brexit future, laden with opportunity but requiring calculated risk, was a liberatory moment for the nation.

Keywords

Entrepreneurialism; Conservatism; Social justice; Discourse; Brexit; Boris Johnson

Introduction

In 2019, when Boris Johnson became Conservative leader and emerged triumphant from that year's mid-December general election, Conservative identity was wrapped in stories of opportunity and aspiration. The Party benefited from the compelling narrative message in its manifesto, *Get Brexit Done: Unleash Britain's Potential* (Conservatives 2019; Cutts et al 2020, p. 11; Mattinson 2020, p. 144). Two years earlier, Tim Shipman's (2017, p. 104) post-Brexit book *Fall Out* had quoted an unnamed Party source discussing how the Party needed to develop a stirring narrative pull: 'The government does facts, but we don't live in facts any more. We have to explain facts through emotional stories. You have to tell stories'. For the Party, therefore, Brexit was not merely a fact. It provided a platform for emotional stories of opportunity and aspiration.

Within this discourse, a human focus for those stories was provided by three types or groups of people: women and girls, working-class people, and ethnic minorities. In 2019, the Conservative discourse told emotional stories about the 'spirit' and successes of all three groups. Of course, the idea of helping those groups is classically associated with the left. This article's aim is to provide a detailed and nuanced reading of how those narratives were deployed on the right. It centres on sources from, and related to, the *Telegraph* (henceforth it will refer to both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Telegraph* as the *Telegraph*), the newspaper that employed Johnson as a journalist prior to his political career.

In this social justice-oriented version of Conservative identity, social and personal characteristics associated with opportunity and aspiration were projected onto the three groups. These were characteristics congruent with the ideals of the notional *Telegraph* reader and the persona of Johnson himself, evocatively described by his biographer Tom Bower (2020) as 'the gambler'. On the surface, it was a discourse of social justice as it praised and celebrated the struggles of the oppressed. However, the key was that it provided its audience

with a feeling (to quote the *Telegraph*'s Christmas-themed postelection headline) of 'comfort and joy'. Groups that were potentially oppositional or troublesome were portrayed as being in harmony with Conservative identity, actually or potentially able to take the risks required to make good on the Brexit gamble.

This article occupies unique space in the lively academic and critical discussion that surrounds the Conservative Party's recent message and purpose. A prime focus in many of the responses to the 2019 victory has been Johnson's personal appeal and strategic dexterity (Alexandre-Collier 2022; Cooper and Cooper 2020; De Luca 2021; Gamble 2021; Hayton 2021; Jennings et al. 2021). Core to this analysis is Johnson's long-established label as a 'Heineken' politician, reaching parts of the electorate with whom other Conservative politicians normally lack sway (Jennings et al. 2021, p. 310. See also Gimson 2016, p. xl; and the account of Johnson as Foreign Secretary in Honeyman 2022). What remains to be interpreted, though, is how the apparent social radicalism embodied in Johnson's approach—the promise of widening opportunity for all sections of British society—was also communicated to a true-blue middle-class Conservative audience.

Through existing analysis, we already know the appeal beyond Conservative heartlands and how it was constructed. Unlike Theresa May, whose disconnected bullet-point style of communication in the 2017 election campaign tended to consist of a series of points or promises, Johnson was adept at composing a logical step-by-step guide to how he would make Brexit happen as well as what would happen post-Brexit (Cooper and Cooper 2020, p. 756). There was a 'geography of discontent' behind Brexit, and Johnson's narrative skill was important in reassuring the 'left-behind' communities whose votes had tilted the country towards Leave that their decision would result in positive change (Gamble 2021; Mattinson 2020; McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021; Payne 2021). In terms of audience, the spread was wide, as Johnson was able to associate 'getting Brexit done' with defending the 'will of the

people'. This position managed to square the appeal of being seen to be truly democratic—by honouring the wishes of the popular majority—with the ideological principle of British territorial sovereignty which was becoming existentially important for the Party membership (Gamble 2021, p. 465; Hayton 2021, pp. 415–416; Hayton 2022, p. 350).

This article carves out a new space of enquiry by analysing how a social justice angle in Conservative identity was communicated to an already-well off 'true blue' audience in 2019—despite that agenda being, on the face of it, irrelevant or even challenging to them. There are particular books that have appeared in recent years on Conservative identity that help us to build up this picture. Ed West (2020) sees the Party being overwhelmed, and in some respects redirected, by a context in which British social attitudes have become more inclusive and liberal, and where the influential voices in the new digital world are predominantly leftish. He implies that the Party at its heart is not socially radical—a judgement shared by two other authors, albeit from more hostile standpoints. These look through opposite ends of the same telescope: Phil Burton-Cartledge (2021) identifies the prime Conservative *followers* as the retired and property-owners—groups with a stake in stability and the status quo, not social turbulence or transformation. Similarly, Simon Kuper (2022) identifies the Party's *leadership* as a caste that is fundamentally at home in an idyllic, unchanging England. So, using these insights to address an original question that represents a highly novel area of enquiry, this article will show how Conservatism responds to the challenge of social justice when it looks in the mirror: how, via its discourse, does it manage to live in its idyll and yet simultaneously answer the needs of the oppressed; and how does it thereby craft Conservative-shaped myths of social radicalism?

Texts related to the *Telegraph* represent a unique vantage point for this enquiry. Of the two centre-right newspapers, it is the *Telegraph*, more-so than the *Times*, that is the quintessential newspaper of the Conservative Party, diametrically opposing the *Guardian* and

the Labour Party (Johnson 1985, p. 355). Meanwhile, the *Telegraph* arguably also belongs to a slightly different social setting than the *Times*. If the *Times* is the metropolitan establishment newspaper, the *Telegraph* could be viewed as the characteristic newspaper of the 'new squirearchy' in rural and semi-rural England who perceive themselves as having won a slice of traditional English gentility (Heley 2010; Lawler 2008). Within its discursive universe, social justice occurs when subordinated groups are able to fight their way up the social hierarchy that the *Telegraph* reader has already climbed. Those consuming this discourse (and gratified by it, given that it reflects their worldview) can immerse themselves in a version of reality in which the ethos of opportunity, aspiration and risk that has served them so well is spread across society.

For this study of Conservatism's social justice identity, a particular, 'constructionist' approach to textual analysis was deemed most suitable. As described by Bryman (2016, p. 531), this approach involved analysing how 'versions of reality [are] propounded by members of [a] social setting', and how, as they select from the many viable ways of representing reality, 'a particular depiction of reality is built up'. Via this approach, three research questions emerged. They were:

1. Was there a unifying and coherent Conservative depiction of reality in 2019, and, if so, what was it?
2. How was Conservative identity articulated in that depiction of reality?
3. What social and personal characteristics were foregrounded in that identity?

This constructionist analysis was applied to texts belonging to two specific periods: June–July 2019 and October–December 2019. All of the texts analysed in this article were identified during a succession of four periods when data gathering took place (1: April–

September 2019, 2: November 2019–February 2020, 3: May 2020–September 2021, and 4: January–April 2022). The texts were read and annotated iteratively; those first encountered during the earlier, embryonic data-gathering phases were re-read and re-annotated across the later phases. During May–July 2019 and October–December 2019, the data-gathering process included following 'newspaper review' features and sections on current affairs television programmes and the internet; monitoring social media profiles; and purchasing relevant newspaper texts via web-based digital archives and newsstands. From January 2020 onwards, during the later part of phase 2 and into phases 3 and 4, additional texts were sourced that filled in logical gaps (e.g. Heffer 2019).

As the research developed, and the *Telegraph* emerged as the key source, the research became more tightly focused and texts not associated with the *Telegraph* were gradually discarded. Of the 10 main texts used in the article (see table below; there are numerous other texts mentioned in passing), 8 were *Telegraph* articles, and the other two (Sandbrook 2019; WEAPPG 2019) were texts that were written about approvingly in the *Telegraph*. These 10 texts were mostly authored by, or referring to, specific Conservative politicians of the present day (or else to Margaret Thatcher). The specific communication explored in this paper is therefore between a certain type of *speaker* (a Conservative MP or Conservative-aligned intellectual personality) and a particular *hearer* we can conject (the type of reader sketched at the end of the previous section). Putting together speaker and hearer in this way, we can interpret the intended message of a text and fit it within a conjecture of Conservative identity (Belsey 2002, p. 45).

The set of texts used here should be understood as a small-scale, exploratory corpus. The two periods, mentioned above, are chosen for specific reasons, linked to Johnson's arrival as Prime Minister and the advent of the election. A more extensive project might compare more different periods systematically. Gender, class and ethnicity were

selected, likewise, as they seemed most relevant to this particular data-set. Theoretically, political discourses may focus on numerous social categories, including several of the categories listed in the UK's Equality Act 2010 such as marital status, sexuality, dis/ability and age, and also (in the UK context, English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish) nationhood. Because the corpus is designed to be exploratory, not comprehensive, these and other endeavours lie beyond the scope of the present paper, but could be explored in further research.

The 10 main texts used in this small-scale, exploratory study are listed in the table below. The table includes any associated Conservative politician; the group foregrounded in its message (women and girls, working class or ethnic minorities); the date during 2019 when it appeared or was written about (an asterisk denotes that it was in the *Telegraph*); and in what phase of research it was discovered (see brackets next to the year in the first column). Broadly speaking, the texts foregrounding women and girls come from the June–July 2019 period, and those foregrounding the working class and ethnic minorities cover both periods.

Text	Type	Associated politician	Group foregrounded	Date published in 2019
Hinds 2019 (1)	Newspaper article	Damian Hinds	Women/girls	22 June*
WEAPPG 2019 (2)	Policy report	Craig Tracey		16 July*
Daily Telegraph 2019c (3)	Newspaper article	Margaret Thatcher	Working class	22 July*
Daily Telegraph 2019b (2)		Sajid Javid, James Cleverly, Kwasi Kwarteng	Ethnic minorities	26 July*
Strimpel 2019 (3)		Priti Patel, Dominic Raab		28 July*
Sandbrook 2019 (2)	Book	Margaret Thatcher	Working class	3 October
Heffer 2019 (4)	Newspaper article		N/A	19 October*
Mikhailova 2019 (2)		Sajid Javid	Ethnic minorities	23 November*

Daily Telegraph 2019a (4)		N/A		6 December*
Daily Telegraph 2019d (4)				

Reflecting the view of textual analysis as a craft skill rather than a regimented set of practices, the way that these texts were analysed was creative, underpinned by a concept of 'sceptical reading'. 'Sceptical reading' was the third of the three main criteria by which texts were selected for inclusion:

1. Does the date and context of the text fit within the parameters for the research?
2. Does the text contain features that are relevant to the research questions?
3. Is the text susceptible to a 'sceptical reading'?

While the formal coding of words or phrases may always be more-or-less central to textual analysis, the sceptical reading approach is most concerned with 'searching for a purpose lurking behind the ways that something is said or presented' (Bryman 2016, p. 534). Where the facility existed (e.g. WEAPPG 2019), texts were word-searched for features (e.g. comments and arguments) relevant to the research questions. However, following the approach of sceptical reading, the main focal point was in unpicking the type(s) of attitude or perspective that could be detected in the texts.

In this sceptical reading process, a text's constituent perspectives or outlooks are situated within a range of short/immediate-term and longer-term socio-historical contexts. So, while this study drew on qualitative content analysis to highlight meanings that were *denotative* (clear to the uninitiated reader), it was primarily a social and historical analysis of the deeper potential *connotative* significances of what was said (Bryman 2016, p. 565). This

sceptical reading begins, in the first of three main sections that cover gender, class and race, by applying that connotative lens to the discourse's discussion of women and girls.

Women and girls

Female liberation was an idea that this discourse could easily utilise—a twist in the long-running association between Conservatism and womanhood. With its championing of family and the female consumer, Conservatism historically offered a type of inclusion not found in the male-centred labour movement; an image further bolstered by the presence of Thatcher as an 'embodiment of women's strength and stamina' (Campbell 1987, p. 110). The problem for Conservatism has been feminism's demand for a critique of systematic sexual oppression. Thatcher's Conservative concern with individuals not systems meant that she was found wanting as an emancipator of women by her female critics (Webster 1990). In the post-Thatcher decades, the challenge further deepened. As West (2020, p. 6) notes, younger generations of women tilted further left, producing a sense that Conservatism was centred in men's, not women's, concerns and priorities.

A notable new resource for connecting womanhood with Conservatism in the UK was 'confidence feminism' (Gill and Orgad 2017). This type of feminism—prominently articulated in US business success manuals such as *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013) and *#GIRLBOSS* (Amoruso 2014)—dovetailed with the established UK Conservative framing of opportunity. John Major (1995), a Prime Minister who had risen following difficulties in his early years, had referred to Conservatism as 'tough edged': 'It offers opportunity but it demands that people stir themselves as well'. Twenty years later, the idea of women rising to the challenge of opportunity, learning to be more active and assertive, was pivotal to the American confidence-feminist bibles. *#GIRLBOSS* advanced the manifesto that: 'A #GIRLBOSS is someone who's in charge of her own life. She gets what she wants because she works for it.

As a #GIRLBOSS, you take control and accept responsibility' (Amoruso 2014, p. 11). It is easy to see how this consciousness-raising messaging could fit into a pro-Brexit narrative—especially given the frequently used metaphor of Brexit as a messy divorce from an oppressive partner (Musolff 2021, pp. 42–47). In this narrative, with an innocent Britain being emancipated from the EU, there was a poetry in British women awakening as Britain's enterprising 'lionesses', helping power the nation's economic growth and global success.

Within this quasi-feminist Conservative discourse of confidence, two other notable texts appeared in the summer period. The first of these was an article by the Education Secretary Damian Hinds (2019), published in June in the *Telegraph*'s Saturday sports supplement to support the launch of the Government's *School Sport and Activity Action Plan* (HM Government 2019). Secondly there was the first report of the Women and Enterprise All-Party Parliamentary Group (WEAPPG), written over the 2016–19 period and published in July 2019 (WEAPPG 2019).

In these texts, the problem of female aspiration was framed consistently as a problem of confidence. Hinds' article pointed to the issue that, in English schools, 'girls are less likely [than boys] to say they enjoy or feel confident about sport and physical activity'. The *Plan* itself had described physical education at school as a platform 'to help empower girls and build their confidence' (HM Government 2019, p. 11). Similarly, the WEAPPG's report highlighted prominently (in large gold text) the finding that '22 per cent [of female entrepreneurs] said a lack of confidence was one of the most significant challenges they faced when starting their business' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 13). The WEAPPG's report was not a Conservative text. Chaired at the time by the (male) Conservative MP Craig Tracey, the WEAPPG also had other members drawn from the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party. Its specific Conservative framing can be observed in the *Telegraph* (16 July 2019),

where the WEAPPG's report was mentioned in a piece belonging to a strand of articles titled with the double-meaning 'Women Mean Business'.

In framing female (and national) aspiration, the WEAPPG's report and Hinds' *Telegraph* article each approximated confidence feminism's 'girlboss' message. The WEAPPG (2019, p. 8) described women's aspiration to become a 'boss': 'Encouragingly, more women currently intend on becoming business owners than men: 13 per cent within the next year, compared to nine per cent of men. That's two million more British women who want to be their own boss'. Its vocabulary was shaped around words such as 'grow' (mentioned 11 times), 'contribute' (4 times including 'contribution' and 'contributing') and 'participate' (6 times including 'participation' and 'participating'). The connection between how women's businesses could 'grow' and Britain's economic 'growth' was an abiding concern here. Referring to 'the potential growth of women-owned businesses as an area of economic opportunity for the UK', the report stated that: 'Post-Brexit, this could be critical in both supporting and enhancing the UK's future growth potential' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 4).

Hinds' *Telegraph* article, part of a sub-brand of articles titled 'Women's Sport: Girls, Inspired', conveyed this quasi-feminist (and nation-focused) message via the example of the June/July 2019 FIFA World Cup. The topic was the England team reaching the knockout rounds of the tournament, introduced by comparison with the men's team reaching the semi-finals at the equivalent event a year earlier: 'The Lionesses are on track to repeat—and hopefully surpass—the heroics of [men's team coach] Gareth Southgate's team as they prepare for the knockout stages in France'. Despite such possibilities of potential victory, the focus was not so much on winning (indeed, the article praised an opposing team's goalkeeper 'who probably did not deserve to be on the losing side') as on the educative potential to 'inspire a new generation of girls'.

Moreso than the WEAPPG's report, Hinds' article centred on girls (and the nation) developing a girlboss-type character. Accordingly, Hinds' keyword was neither 'grow', 'contribute' nor 'participate', but 'active', mentioned four times along with 'activity' twice. Apart from exemplifying how 'to get active' in order to enhance 'physical and mental wellbeing', the team's refusal to allow 'setbacks' to diminish their enthusiasm (England had not converted an early penalty kick) had set an example for 'the persistence and team spirit required to succeed in any walk of life'. Hinds' message was therefore that children should learn 'grit' ('As a parent, I want such traits—perseverance, grit and determination—to be the ones my children take on board') and 'never-say-die attitude': 'I hope the Lionesses' laudable never-say-die attitude will be the catalyst for millions of girls to show everyone what they are capable of achieving'. Both 'grit' and 'never-say-die spirit' were embedded in the *Telegraph*'s headline and subtitle, which described the demonstration of these qualities as a 'life lesson': 'Every girl can learn from never-say-die spirit: England's grit in earning [a] knockout place should be a life lesson in how to succeed for children'.

The emphasis on liberating the girlboss energy of aspirational females was present in the WEAPPG report. At a structural level, it outlined proposals to help women by tackling 'outright gender-bias' among investors (WEAPPG 2019, p. 21). At a psychological level though, it set out the need to re-educate women about risk. The finding here, again highlighted in large gold type, was that women were currently (and sub-optimally) more open to making emotional than financial commitments; 'more likely to take risks with their time, but not their money' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 7). Tackling investors' sexism, giving women greater access to venture capital, was one part of the remedy—in anticipation that 'women would take a more calculated risk with their business if they had more money to invest' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 11). Another aspect was the educative role of mentors: 'mentor' and its derivatives being mentioned 81 times over the report's 26 pages.

The WEAPPG (2019, p. 11) presented the idea of teaching women to 'take a more calculated risk with their business' as key to the UK's post-Brexit national success story. The emancipation here, 'the continued progression to economic equality for women', was women—and Britain—being taught to outgrow the reluctance to take a 'calculated risk' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 3). A testimony on female-specific mentoring in the report pointed to a 'feeling': 'Having the right coach leaves you feeling like you have tapped into more potential'. This was a feeling of being 'armed' and 'brave'; a feeling 'giving you the confidence to take bigger steps and braver decisions, armed with tools to make calculated and informed decisions' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 15). 'Potential' (mentioned in relevant ways in the report 15 times) was a keyword here: 'the economic potential of women seeking to start up and grow their own business'; and, in historic terms, 'the potential to encourage greater development of home-grown enterprise as we move into the post-Brexit era' (WEAPPG 2019, pp. 17, 7).

This emotional story of confident female (/national) risk-taking fitted feminism within the post-Brexit Conservative success story. It positioned Brexit, and its mix of opportunities and potential setbacks, within a narrative of female growth and gender equality. The report's executive summary started with a passage that foregrounded that proposition: 'This report makes the overarching point that female entrepreneurs are currently a huge asset to the UK economy and they are a resource waiting to be fully unlocked. We firmly believe the time is right to empower this potential as the UK leaves the European Union' (WEAPPG 2019, p. 5). Naturally we can conject that Tracey and Hinds were not themselves readers of female-focused books such as *Lean In* and *#GIRLBOSS*. However, the broader cultural resonance of confidence feminism's vocabulary and outlook provided them with a ready-made vision of empowerment that could be linked to themes of patriotism and economic growth. Conservative identity was therefore pliable in relation to women and gender and could be repositioned in opposition to patriarchy. Conservatives were not necessarily 'small men on

the wrong side of history'. Instead, they could be posed as champions of female opportunism and 'calculated risk'.

The next section considers how the post-Brexit Conservative success story aligned Conservative identity with the identity of the working class. In this discourse it was not only women and girls who had risk-taking potential; female and working-class entrepreneurialism were highlighted in parallel ways. Here the Conservative Party was being framed not only in an adjacent position to feminism, but also as a liberator of the deserving poor—offering them a rival package of 'promises' to that offered by Labour (Goodwin and Heath 2020, p. 5). Traditionally, of course, 'the workers' was a category of people to whom the Party was averse, given that the 'organised working class' in Conservative eyes was a hostile body driven by union agitators (Taylor 2021). However, with the successful sidelining of union power by the Party over preceding decades, it was possible for true-blue Conservative discourse in 2019 to present the Party in a way encapsulated by the *Spectator* (2019) in an editorial in October: as the real 'workers' party'.

The working class

The alignment of working-class identity with Conservative identity—working-class people being inspired by the Conservative vision of confident risk-taking—was a dominant portrayal of the 2019 election. Both left and right-wing commentators noted afterwards how the Conservative Party had secured an 'audacious alliance' of 'blue-collar and true blue' voters (Clarke 2020; Goodwin 2019). The projection was epitomised in the figure of 'Dave from Bolton' (real name David Barnard), a real-life working-class Conservative convert who gave this straight-to-camera account of why he voted Conservative as part of a February 2020 TV/social media publicity stunt by the Party: 'The Conservative Party seems to be giving everyone an equal opportunity. You know, everyone gets given the same chance. And

whatever you do with that chance is up to you, and that to me is what it should be' (Conservatives 2020). This open, buccaneering, 'up to you' idea of opportunity was the essence of the Party's social justice message in 2019.

This was a fresh iteration of a consistent theme in Conservative discourse, with the Party keen on attracting blue-collar workers and projecting them as pro-Conservative. Historians have described how in the late nineteenth century the Conservative Party sought to pull the newly enfranchised working-class male electorate into its orbit, a phenomenon known as 'popular Conservatism' (Roberts 2007; Windscheffel 2007). A pioneer historian in this field, Hugh Cunningham (1986, p. 293), described how the Party at the time flattered workers 'as manly, straightforward, courageous, tenacious, and heir to a tradition of freedom which need not be too closely examined'. The discursive matrix for that ploy—the Party cultivating a plebeian confidence in personal and national 'freedom'—was repeated in the 1980s. Monaghan (2001, p. 4; 2003, p. 191) summarises how Thatcher struck 'a responsive chord' among sections of the working class by flattering the British people as entrepreneurial and independent-minded, and how she framed British military victory against Argentina as a throwback to imperial-era bravery. In her victory speech at Cheltenham racecourse, Thatcher (1982) positioned 'the nation' (including workers themselves) as being opposed to the railway strikes that were threatened at the time and in favour of facing 'the risks', not only in military battle but also in a free market economy with its potential for setbacks that needed to be faced and overcome on the way to (economic) 'success'.

In 2019, as with the discussion of women and girls surveyed in the previous section, post-Brexit success was defined in terms of liberating personal (and national) agency. Admittedly, there was a certain strand of *Telegraph* article in which enterprise was framed in impersonal terms. Here, Conservative politicians sketched the details of infrastructural developments and what they would mean practically for someone from a working-class

town on the outskirts of a major city (Hague 2019; Shapps 2019). However, there was also a more personal framing which, like the depiction of female confidence, told an emotional story of opportunity. The housing minister Esther McVey (2019) wrote after the election that the reason why 'working people backed Boris' was because they identified with his 'positive vision of a confident, outward-looking trading nation'. Several of the *Telegraph*'s op-ed columnists also identified the election as an awakening of working-class assertiveness. Some, such as Janet Daley (2019), characterised the force powering Johnson's victory as working-class defiance ('revenge') against anti-Brexit elites. The *Telegraph*'s portrayal of working-class identity therefore chimed with its depiction of Conservative identity: an identity personified in the image of Johnson as the 'D.U.D.E.' (deliver Brexit, unite Britain, defeat Labour and 'energise the country') unveiled on its frontpage when he became Prime Minister ('I'm the Dude', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 2019).

This working-class (and national) liberation was linked to Thatcher in a *Telegraph* interview with the working-class pro-Brexit comedian Geoff Norcott (*Daily Telegraph* 2019c). Norcott was engaged in his own political reflections, culminating in his 2021 memoir *Where Did I Go Right? How the Left Lost Me*. In the context of 2019, he was already serving within the discourse as an archetype of the working-class Conservative convert. In the *Telegraph*'s interview, the political discussion zooms in on Thatcher, who was in power when Norcott (born 1976) was growing up: 'I ask if it was Margaret Thatcher's pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps brand of Conservatism that appealed'. Norcott's response, with an agentic emphasis on 'you' and 'you can', is that 'as a working-class person, the idea that you've got agency and can make your life better, that was inspiring'. The excitement of this discovery, Norcott explains, was in learning that 'you can' move upwards even if there is a greater element of risk: 'The problem with the Left is the state will give you consistency, but they'll keep you where you are'. It is useful briefly to compare this interview with Norcott's (2021)

memoir. In the latter, he does indeed heavily criticise the welfare state, but he also tells a well-rounded story of the structural difficulties involved in social mobility, as well as crediting the people around him for educating him into punctuality and diligence. (Moreover, far from being a young devotee of Thatcher, he explains how he voted Labour in 1997 and converted to Conservatism gradually in the 2000s via a slow accumulation of self-knowledge.) Nonetheless, in the *Telegraph*'s snapshot of his views, a broad simplification is provided for the newspaper's audience. In the interview, appearing two days prior to the Johnson 'Dude' frontpage, Norcott, like the 'dude' Johnson, is depicted as a risk-taker inspired by the 'energy' of Conservative identity.

The *Telegraph*'s Thatcher-themed vision of post-Brexit working-class agency was augmented in October 2019 with the publication of the book *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979–1982* by the pro-Conservative historian Dominic Sandbrook. *Who Dares Wins* is one of the main texts used in this article, as is the *Telegraph*'s five-star review of the book written by Simon Heffer (2019). To begin with, here, it is important to note the political double-meaning behind Sandbrook's choice of title. 'Who Dares Wins', the motto of the SAS, was a direct reference to British risk-taking in the Iranian Embassy hostage-crisis in London in 1980. Secondly, 'Who Dares Wins' was also a suitable characterisation of Thatcher's risk-taking attitude to intervention against Argentina in 1982. Referencing both of these events, Heffer's review highlighted how they taught Thatcher to be a risk-taker. The Embassy siege 'established the character of a leader [Thatcher] who had until then been finding her way'—enabling her to 'act ruthlessly […] two years later, when the fascist junta in Argentina decided to invade the Falkland Islands'.

Reading Heffer's review of *Who Dares Wins* together with the Norcott interview we have just analysed, Norcott line about working-class inspiration stands out: 'the idea that you've got agency and can make your life better, that was inspiring.' In Heffer's review, it is

explained that Thatcher's experiences with the hostage-crisis instilled in her the bravery to deal with the Argentinian incursion; as, even though 'those around her could not see how, at 8,000 miles distance, it could be reversed […], the challenge was accepted [by Thatcher]'. Moreover, Heffer implies that Thatcher's bravery rubbed off on the masses. The election victory of 1983 is attributed by Heffer to 'the energising effect it had on the British people', with the previous 'sense of despair' at 'an apparently hopeless decline' turning into a 'restored self-respect'. There is also, in the way that the review is presented, a subtextual link made between the Thatcher era's history and the post-Brexit Johnson era's potential. Heffer's review appeared in the *Telegraph*'s 'Review' supplement under the heading 'Here come the Eighties: There's a revelation for every reader in this superb study of a transformational time for Britain'. Connotatively, 'Here come the Eighties' conveyed the *Telegraph*'s message that the new decade of the 2020s could be a new 'Eighties' of similar 'transformational' inspiration for the masses: an inspiration role-modelled by a new risk-taking Prime Minister in the form of Johnson.

Turning to Sandbrook's book, we can pursue the connotative significance of confident risk-taking in aligning working-class identity with Conservative identity. To begin with, there was a third meaning behind the book's title—'Who Dares Wins' being a catchphrase of the working-class hero Derek Trotter ('Del Boy') in the popular TV sitcom of the early 1980s, *Only Fools and Horses*. The character of Del Boy was an archetype of Thatcherite risk-taking: a 'would-be entrepreneur', as Sandbrook (2019, p. xx) introduces him, living in an inner-London tower-block who 'is desperate to work his way up the ladder' via successful business schemes. In Who Dares Wins's narrative, the emergence of a Del-Boy-style Conservative is crystallised towards the end in a discussion around Thatcher's ministerial reshuffle of September 1981. The event is notable for the replacement of the Old Etonians Sir Ian Gilmour and Lord Soames with a different set of ministers including Nigel Lawson, Cecil

Parkinson, and Norman Tebbit. Sandbrook's framing recalls the 'same chance' sentiments of Dave from Bolton (see above). The men of 'the traditional Tory mould' were demoted; given opportunities instead were those brought up by 'working-class parents'—the respective fathers of these men being 'a Jewish commodities trader' (Lawson), a 'jeweller' (Tebbit) and a 'railway worker' (Parkinson) (Sandbrook 2019, pp. 656–658). Linguistically arranging characteristics of ruggedness and enterprise into couplets, Sandbrook presents these new ministers as men with winning characteristics: 'ambition and energy' and 'self-reliance and aspiration'. Sandbrook's point is that Thatcher's narrative of agency, as embodied in these new ministers, had 'a connection to ambitious young voters', or, as Sandbrook (2019, p. 237) describes them earlier in the book (regarding Thatcher's famous Right to Buy policy enabling social housing tenants to purchase their homes), 'confident, aspirational working-class voters'. The narrative meaning conveyed here is that, like Thatcher, these voters had a 'Who Dares Wins' spirit. Mirroring Thatcher's spirit, they were daring to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by her government in the period.

This Conservative success story centred on character; specifically, the syncing between the confidence of the aspirational working class and an assertive new government. In Sandbrook's book, as in the other texts, this was the emotional story of opportunity: a national success story designed to inform the present. In Sandbrook's framing, the new 'ambition and energy' and 'self-reliance and aspiration' of Thatcher's appointees—and of the working-class people inspired by this entrepreneurial 'energy'—symbolised a rejection of 'Establishment entitlement'. For Sandbrook, this breaking of deference towards the establishment—connotatively significant in 2019 in terms of Brexit's popular Leave vote—reflected a wider enlightenment by the working class (to link back to Norcott's interview) against socialist forms of consistency. By giving opportunities to members of the new

aspirational working-class, Conservatives were showing 'a keen sense' of the working-class appetite for competition and risk-taking.

In 2019, then, the Conservatives' post-Brexit success story was aligned in this discourse with the potential character and agency of the working class as well as women and girls. In relation to both groups, this alignment took place via a depiction of reality that connected an awakening of risk and 'daring' with an emotional story of opportunity. The next section will show how, similarly, that depiction of reality also provided a way of aligning Conservative identity with another group: ethnic minorities. Just as this discourse told its audience emotional stories aligning Conservative identity with women and girls and with the working class, it also depicted a reality in which the Conservative spirit was in harmony with post-Windrush multi-ethnic Britain.

Ethnic minorities

The idea of liberating the agency of aspirational ethnic minorities was integral to this Conservative success story. The roots of this vision lie in the 1960s, when Labour became associated with racial equality (via its pioneering Race Relations legislation) and the Conservatives with intense suspicion of diversity. The Conservative Party's association with Enoch Powell was a slightly unfair one—as Labour, despite introducing the Race Relations Acts, had also tightened non-White Commonwealth immigration in 1968 (Solomos 2019). However, it meant that disassociation from racism was an ongoing concern in Conservative messaging in the 1970s and Thatcher's 1980s (Francis 2017). With Conservatives recognising the political power of the ethnic-minority population in the 1970s and '80s, it was important for the Party, in Francis' (2017, p. 288) words, to assert an affinity between 'its traditional—white, middle-class—electorate and the new Black and Asian voters'. The projected affinity here was one of entrepreneurship: the idea of a shared love for what one British South Asian

Conservative in the 1980s approvingly called 'the concept of individual enterprise and initiative' (Francis 2017, p. 284).

Accordingly, in the Brexit moment of 2019, this claim of affinity between Conservative identity and ethnic-minority identity was pivotal to Conservative discourse in the *Telegraph*. The newspaper narrated the character found within certain ethnic-minority migrants; tallying with the established way in which Conservative commentators such as Goodhart (2013, p. 209) heralded 'Hindus and Sikhs from India, East African Asians and some black Africans' as excellent contributors to the national economy. Championing ethnically different migrants also brings us back to Thatcher, who was noted for her reliance on Jewish ministers such as Lawson as well as Leon Brittan, Keith Joseph, Malcolm Rifkind and David Young. Contemporaries were highly conscious of the migrant family backgrounds of these men, as well as Thatcher's pro-Jewish inclinations. (Her Finchley constituency included a significant part of Britain's Jewish population.) The common joke (originally made by the onlooking former Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan) was that Thatcher had discarded Old Etonians in favour of 'old *Estonians*' (Dellheim 2003).

The Prime Ministerial choice of ethnic-minority Cabinet ministers was, in 2019, central to the *Telegraph*'s framing of the Conservative/ethnic-minority affinity. The presence of these ministers was highlighted—this time, so to speak, as Old Asians and Old Africans; it being noted that 'three [Priti Patel, Alok Sharma and Rishi Sunak] were born into families that originate from India' and other Asian/African family migrations being recounted: 'The parents of Sajid Javid, the first ethnic-minority Chancellor, came to Britain from Pakistan. The mother of James Cleverly, the Conservative Party chairman, is from Sierra Leone, while Kwasi Kwarteng, the minister for business […], was born to parents who came to Britain from Ghana as students in the Sixties' (*Daily Telegraph* 2019b). Overall, the *Telegraph* noted, Johnson's team was the 'most ethnically-diverse cabinet in history', where 'almost one in five

is from an ethnic minority background'. The article was illustrated with a picture of the 'multicultural set of ministers' sitting around the table, with Cleverly prominent in one of the closest seats to the camera. It also included an accompanying set of graphs on the team's composition compared with historical predecessors, with the graph on the '% who are non-white' making it clear that the 2019 Cabinet's proportion, 18.2% (6 ministers out of 33), outstripped the contemporaneous 'General population' of non-white people in the UK as a whole: 14%.

The thematic alignment of Conservatism, energy/agency, aspirational ethnic minorities and Brexit was made explicit in the contribution of the *Sunday Telegraph*'s columnist Zoe Strimpel (2019). Describing Johnson's ministerial team as the country's 'most diverse Cabinet yet', Strimpel began by mentioning Javid, Patel and Sharma. She also, significantly (herself being from a Jewish background), added Dominic Raab, white but 'the son of a Czech Jewish refugee'. Paying particular attention to Patel, 'the daughter of immigrant Ugandan-Gujarati newsagents', Strimpel also made a direct connection to the idea of working-class entrepreneurship. Here was small-business enterprise narrated in terms of ethnic minority aspiration. Considering 'the elite Left's persistent shock at the presence of black or Asian Tory voters or Leavers', Strimpel noted the left's apparent disconnect from the pro-Brexit aspirational characteristics of such people: 'Perhaps they haven't met many people like Priti Patel's parents: ambitious shopkeepers keen on self-made prosperity […and hence with] Right-wing opinions'.

Later, during the second of our two periods, the *Telegraph* re-told the story of liberation and agency, aligning Conservative and ethnic-minority identity via the connotative reference to confident risk-taking. In a multi-page profile of Javid published in the newspaper's Saturday magazine supplement in November, Javid's roots in migrant enterprise (along with those of Sunak, his protégé at the time) were explored by the journalist Anna

Mikhailova. At the centre of this family success story, Mikhailova (2019, p. 20) narrated Javid's late father Abdul as a determined pioneer migrant; a man who 'arrived in the UK in 1961 from Pakistan with a £1 note in his pocket' and had begun by starting a small family business, 'opening a shop selling clothes made by Javid's grandmother, Zabeida'. This story of Abdul's enterprise, starting small and building bigger, was further detailed here by Javid himself: 'At one point, it looked like his [Abdul's] business wouldn't do well, and he wanted to shut up shop, but he just said to himself, "Pick yourself up and carry on—every day's a new day." And I think that's rubbed off [on me]'. This emotional story of personal success in the face of setbacks tallied with the educative story of the Lionesses that, as we saw, Hinds had told in July. There, Hinds had referred to the 'life lesson' in 'never-say-die spirit' taught to children such as his own daughters. Here, the message was that Javid had learned from his father how to 'pick yourself up and carry on'. This narrative had the same connotative significance as the narratives of female and working-class enterprise surveyed in the previous sections. It signified a celebration of the personal (and national) bravery to be liberated in Britain's Brexit gamble.

Finally, also in this latter period, the success story was attached to post-Brexit ethnic-minority (/national) agency via the Jewish term for confidence: 'chutzpah'. This Conservative usage of the word may be traced to the Conservative 'Free Enterprise Group', a grouping in the early 2010s to which many of the aforementioned ethnic-minority ministers (as well as White British ministers such as Liz Truss) had belonged. In *Britannia Unchained*, co-written by members of the Group in 2012, Israel was one of many emerging economic powers cited as an example to Britain. In the section on Israel in the book (subtitled *Global Lessons for Growth and Prosperity*), the authors celebrated its national character of 'audacity and rejection of deference' and 'risk and bold business acumen'. Championing 'the right to take risks' was

praised as an Israeli virtue 'encapsulated in the terrific Yiddish word *chutzpah*' (Kwarteng et al 2012, pp. 80–82).

Tellingly, as a clear Conservative affirmation of Jewish identity, Johnson reappropriated 'chutzpah' as a term for national character and agency in his Party Conference speech in October. His Manchester audience were told of the need to widen 'opportunity' so that Northern entrepreneurial chutzpah could be unleashed: 'I believe that talent and genius and initiative and chutzpah are evenly distributed across the whole UK. But it is also clear that opportunity is not evenly distributed'. The comment was not headlined by the *Telegraph*, but was highlighted in large text as a pull-quote when the event was reported in a regional broadsheet occupying a similar social niche, the traditionally Conservative-supporting Yorkshire Post ('PM Hails Powerhouse Rail Plan: Johnson Talks of "Levelling Up" the UK', *Yorkshire Post*, 3 October 2019). While the word 'chutzpah' was not framed as specifically Jewish in Johnson's speech, the connection to British Jewish people—present notably in Manchester, as well as in London—was reinforced when Johnson made a campaign appearance in Golders Green (within the Finchley and Golders Green constituency) on 5 December, the Thursday before the election. Specifically, he visited the Grodzinski bakery (which served Johnson's narrative purpose as a small craft business founded by Lithuanian Jewish immigrants in the 1880s), distributing pastries while wearing a 'Get Brexit Done' apron.

Then, on Friday 6 December, there was a major Conservative affirmation of Jewish identity, notably in the *Telegraph*. While the Party took out a two-page cover wrap in the *Jewish Chronicle* (featuring the slogan 'Britain, a safe home for Jewish people: It comes down to your vote' and a personal letter from Johnson), the *Telegraph* included multiple strands of emotive pro-Jewish messaging. A multi-page exposé of the left's alleged anti-Semitism in the news pages was accompanied by a letter in the letters section that lambasted the exclusion

of the Jewish yarmulke headdress in Labour's message of welcome for those who 'wear a hijab, turban, [or] cross' (*Daily Telegraph* 2019a). Meanwhile, the leading article refuted the Conservative Party's alleged Islamophobia, dismissing it as 'a limited number of issues that could be found in any mass membership organisation' (*Daily Telegraph* 2019d). In this narrative, it was Labour, not the Conservatives, who harboured a latent racial prejudice; and only the Conservatives who could facilitate the chutzpah of Jews (and other groups) as part of Britain's opportunity story.

Conclusion

Returning to our research questions, this article has argued that there was a unifying and coherent Conservative depiction of reality in 2019 that connected character with an emotional story of opportunity. It focused on gambles that pay off; triumphs of self-betterment; and the excitement of competing in a world of potential setbacks and downfalls. In this depiction of reality, Conservative identity was linked to the liberation of opportunism and risk-taking. The social and personal characteristics foregrounded in this identity were those of enterprise, confidence and energy, embedded in educative narratives of 'Who Dares Wins', 'calculated risk' and 'chutzpah'. These qualities of entrepreneurial potential were, for the benefit of a Conservative-aligned bourgeois audience, projected specifically onto women and girls, the working class, and ethnic minorities. A positive Conservative self-image was therefore asserted in relation to gender, class and race—each of which otherwise could make Conservatives feel as though they were 'on the wrong side of history' as societal and cultural attitudes towards equality had developed.

Dissecting this emotional story, the article makes a distinctive contribution by departing from the common focus on the eye-catching political dexterity of Johnson in 2019 and his personal appeal in Labour's 'red wall' heartlands. Instead, the paper has explored how

the story of opportunity was communicated in 2019 to a 'true blue' audience. This narrative, of personal agency, was one that (we can conject) gratified the *Telegraph*'s 'deserving rich' because it reflected their own self-image—where personal success is/has not been a given, but instead results/has resulted from brave decision-making. Apart from providing evidence (and reassurance) that its value-system could extend down the social hierarchy, it was also a narrative of *self*-assurance.

Via its 'sceptical' reading of that emotional story, this article's constructionist discourse analysis has illuminated ways of further developing our understandings of Conservative-shaped myths of social radicalism. One area that could do with more clarification, perhaps, is how distinctive, or especially Conservative, this discourse really is. Some aspects encountered here (for instance Hinds' framing of girls' sport not so much around competitiveness as on health and personal development) show signs of a more compassionate turn. Similarly, in the other direction, toughness, character and grit has also been championed by non-Conservative figures such as the former Labour MP Tristram Hunt. Meanwhile, national identity is central to social-democratic pro-independence parties in Scotland and Wales, as well as to left-wing support for national public service bodies such as the NHS and BBC. Continuing to explore these questions therefore promises to be a complex and challenging endeavour for further research.

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