

Say's reading materials for Group B

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Boris Johnson isn't Donald Trump, he's Ronald Reagan

The UK prime minister's sunny optimism brings to mind 'Morning in America'

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From the moment the British political elite realised that Boris Johnson might end up running their country, there has been a mad scrum by politicians and journalists to undermine his reputation and his career. Their latest line of attack is to say he is just like US president Donald Trump.

Having known the new UK PM on-and-off for more than three decades, and having observed Mr Trump during those same years, the comparison is laughable, inaccurate, and malicious.

Let's start with personal presentation. One has been on first name terms with the entire UK since serving as London mayor. Nobody in America would dare call the other "Donald".

One rattles off lines from great literature and has the vocabulary of an Oxford don. The other, not so much. True, both individuals have personalities so large that they overshadow their policies. Both have taken positions that contradict previously drawn red lines. And both have survived and thrived politically despite the doom and gloom of their detractors. But that's where the similarities end.

I have conducted focus groups in the US and UK for 30 years. Mr Johnson is singularly the most difficult politician to label or categorise because there really isn't anyone like him on either side of the Atlantic. Trump voters say the president speaks like them and for them. Nobody in the UK thinks Mr Johnson speaks like they do, and that's his advantage. They think he's better — better than them, and better than the career politicians. Politically, both men appeal to populist-leaning voters, but again, that's where the similarity ends. Whereas Mr Trump is visceral and rooted in the here-and-now, Mr Johnson is intellectual, effortlessly traversing history to make his case. And while Mr Johnson is not above the occasional attack or insult (which, as often as not, backfires), his message has a much more positive, hopeful, uplifting tone. He is one of the most effective speakers of our time. The correct US analogue for Boris Johnson is not Donald Trump. It's Ronald Reagan.



Boris Johnson with Donald Trump. One rattles off lines from great literature and has the vocabulary of an Oxford don. The other, not so much © AFP

The limitless optimism that Reagan spoke of in the 1980s as “Morning in America” could just as easily be articulated today by Mr Johnson. Much of his Brexit messaging wasn't anti-Europe. It was pro-UK. He talked about restoring the strength and confidence that last existed when Reagan and

Margaret Thatcher together ruled the free world. And as he himself has said, if he can rise as far as he's come, so can anyone.

On a personal level, I have never met someone in politics who is so obviously talented and surprisingly humble, yet so underestimated and dismissed by his critics because he doesn't conform to their expectations. There is only one Boris Johnson. He is the same in private as he is in public — and that hasn't changed since we met during our days at Oxford.

He says what he thinks, often to a fault, and that is infuriating to those members of the elite who were raised from birth to mask their feelings. Moreover, he's a direct threat because he rose to his position despite them, not because of them.

I will give you an example from our Oxford Union days. There was a motion condemning Israel for being responsible for the conflict in the Middle East. Every debater, on both sides, used facts and historic evidence to make their case. Not Mr Johnson. He talked about what it was like to be bullied in the playground — making an unusually sympathetic case for Israel as the victim in the conflict. "Shouldn't we blame the bullies, not the bullied?" The place was mesmerised.

He never took the easy or the expected approach to his Oxford debates, or to his writing or his political career since then. When other people went for the head, Boris went for the heart — and it's why he was (and is) so well liked by so many people who didn't (and don't) like most Etonian Conservatives.

He is a natural crowd-pleaser and a consensus-builder — he has been that way for 35 years. It used to frustrate me that he was so close personally with people who disagreed with him ideologically, but that's who he was. He had no more or less ambition than anyone else in the Oxford Union. He was just better at everything than they were. He spoke better, he made friends better, he campaigned better than anyone else.

I remember listening, a little more than a decade ago, to a conversation between several members of David Cameron's inner circle bemoaning Mr Johnson's first mayoral candidacy: "He's just not serious, he'll destroy our party", they said. They agreed that voters would never accept him as their

leader. Mr Johnson was too different, too intellectual, too elite. They are gone today, but he's still around. The irony is sweet.

The writer is a pollster and political strategist