

London Mayor Boris Johnson's paean to the super-rich

By Julie Hyland
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Mayor of London Boris Johnson must count as one of the most despicable people in British politics.

No mean feat in itself, this is a man who was sacked from the *Times* for making up a quotation, was taped on the telephone agreeing to supply a friend threatening to beat up a journalist with the person's private address, described black people as "piccaninnies," approved a *Spectator* editorial accusing "drunken" and "mindless" Liverpool fans of responsibility for the deaths of 96 people at Hillsborough Football Stadium in 1989, and dismissed his £250,000 annual income as a columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* as "chicken feed."

None of this has been an impediment to Johnson rising through the Conservative Party or to his securing a second term as Mayor of London.

In part this is because he has been granted extraordinary licence by the media due to his contrived pose as a character from a P.G. Wodehouse novel.

More importantly, it is because he speaks to something essential within Britain's ruling elite, in particular the class arrogance and prejudice that they normally let out only over the most exclusive dining tables.

So it is with Johnson's latest comments in his November 17 *Telegraph* column.

Under the headline, "We should be humbly thanking the super-rich, not bashing them", Johnson weighed in on the side of the "very, very rich", whom he described as a "put-upon minority", comparable to the homeless and Irish travellers.

These are the "zillionaires," Johnson wrote. Those with so much money they fly by private jets, buy jewel-encrusted Cartier collars for their dogs, and "who have other people almost everywhere to do their bidding: people to drive their cars and people to pick up their socks and people to rub their temples with eau

de cologne and people to bid for the Munch etching at Christie's."

Any resentment or disapproval of such gargantuan wealth was misplaced, he continued, as the super-rich are probably "no happier than the man with just enough to live on." After all, whether driving a 20-year-old Toyota or the latest Mercedes, "We both get stuck in the same traffic."

Instead, the zillionaires should be offered our "hearty thanks," he continued, as the top one percent of earners pay 29.8 percent of all income tax and National Insurance contributions, putting "bread on the tables of families who—if the rich didn't invest in supercars and employ eau de cologne-dabbers—might otherwise find themselves without a breadwinner."

Johnson's comment is a pack of lies from beginning to end. Unlike the homeless—whose ranks, especially in London, are burgeoning as the super-rich drive up property prices seeking out a guaranteed return on their wealth—there are no threats from police that they should move on or face the sequestration of their property and even prison.

Instead, while the poor have been the target of government austerity measures cutting welfare benefits, the super-rich are being indulged with unlimited handouts from the treasury. Not only have all their losses in the 2008 financial crash been more than compensated for by billions of pounds given over to bail out the banks, the coalition's policies of public spending cuts, privatisation and wage freezes are aimed at increasing their wealth by opening up new avenues for exploitation.

As a result, working people are suffering the longest fall in wages since 1870. In contrast, a report published by Income Data Services the same day as Johnson's column noted that the bosses of companies in Britain's

FTSE 100 index have enjoyed a 14 percent boost in total pay, 20 times the rate of pay growth for most workers. And these are not even the yet wealthier layers of which Johnson speaks.

It is the decline in living standards for the vast majority that accounts for the fact that the super-rich proportionally pay more in income tax than in 1979—the date Johnson chose for comparison, as this was when the top rate of tax was at its highest. He deliberately ignores the fact that cuts in direct taxation have been accompanied by a massive increase in indirect taxes, which fall especially hard on working people. And he passes over the reality that virtually none of the “zillionaires” he praises will contribute a single penny in income tax.

Britain’s super-rich constitute mainly foreign oligarchs, many of whom made their fortunes plundering the former Soviet Union and Eastern European states after the fall of the Stalinist regimes, and/or property/financial “investors”.

Far from being dynamic wealth-creators, they are economic parasites, which is exactly what attracts them to London. Successive governments have made the city a haven for storing and investing ill-gotten gains with its “light touch” regulation—and a profusion of drivers and eau de cologne-dabbers trying to eke out an existence on minimum wage and less.

The UK now homes 88 billionaires, worth a total of £119 billion. They are mainly domiciled in the capital along with 4,224 other individuals worth more than £19 million each—making the city home to more multi-millionaires than any other in the world.

As for Johnson’s claim of the zillionaires contribution to the “wider good”, politically, morally, they pollute society dragging it deeper into an economic and intellectual abyss.

Most striking is that Johnson’s article attracted barely any comment. While the mayor’s failure to improve cyclist safety in the capital came under daily attack from the media, Labour and the Green Party, virtually none of them had anything to say on his paean to the super-rich. They are not so much silent, as indifferent. For the most part, they can see nothing to criticise in his comments.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has had more than one occasion to liken today’s ruling elite with the Ancien Regime of pre-revolutionary France. This event makes

clear just how putrid this layer has become. Not only are Johnson’s remarks profoundly anti-democratic, solidarising entirely with the financial oligarchy who are to be “humbly” thanked for their beneficence. They contain more than a whiff of fascism.

Johnson complains that the rich are only resented because they are “getting even richer than the middle class,” “hazarding the guess” that the reason they are able to do so is because they are unlike most other human beings.

The “super-rich” belong to “three fairly exclusive categories of human being,” he writes. They “tend to be well above average” in “mathematical, scientific or at least logical reasoning,” possess “a desire to make money” and “have had the good fortune—by luck or birth—to be able to exploit these talents.”

Where the Nazis held up the racial myth of the “ubermensch”—a superman endowed with great powers and abilities—Johnson offers up speculators and criminals as the innate lords of the universe.

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