

THE RELEVANCE OF ANIMAL FARM TODAY

When did you first read *Animal Farm*? Maybe just now. If so, I hope you enjoyed the discovery.

Otherwise, you likely first read the book at school. Its drama, idealism and spirit of revelation ring rich for teenage minds. Thereafter, maybe you filed the fable as ‘that take-down of totalitarianism’ and felt little need for a return visit. After all, those evil days are surely past.

Indeed, if you see *Animal Farm* as essentially a primer on the horrors of Soviet communism – with Napoleon as Stalin, Snowball as Trotsky and Boxer representing the noble labourers – then, yes, the lesson is largely historical.

But if you feel the book points to wider truths about the normalisation of public falsehood, then it’s highly relevant today (in the early 2020s). The West has recently embraced authoritarian populism more keenly than at any time since, well, George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* in the 1940s. No longer do you have to point abroad for cartoon dictatorship. One glance at Michael Gove, bounding onto the Sunday morning political shows to argue, with utter conviction, the opposite of what he claimed last week, and bingo – here’s Squealer, hard at work in the heart of British Government.

Of course, there’s nothing new about politicians who lie. And cynical authoritarianism has long lurked in Britain and America. But even while Margaret Thatcher was palling up with Pinochet, or the CIA was stirring another coup in Central America, one sensed such administrations had some concern about public shame. That no longer seems true. Let’s chart the change.

On 5th November 1992 a witness called Alan Clark appeared

at the Old Bailey court in London. The engineering firm Matrix Churchill was accused of illegally selling arms to Iraq. Their defence argued these sales had been encouraged by the British Government. Whitehall denied this. As one of the government ministers then responsible, though now out of parliament, Clark was expected to support this denial.

But he didn't.

Asked why he had written as a minister that the sales would only be used 'for general engineering purposes', he answered:

'Well, it's our old friend – being economical – isn't it?'

'With the truth?'

'With the actualité. There was nothing misleading or dishonest to make a formal or introductory comment that the Iraqis would be using the current orders for general engineering purposes. All I didn't say was "and for making munitions" . . .'

Clark's words destroyed the government's case, caused a public storm and triggered the Scott enquiry into arms-related exports to Iraq. The phrase *economical with the actualité* was relished by commentators. But most striking to us today was not the admission that Governments lie; rather, that such a revelation was then a shock.

Jump to 6th December 2019, six days before a UK parliamentary election. Government minister Michael Gove is asked by ITV News about claims that recent Facebook ads from his Conservative party were misleading. In the previous week the party had run nearly 7,000 ads on Facebook – a key media for modern elections. Of these ads, an independent fact-checking body reported that no fewer than 88% were misleading.

These falsehoods were not small. The Conservatives

repeatedly claimed they would build ‘40 new hospitals’ (the true figure was six upgrades with the rest uncostered and unachievable in five years); that the National Health Service would receive an extra £34bn, ‘the biggest cash boost in history’ (the true figure was £20bn in real terms and not a record); and that electing the Labour party would cost each taxpayer an extra £2,400 a year (carefully flawed assumptions).

This report of 88% Tory falsehoods was published on 6th December. Mr Gove could hardly have missed it. Yet hours later he calmly declares to national TV news, ‘I’m not aware of any adverts that we publish that have been misleading.’

He could say this with impunity because, by December 2019, government falsehoods were not news. The British public were being asked to re-elect the Conservative party under a leader called Boris Johnson: a man who had twice been fired for lying, first as a journalist by The Times Newspaper and later as a government minister. His enduring mendacity was noted by both left and right; from Guardian journalist Marina Hyde commenting ‘lying does not come second nature to Johnson, it *is* his nature,’ to right wing journalist Max Hastings claiming he was ‘unfit for national office’. Yet the electorate decided, by a thumping majority, to let such a character – the very embodiment of ‘perfidious Albion’ – hold the reins.

Johnson would have been heartened by the experience of Donald Trump in October 2016. Just weeks before his first American presidential election, Trump’s campaign was rocked by the release of a tape in which he boasted of assaulting women. ‘Grab ‘em by the pussy,’ he said. ‘You can do anything.’ This caused such shock, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus, urged him to drop out immediately ‘or face the biggest landslide in American political history.’