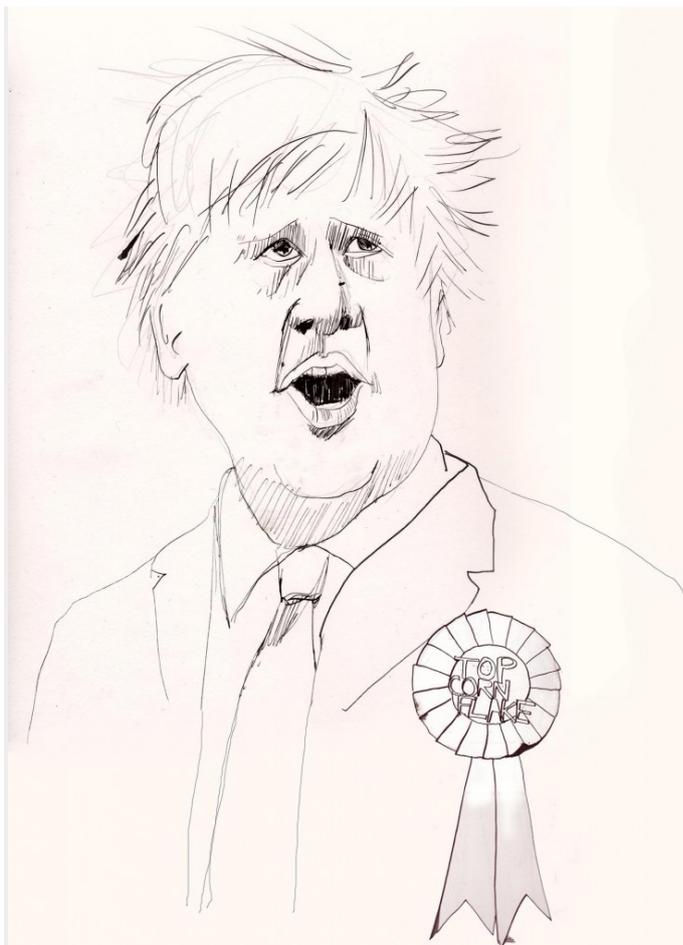


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<http://www.strikemag.org/top-cornflake/>

# The Problem with the Truth

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[Professor Danny Dorling](#) wrote an article for our summer issue entitled 'Equality – Why more is good for you'. So when we heard London Mayor Boris Johnson piffing-on about greed being good and inequality innate, we immediately wondered what he'd make of it. This is Danny's response to Boris and an elite that is part of the problem, not part of the solution...



Boris Johnson: Top Cornflake

[Illustration by Hannah Meese.](#)

# The Problem with the Truth

*Giving it to us straight* – by Danny Dorling

Boris Johnson needs attention. He doesn't just like it, he needs it. When he described 16 per cent of the human 'species' as being the equivalent of severely intellectually sub-normal (having an IQ below 85) he knew exactly what he was doing. He was getting attention. But he also got himself in trouble. Here is part of what he said:

*“Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests, it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16 per cent of our species have an IQ below 85, while about 2 per cent have an IQ above 130. The harder you shake the pack, the easier it will be for some cornflakes to get to the top.”*

Boris was giving the annual Margaret Thatcher Lecture at the Conservative Centre for Policy Studies but he wasn't really talking to those sitting in front of him. He was playing to the press gallery. Boris was talking to us through how he knew his words would be reported by newspapers, on the radio and even on TV. And through talking to us, he was telling his colleagues who were not sitting in front of him, those at the top of the coalition government, that he had grown tired of pussy-footing around. He was going to give it to us straight.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, was the first to slap Boris down before being joined by a small army of the liberal commentariat. In the pages of *The Guardian*, Nick described Boris as being [“carelessly elitist”](#). The implication being that it was more of a problem that Boris was careless than that he was being elitist. The elite often talk of being shamelessly elitist, of wanting the best person for the job, collecting together the brightest minds. As long as meritocracy also gets a mention, such talk is rarely criticised. Boris's crime was failing to mention the sub-clause about it being apparently ok if a few were grossly over rewarded as long as everyone had an equal chance to get to the top.

When Boris talked about how we should worry less about greed at the top and the envy of such greed, he went on to say that those at the top were there because god or genes had put them there. He wasn't so much “careless” as loudly confident that the time had come when it was safe to say what he thought. Boris put it bluntly:

*“And for one reason or another – boardroom greed or, as I am assured, the natural and god-given talent of boardroom inhabitants – the income gap between the top cornflakes and the bottom cornflakes is getting wider than ever. I stress: I don’t believe that economic equality is possible; indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity.”*

Government in Britain is quietly elitist and publicly populist. Nick Clegg is a careful, quietly confident, elitist. He advocates higher rates of social mobility so that what he imagines are a few really able children missing out at the bottom of the heap can rise to the top, but he advocates without using the damning language of Boris. We do not know what Nick Clegg’s thoughts are about whether a large number of children are so inherently stupid they are destined to fail. Clegg has never made his opinion on variations in innate ability clear.

Boris has done the populace a favour. He has described the view of the world that is held by a comparatively small group at the top. A few years ago I wrote a book, “Injustice”, which mostly documented examples that (when collected together) suggested a majority of those at the top believe that just a few are capable of leading us all. It is a view that makes sense of their lives.

When Boris called in his speech for more help to be offered to the two per cent of the population with an IQ above 130, he was partly explaining to his audience why he thought it was good that so much more had been spent on his education as compared to the monies that are spent on resourcing the teaching of most children in Britain. Boris is, famously, an Eton boy.

Nick Clegg is a Westminster public school boy. Nick may secretly think that there was not much difference between him and the next child born in Britain around the minute of his birth. He may believe that like most people he is pretty average, but that advantages of wealth, schooling and a little luck propelled him forward faster than most. Or he may think that he has done well, got to the top of his party, partly because he was a little special from the start. We don’t know. He wisely does not say.

It is not hard to say that the circumstances which alter the likelihood of who may be in a top job are affected by many factors. What is hard to say, what is not currently seen as wise, is to suggest that one of those factors is that you were somehow born more of a chosen one than others, with an eventual potential for greatness just waiting to be nurtured and unleashed.

If it were not the case that just a few children were inherently so much more able than the rest, it would be very hard to justify the continued existence of very expensive private and even more expensive public schools. If more people, especially those who think their IQ is high, understood that IQ is defined so that 16% will always score under 85, there would be less fear of comprehensive schooling. Having a high IQ is about scoring well in a series of weird, largely context-free tests of visual logic. It is not about understanding.

The core beliefs of much of the establishment would be a lie if children did not come with a fixed dial inside their brain which, with enough early investment, can be turned up to a particular maximum but no higher. Maximal intellectual ability or 'potential' is – according to those who 'assure' Boris – both inherent and inherited. Scoring well on an IQ test does not mean that you can understand context or subtext well, it is a one-dimensional trait.

The core beliefs of the establishment are a lie, then. The core beliefs of every establishment in history have always rested on one lie of superiority or another. From the very first priests of the world's most ancient dominating religions, through to every monarch who believes they are ordained to rule, right through to those who have substituted the word genes for god and believe it is their superior little chromosomes that mean others should take orders from them, it is always a lie.

*So what's the problem with the truth?*

The problem with any belief that we are pretty much all equal, that there are no special little Nicks and Boris's just waiting to be discovered, is that once you begin to accept the thesis that we are all created pretty much equal you have to then start to question almost everything about the society you live in. You are also denied an obvious route to revolution, by saying: "follow me everyone, I know the way". Your potential followers would simply retort: "what's so special about you?"

The establishment usually does not question what they see as their inherent superiority. If they do they are said to be having a dog-day, to be out of sorts. When they are functioning normally they do not worry about what Boris called "shaking the Cornflake packet". Trying to get the few children they assume might be very able, but are stuck at the bottom of the box, up to join their little club at the top. Boris's mistake was a failure to be careful over how he described this.

If the debate between Nick and Boris does turn into a 'do we tell the kids Santa doesn't exist and most of them are going to be losers' argument, it could get more interesting. In a way Boris is right – if we don't temper/change/terminate capitalism then only the 2% will be ok, and half of them will feel poor, while the bottom 16% really will suffer badly and not much can be done for them. What Boris sees as the future is the future if his beliefs prevail.

In some ways the future that Boris wishes for is largely already here. As David Graeber puts it: *“What does it say about our society that it seems to generate an extremely limited demand for talented poet-musicians, but an apparently infinite demand for specialists in corporate law? (Answer: if 1% of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call “the market” reflects what they think is useful or important, not anybody else.)”*

This debate has very little to do with IQ, which is a hang-up from the 11 plus, eugenics and the Nazis. It is about the right-wing seeing no alternative to the status quo. Some on the right can now again see an end of history. They think that that the future is so set in stone that it is safe to say so. The elite think that the worst that can happen if they tell the electorate that their leaders think they are stupid is increasing abstentions, which only reinforces their position.

It might be that neither Boris nor Nick are smart enough to imagine all that really is possible and all that might soon occur – because none of us are that smart. Contrast what Boris writes, and how Nick chides him, with what Neal Lawson had to say in the same week about those at the top and those at the bottom:

*“So these new times demand leaders without egos and movements without silos on a journey in which our behaviour is key. Through our behaviour we both prefigure a good society and build support for it; because how we treat people is what they become. So the practice must be one of tolerance, empathy, compassion and, yes, love.”*

There is more than just one story, one argument, and only two sides out there. Some stories are nasty, others are nicer. Some are spats between Conservatives and Liberals, others are utopian dreams that step above the spats, and yet others the wisdom of anarchists who remind us just how hard it is to change the elite from below without simply reproducing them again. We need to hear them all.

*Danny has worked in a variety of universities; here he is writing in a personal capacity. A collection of his writing can be found at [www.dannydorling.org](http://www.dannydorling.org).*