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## Don't lump Boris Johnson together with Donald Trump

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It was a dreary end to a dreadful premiership. Theresa May's final "reflections" speech last week was as devoid of insight as one might expect given her government's sorry record. "Worried about the state of politics," she showed little contrition for her failings. The former prime minister grasped for the grand sweep of recent history in lieu of so few personal achievements to highlight.

That underwhelming performance underscores why British Conservatives have gone "all-in" on the maverick former mayor of London Boris Johnson as their new leader and prime minister. The eccentric zip-lining, soccer-bruising, blond, shaggy-haired former journalist is seen as the antithesis of May's sterility, given his Ronald Reagan-esque optimism.

British politics corrects abruptly to perceived failure. Such has been the catastrophe in Conservative fortunes under May (a lost majority, a 24-percentage point collapse in polling numbers from peak, a failure to deliver Brexit and a complete breakdown in functioning government); Conservatives saw fundamental change as their only salvation.

Johnson is the anti-May, with differences far beyond character. Where she was unwilling to countenance leaving the European Union without an withdrawal agreement, Johnson is committed to Brexit "do or die" by Oct. 31. Where May struggled with public exposure, Johnson can reach beyond politicians and speak directly to the public. Where she has proven an electoral liability, Johnson is a proven winner, having seen off the hard-left Ken Livingstone twice in mayoral elections in liberal London.

The Labour party and liberal commentators in the United States try to lump Johnson in with President Trump as some sort of populist whipping up hatred and fear. But Johnson's policy record and disposition is much closer to David Cameron-style social liberalism than to Trump or May.

Trump's inaugural address talked up threats to America. On the campaign trail he bemoaned the death of the American Dream. May didn't go that far, but her pessimistic worldview saw a Britain infested with burning injustices for the government to fix. That resulted in busybody policy. Her government is widely ridiculed for seemingly banning activities every week.

May's authoritarian streak was personified by a deeply illiberal immigration policy. She championed capping net migration with a crude target and creating a "really hostile environment" for illegal immigrants, replete with "Go Home" vans deployed in highly concentrated ethnic minority neighborhoods. As home secretary, she oversaw the Windrush

scandal, which resulted in legal migrants from the 1970s denied rights and in some cases even deported wrongfully.

Johnson's instincts, in contrast, are liberal and permissive. He's an optimist, pro-free trade and pro-immigration. He even actively championed the idea of an amnesty for illegal immigrants during the Brexit referendum campaign. Today he wants a shift to an Australian-style points-based immigration system, which former May staffers oppose.

Yes, Johnson takes traditional conservative positions on many issues. He is partial to a tax cut, skeptical about new economic regulation and libertarian on the nanny state. This itself marks a sharp break from May, who continually distanced herself from Thatcherism. But Johnson is no slavish disciple to free-market economics. As mayor of London, he championed the Living Wage and had a penchant for large infrastructure projects. Newspaper reports suggest he might even now expand social insurance for old-age care.

What perhaps marks him out most though is an inherent buoyant attitude about the future. After years of media and self-inflicted gloom associated with Brexit-induced uncertainty, he sees the many positives Britain has to build on.

The working age employment rate is at record levels and inflation is at target. Real earnings are growing robustly and the public deficit has been mostly eliminated. If Johnson can deliver Brexit and move on, the foundations for economic prosperity and defeating Jeremy Corbyn are strong. Johnson is seen as the change agent to deliver.

Why, then, do many consider him some unacceptable, hard-right populist demagogue?

The simple answer is Brexit — the key dividing line in British politics. Johnson was a key part of the Leave campaign, and some cannot forgive what they consider a monumental national mistake. They are willing to ignore their own eyes and ears on his socially liberal record because they have convinced themselves that Brexit is necessarily a nationalist, xenophobic pursuit by definition.

True, some of his detractors find his journalistic contributions intolerable too. Like Trump, his past comments about gay people or burqas making people “look like letterboxes” can offend. But Johnson was a key proponent of same-sex marriage legislation. His comments about burqas came within an article making the case against banning them, as Denmark had.

Johnson's opponents might console themselves that his premiership could be short-lived. His willingness to leave the European Union without a deal is not supported by the House of Commons, and so October could see a parliamentary no-confidence vote, his defeat and a general election.

Yet whatever your views on Brexit and the likelihood for his government and electoral success, it's bizarre to consider him some right-wing zealot. In contrast to May, Johnson as prime minister is a firm move in a pro-freedom direction.

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