GOOD CHAPS

ALSO BY SIMON KUPER

Impossible City: Paris in the Twenty-First Century

Chums: How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK

The Happy Traitor

Football Against the Enemy

Barça

Good Chaps

SIMON KUPER

Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
ECIA 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80522 122 7
eISBN 978 1 80522 123 4
Audio ISBN 978 1 80522 275 0

To all Good Chaps (male and female).
There are still plenty of them.

Contents

A WORD IN ADVANCE

I genuinely believe that the UK is not remotely a corrupt country and I genuinely think that our institutions are not corrupt.

Boris Johnson, prime minister, 2021[1]

This isn't another book about Boris Johnson, and the problem is much bigger than him, but he did embody Britain's lurch towards political corruption. (I will call corruption corruption, instead of using the preferred British euphemism, 'sleaze'.) Since the day Johnson walked into Downing Street in 2019 and began looking for donors to pay for new wallpaper, there have been so many financial scandals in British politics that even the most diligent corruption-watchers cannot keep up, as I discovered when I became one.

At one point during Johnson's premiership, I received an anguished email from Anthony Ojolola, a Nigerian Briton who left Nigeria for the UK. Ojolola wrote:

> I hate to kick a man when he is in the gutter. But some of us fled countries where such dishonest and cavalier attitude currently being exhibited by the prime minister is de rigueur. None of this is funny. Not in the slightest. And frankly, I would be damned if I kept my mouth shut and see Britain become another Nigeria … Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, for once in your life do the right thing and resign. Standards and ethics in high office are that important. For the sake of God, Go!
>
> Anthony Ojolola. Aggrieved Citizen.

His words about Britain becoming 'another Nigeria' startled me. I had never trusted Johnson, but I suppose that like most Britons, I hadn't taken him very seriously. Now I was jolted into realising how his behaviour looked to somebody who had grown up amid corruption. Ojolola understood how badly a state could go wrong. I ran his views by a Russian friend of mine who lives in Britain. Did the Russian see it like that, too? He looked at me as if I was an idiot. Of course he did.

I don't think British politics could ever become nearly as corrupt as Nigeria or Russia. The UK has more guardrails than they do. But I wrote this book because our politics has become more corrupt than it used to be – and because its drift can be stopped.

The World Bank defines corruption as the use of public office for private gain.[2] Sometimes this use is illegal, but often it's perfectly legal. For instance, David Cameron's lobbying for the Greensill Capital firm during the pandemic didn't break any rules. But Cameron was trying to use his former office as prime minister to make a private gain for himself and a dubious business associate, at the expense of the state.

This book asks: what went wrong? I have followed the money that has been pouring into British politics. But I have also tried to understand the changed norms of the ruling class – the way many of its members have come to justify their self-dealing.

Good Chaps isn't a comprehensive overview of modern British political corruption. That would require a multivolume set. It delivers only a modicum of original reporting. I interviewed everyone from party donors to spies, but I've chiefly relied on the findings of others. Britain has lots of first-class investigative journalists. I am not one of them. Much of what I know about British corruption I learned from reading colleagues such as Peter Geoghegan, Carole Cadwalladr, Gabriel Pogrund, Adam Bienkov, Jim Pickard, George Parker, Paul Caruana Galizia, David Conn, Catherine Belton and everyone at *Private Eye*. Merely contemplating Pogrund's output is exhausting and makes me want to go and lie down. Geoghegan's excellent *Democracy For Sale* (2020) is the most

authoritative of the very few books on the subject, and I'd urge anyone who wants to learn about political corruption to subscribe to his Substack.

Some of these journalists work for smaller media like *Byline Times* and *Tortoise Media* that don't (yet) get the attention they deserve. They do their work in – and for – a country that has largely stopped trusting journalism, and understandably so, after the years of hacking and decades of partisan propaganda by many newspapers. Britain is a country where circulations and journalists' pay have collapsed, where draconian libel laws impede anyone trying to expose wrongdoing, and where much of the public has become numb to corruption. Often, anti-corruption activists will turn first to journalists, who expose the story – only to find that there is no follow-up from political parties or the law, whereupon the scandal dies.

This brand of serious muckraking journalism is among Britain's enduring strengths. So are the all-party parliamentary select committees that investigate wrongdoing. So is the Good Law Project, which raises money through crowdfunding to bring legal cases against government. Britain still has enough Good Chaps, male and female. They are the heroes of this story.

I've also drawn on the mountain of information on corruption that's freely available, out there, but ignored. What I have tried to do in this short book is

pull all the sources together in one place, and interpret them.

Perhaps nothing does more to destroy trust in democracy than the spectacle of politicians looting the state. But I understand that reporting on corruption, as I'm doing here, can have the unintended effect of eroding public trust even further. A book like this one exemplifies a dangerous tendency in journalism: we report on the people who break the rules, not the people who stick to them. Every revelation of wrongdoing chips away at institutions. There is a jagged line that leads from the *Telegraph*'s exposure of the MPs' expenses scandal in 2009 to the vote for Brexit in 2016.

I have tried to counteract the risk of feeding distrust by proposing remedies throughout the book. A lot can be fixed. I don't believe for a moment that Labour is immune from corruption, but the likely change of power after the general election of 4 July is a chance for a reset. Things used to be better, so they can become better again.

1

LIFE AND DEATH OF THE GOOD CHAP

'You're a good chap, Bingley.'
'So are you, Mulliner.'
'Both good chaps?'
'Both good chaps.'
'Making two in all?' asked Wilmot,
anxious to get this straight.
'That's how I work it out.'
'Yes, two,' agreed Wilmot, ceasing to twiddle his
fingers. 'In fact, you might say both gentlemen.'
'Both gentlemen is correct.'

P. G. Wodehouse, 'The Nodder'[1]

It was in the grounds of Windsor Castle in 1985 that Clive Priestley, former head of Margaret Thatcher's efficiency unit, coined the magic expression. At a gathering sponsored by the Adam Smith Institute, Priestley was trying to explain to a group of visiting American political appointees from the Reagan

Administration how the British state worked. 'I have a theory,' he said,

> the 'good chaps' theory, which runs like this: in the higher civil service we begin (expensively) by recruiting terribly good chaps. We are terribly lucky because they've chosen to come to us, and it would be rather base to suggest they ought to be trained. If they are really good chaps, they go on getting better good chaps, until finally one of them becomes the very best good chap of all – the Permanent Secretary.

If you're permanent secretary, Priestley went on, 'the last thing you want to do is to put management targets on any of your fellow good chaps … because that would be infra dig and bad form.'[2] Priestley was trying to explain why Britain's civil service wasn't particularly efficient (in brief: it wasn't trying to be) but what struck the scholar Peter Hennessy, sitting in the audience, was the phrase 'good chaps'. Hennessy eventually expanded it into a total theory of modern British government.[3]

The UK, he came to argue, worked according to 'the Good Chaps' theory of government: the people who ran the country were considered Good Chaps, who didn't need to be bound by rules because they did the right thing instinctively.[4] (In the 1980s there

was still only a sprinkling of chap-esses.) Good Chaps obeyed what Hennessy called the 'Whitehall equivalent of the "Code of the Woosters"'.[5] In fact, he wrote, the British constitution was 'a state of mind'.[6]

That's how the country managed to function – almost uniquely among democracies – without a written constitution. (Or at least not one written down in a single document. Hennessy and Andrew Blick point out that much of the UK's constitution 'is of course written down – in places such as Acts of Parliament, parliamentary regulations, judicial decisions and … various codes'. However, these are weak constraints. Many could be ditched tomorrow by a parliamentary majority, or simply ignored without consequences.)[7]

Admittedly, the British ruling class always included a few Bad Chaps. The country has a long tradition of corruption scandals, now often remembered with nostalgia. Nineteenth-century landowning MPs bribed their constituents in 'rotten boroughs'; Lloyd George, prime minister from 1916 to 1922, set a more or less formal price list for the sale of honours; there was the cash-for-questions scandal of the 1990s, and on, and on. Political corruption will never hit zero in any country.

But on the whole, Priestley was right. In the postwar decades, Britain was mostly ruled by Good

Chaps – a phrase that I'll use in this book in a gender-neutral way. Government was fairly clean. This century, that began to change. Although we haven't fallen from a lost Eden, things have got dirtier.

There is no precise measure of a country's degree of political corruption, but some authoritative observers have signalled a rise in Britain's level. In 2020, the credit rating agency Moody's downgraded the country's credit status, citing, among other reasons, 'the weakening in the UK's institutions and governance'.[8] (The downgrade tends to make it more expensive for the government to borrow.) Then there's Transparency International, the anti-corruption NGO. It collates surveys of business executives and other experts to rank countries by their perceived level of public-sector corruption. As recently as 2017, the UK ranked joint eighth. In Transparency International's league table for 2023, the UK finished twentieth. (Denmark was number one.)[9]

Some establishment figures now describe British governance in the kind of language that would once have been used by revolutionary leftists. John Major (a Good Chap) said Johnson's Conservative government was 'perhaps politically corrupt'. Lord Evans, chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and former chief of MI5, warned that the UK could 'slip into being a corrupt country'.[10] When I suggested to a senior former government official that

corruption had crept into the system, I was swiftly corrected: 'Corruption has thundered in.'

So who killed the Good Chap?

⋆

The crazy thing about the Good Chaps theory is that it more or less held true for so long. Its golden age was the forty-year stretch from Neville Chamberlain's radio address on that sunny September morning in 1939 until Thatcher's entry into Downing Street in 1979, quoting St Francis: 'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony.' In my previous book, *Chums: How a Tiny Caste of Oxford Tories Took Over the UK*, I described these decades as an era when Britain was mostly run by posh men who had fought in one or other world war.

These men were Good Chaps, or more precisely, public-service toffs. They had gone through private school and Oxbridge, before becoming senior civil servants, army generals and BBC bosses. Most took their place at the top of the class system for granted, but they had also limped home from war with the belief that politics was a serious business, and that serving the British state – until death, if necessary – was the highest calling.

Even today, you still encounter some public-service toffs dotted around the British state. Many are

the descendants of Good Chaps who fought wars and ran colonies. The most famous extant Good Chap, the podcaster Rory Stewart, explains in his autobiography why he went into politics: 'My father had fought in the war. My grandfather had been a doctor at the creation of the NHS … The only thing that had ever motivated me since I was a small child was the idea of public service.'[11] And as a public-service toff, Stewart assumed that his service would be served at the top end of the state.

Good Chaps tended to gravitate instinctively to the Conservative Party, their ancestral home. However, they weren't very partisan: Labour's chaps had done their bit in the war, too, and even Tory chaps in the 1939–79 era wanted to improve life for the lower orders. The two parties mostly felt they were working in their different ways for a common cause.

Some corruption scholars wonder why there isn't *more* corruption in public life. After all, why not steal from the state to benefit yourself if you can?[12] Good Chaps refrained from stealing largely because of their shared codes. Britain in their era deterred corruption with unspoken guidelines, rather than with vulgar written laws.

Good Chaps liked to say that sunlight was the best disinfectant. (The phrase comes from the American Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis.)[13] Transparency alone, they thought, was enough to deter

corruption. In the postwar decades, any Bad Chaps, or even Good Chaps who slipped up, were practically embarrassed out of office. John Profumo had served in the Northamptonshire Yeomanry in the Second World War, earning an OBE. In 1961, while Conservative secretary of state for war, he began an affair with the dancer and call-girl Christine Keeler, unaware that she was also sleeping with the Soviet assistant naval attaché in London. The brief triangular relationship did no damage to national security, but on 22 March 1963 Profumo lied to the House about it, saying: 'There was no impropriety whatsoever in my acquaintanceship with Miss Keeler.'[14]

When the lie was exposed, he resigned from politics for good. He spent much of the rest of his life doing penance through charitable works, washing dishes and tending to addicts in London's East End. His friend Jim Thompson, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, reported: 'He says he has never known a day since it happened when he has not felt real shame.'[15] Sunlight disinfected Profumo.

True, there was money-grubbing even in the Good Chaps era. Five days after Profumo's false statement to the House, his cabinet colleague Ernest Marples presented the Beeching Report, which would lead to the closing of thousands of Britain's railway stations. Marples, transport minister since 1959, presided over the birth of Britain's motorways. He opened

the first one, the section of the M1 between Watford and Rugby. His eagerness to build roads may have had something to do with the fact that he was a road-builder by trade. Only in 1960, under pressure from the Commons, had he sold a large stake in the road-building company Marples Ridgway to an unknown buyer – who probably wasn't his wife, as was rumoured at the time. Marples fled to Monaco in 1975, reportedly to avoid having to pay almost thirty years of overdue tax. He died there in 1978.[16]

Another Conservative contemporary of Marples and Profumo, Reggie Maudling, became a frontman for the Yorkshire architect John Poulson. In 1972, when Poulson went bankrupt and was revealed to be corrupt, Maudling, then home secretary, wrote his own (admittedly obfuscatory) resignation letter over lunch.[17] He was allowed to escape public shaming. The Good Chaps era was less transparent than our own. But Maudling was, metaphorically, locked in a room with a whisky and a revolver and encouraged to do the right thing.

Today's oldest living Good Chaps entered public service in the 1960s. Back then, a senior civil servant could still afford to buy a nice house in London, with enough left over for school fees. At the time, there was little to tempt him away from public service. There wasn't yet much money to be made in the sleepy City of London, where local kids played on

the bombsites left over from the Blitz.[18] Few Britons were rich enough to buy politicians. The top rate of tax on 'unearned' income peaked in the 1970s at 98 per cent.[19]

But then came Thatcher, the first British prime minister to have reached adulthood after the world wars, and the tide began to turn against Good Chaps. Admittedly, Thatcher herself didn't countenance self-dealing in office. David Willetts, who joined her Number 10 Policy Unit when he was twenty-eight, told me that the ethos that protected her against corruption was Christianity. The barrister John Bowers recounts in his book *Downward Spiral: Collapsing public standards and how to restore them*: 'Edwina Currie (the former MP) recalls that Margaret Thatcher was so fastidious that when ministers met in Number 10 to talk politics (as opposed to government business) she insisted they chip in a few pounds from their own pockets to pay for sandwiches.'[20] Thatcher believed in public service. Yet she thought that the highest calling for other Britons was business. To get rich became glorious. The Thatcherite ethos made the idea of serving the state for its own sake seem a bit silly.

Thatcher claimed to create wealth. She certainly created more wealthy individuals. She cut taxes for the rich. Her 'Big Bang' of 1986 deregulated the City, turning it into a wealth machine. She also put chunks of the state in private hands. Suddenly there was a

plethora of companies that cleaned state hospitals, collected garbage and ran sports centres. Since they lived off government contracts, they began courting politicians, legally or otherwise.

Then, under John Major's premiership, Tory standards visibly slipped. A series of scandals, financial and sexual, peaked in the 'cash-for-questions' affair of 1994: the Harrods owner Mohammed Al-Fayed paid the Conservative MPs Neil Hamilton and Tim Smith £2,000 a pop to ask parliamentary questions on Harrods' behalf.[21] When the story broke, it was considered so disgraceful that Major set up the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which he called his 'ethical workshop'.[22] It endures to this day.

The committee drew up the seven so-called 'Nolan Principles': Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership. The principles had reportedly been scribbled down on the back of an envelope by the political scientist professor Anthony King, in a belated attempt to codify Good-Chapness. The principles still apply to every national and local holder of public office, and to countless other state employees, from police through NHS staff to teachers.[23]

'The original Nolan report,' says Peter Riddell, the former Commissioner for Public Appointments, 'was a very British exercise conducted by eminent figures in public life based on hearing the views of other

eminent people without any detailed research.'[24] In any case, the highfalutin' Nolan Principles were vague and had no legal force. They were widely ignored even by the few people able to remember what they were.

2

SHAMELESS

Private affluence and public squalor.

J. K. Galbraith, American economist,
The Affluent Society (1958)

The book that taught me most about the surge in British political corruption since the 1990s isn't, ostensibly, about Britain at all. *Gambling on Development* by Stefan Dercon, a specialist on Africa at Oxford University, focuses on much poorer countries. Yet reading its insights into ruling elites who loot their states, I kept noticing parallels with what had started to happen in the UK.

Dercon argues that a country tends to develop once its elite strikes a so-called 'development bargain'. The bargain involves elite members agreeing to develop the country, instead of just dividing existing goodies among themselves. The elite of an autocracy can strike a development bargain, and so can a democratic elite. What matters is the elite's choice to develop – its decision that it wants to improve life for