

Trussed Up. How the Daily Mail Tied Itself in Knots over the Tory Leadership, by Liz Gerard
(Bite-Sized Books, pp. 198, £10.47)

In which we are plunged into the Tory psychodrama of the defenestration of Boris Johnson, the election of Liz Truss and the acclamation of Rishi Sunak, as filtered through 90 issues of the *Daily Mail*.

From the day Johnson resigned to the day Sunak took office, with a week's break for the Queen's funeral, the paper ran more than 60 leading articles on the leadership contest, Truss and Kwarteng's so-called "fiscal event" and its sequel, six of which occupied an entire page. There were 45 front page leads, 300 inside news pages and 60 bylined opinion pieces, although, this being the *Mail*, it was frequently impossible to distinguish news provision from opinion mongering. For example, the front page which marked Truss becoming prime minister headed "Cometh the hour, cometh the woman ...", the now infamous headline greeting the "mini-budget" – "At last! A true Tory budget" – and, as Truss's end approached, "How much more can she (and the rest of us) take?".

Navigating this veritable deluge takes very considerable journalistic skill, and we are indeed fortunate to have as our guide Liz Gerard, who worked for 30 years at *The Times* as a night editor and who in 2012 set up the award-winning SubScribe blog, which is a highly authoritative source of press critique.

Gerard's method is to summarise the main points of each day's *Mail* coverage, and also to reproduce a number of the articles themselves. It's not possible to read all of the newspaper text, but it's important to be able see how the articles are laid out on the paper's page, since part of their meaning and impact lies in the way in which they're presented. And anyone wanting a closer look need only to go to *MailOnline*.

Much of the book is descriptive, and as such it will serve as an absolutely invaluable resource for anyone wanting to undertake further work on its subject. From Gerard's selection of articles, a number of key themes become readily apparent in the coverage: Johnson should never have been dethroned in the first place ("What the Hell Have They Done?" demands the front page splash the day after the regicide, with the addition of a red tab announcing "Day Tories Lost Their Marbles"). Truss was the next best thing because she was a "brave, radical TRULY Tory" candidate. The "fiscal event" was a "Genuine Tory budget that spells the end of Treasury doomsters". However, it was fatally undermined by a combination of the IMF, the Bank of England, "advocates of the failed economic consensus, Remainers refighting the Brexit battles of 2016 and a hysterical anti-Tory media", although the *Mail* also grudgingly and belatedly admitted that it was mishandled. If the Tories could not unite behind Truss than they had to do so behind Sunak or "consign their party to oblivion and despatch Britain into the ruinous clutches of Starmer".

For the most part Gerard lets the articles that she has chosen speak for themselves, but from time to time she does interject her own critical analyses. (This not being the *Mail*, facts and views are readily identifiable one from another, the latter being printed in bold and contained in separate text boxes). Several of these concern the different ways in which the paper treats Labour and the Tories, and Johnson and Starmer in particular. For example, Partygate is represented as a mere distraction, but Beergate as a major scandal. An endlessly repeated trope in the coverage of the former is that all it concerned was "a birthday cake that never came out of its Tupperware box", and this then leads on to front page splashes such as "How long can the Partygate farce go on?", "Now end the party-probe witch-hunt" and "What a farcical waste of time and £460,000".

Gerard notes that the *Mail* played the key role in igniting Beergate in the first place. In April 2021, Starmer had been filmed (by the son of a former *Mail* writer) drinking from a beer bottle when campaigning in Durham. But it wasn't until 15 January 2022 that the paper ran a front

page splash headed “Starmer the Covid party hypocrite”. The police had taken no action when the film originally came to light, but as the Partygate story developed (albeit not in the *Mail*), the paper devoted no less than eight lead stories in eleven days to its concerted campaign to get the Durham police to re-investigate Beergate – one of which had the gall to accuse “Slippery Starmer” of “piling pressure on police”. When the investigation concluded with no police action, but 3,200 staff hours and £101,000 expended, the *Mail* headline read “They’ve bottled it!”. As so frequently in the case of the political campaigns which it wages, the paper did it best to expunge its own role in first generating the stories which it then reported.

Gerard notes that “the *Mail* makes no attempt to conceal its hatred of the Labour party and the broader ‘Left’ ... It is a given that a Labour government would wreck the economy, ruin our culture and destroy the union”. The spectre of a “coalition of chaos” under Labour is endlessly evoked, seemingly oblivious to the fact that even the *Mail*’s heavily slanted coverage of vicious Tory in-fighting could give the distinct impression that such a coalition is already in power. Special reserves of contempt are kept for Starmer, whose infantile nickname coined by Johnson, Captain Crasheroonie Snoozefest, is employed no less than thirteen times in the course of the psychodrama (and this in a paper that repeatedly demands that MPs stop behaving like children).

Indeed, such is the level of hostility exhibited towards Labour that it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion that the *Mail* regards the prospect of a Labour government as entirely unacceptable, and the Tories as not simply the *natural* but the *only legitimate* party of government. Gerard charitably argues that the *Mail* “sincerely believes that the wellbeing of the country depends on having a Conservative government”, but what can equally well be sensed in its coverage of the psychodrama is an elision between party, government and state along with an intolerance of checks of any kind on executive power (as long as it’s a Tory executive, of course). These, most emphatically, are not the hallmarks of a liberal democracy.

The *Mail* is bitterly hostile not only to Labour but to anything and anybody not on the right of the Tory party. What it sees as a “monstrous threat”, in Gerard’s words, includes Nicola Sturgeon, the Civil Service, the BBC and indeed numerous Tory MPs as well. Thus, for example, a front page splash on 13 July attacking Sunak’s economic record is headed “Rishi blasted on ‘socialist’ taxes”, which is a gloss on an inside page piece by Rees-Mogg headed “She fought Rishi’s tax hikes and the Whitehall blob – that’s why I’m backing Liz Truss”. Similarly, when Braverman resigned or was sacked as home secretary and was replaced by Grant Shapps, and Kwarteng was replaced by Hunt, Andrew Pierce’s column on 20 October was headed “Cabinet is captured by Tory left-wingers: The takeover’s all but complete as vision of low-tax Britain is all but dead in the water”.

These targets can be properly regarded as “left-wing” only from a political position a very considerable distance to the right, and what the *Mail*’s representation of, and indeed leading role in, the Tory psychodrama proves beyond doubt is that it is not simply a Tory paper but one which ferociously supports only the right wing of the party. But does this really matter?

In the present case, it most certainly does, because of the role which the Tory membership played in the election of Truss. As was frequently noted during the campaign, this was a remarkably small and demographically unrepresentative electorate, comprising just over 172,000 people, of whom 82.4% took part in the election, 57.4% voting for Truss and 42.6% for Sunak. One doesn’t know exactly how many of these were *Mail* readers, but during the 2017 general election it was reliably estimated that 74% of the paper’s readership voted Tory, and it is thus safe to assume that many of the party members who voted in the leadership election were *Mail* readers, and that they voted in significant numbers for Truss. It is also safe to assume that the *Mail*’s coverage of, and indeed active participation in, the campaign was undertaken with this electorate centrally in mind. Thus it is also perfectly fair to place at least some of the blame for

the economic catastrophe that followed the “fiscal event” fairly and squarely at the door of the paper.

The paper’s ideological stance as evidenced by its coverage of the campaign also matters because of what it augurs for the future. The endless gushing encomia to Johnson leave one in absolutely no doubt that, were he to stand for leader again, perhaps in the wake of the Tories facing disastrous local election results in May or fearing a resurgent threat from the far-right in the shape of Reform, the paper would support him to the hilt. Furthermore, by repeatedly insisting that the main problem lay not with the actual contents of Truss and Kwarteng’s “fiscal event” but merely with its presentation, combined with the manoeuvrings of various “enemies within”, the paper has repeatedly made it abundantly clear what it demands of a Tory government now and in the future, namely exactly the kind of “low-tax, pro-growth, small-state Conservatism” represented by the catastrophic “mini-budget”. In other words, a remorseless continuation of the policies which, over the past twelve years, have led to our present divided, debilitated and desperate state. So yes, even if you don’t read it, what the *Mail* says does matter a very great deal, and we owe Liz Gerard a considerable debt of gratitude for enabling non-readers of the paper to discover the ideological horrors which dwell within its pages.

Julian Petley is a member of the *BJR* editorial board.

