

Stanley Johnson Notebook

My bike ride to Kolkata, Corbyn's position on HS2, and the plight of the metropolitan hedgehog



Last Saturday morning, I was waiting in the lounge of Terminal Four at Heathrow for a Malaysia Airlines flight to Kuala Lumpur. Just as we were boarding, I saw on television that Tom Watson had been elected deputy leader of the Labour Party and that the results of the leadership election were expected shortly. On board, I took out my phone and clicked on to the BBC website. Still no news, though everyone assumed that Jeremy Corbyn had won.

As it happened, it was a good 12 hours before I heard the result, because nowadays Malaysia Airlines, for understandable reasons, avoids flying over Ukraine and other war zones. It doesn't want to lose another of its fine, comfortable planes to an incoming missile. So we flew south over Turkey and Iran. As time passed, I stared at the route map on the little screen in front of me. I always find those route maps fascinating.

The memories came flooding back. Ankara, Tabriz, Tehran, Qom, Kolkata . . . Oh, Kolkata! It had taken me three months, as an Oxford undergraduate in the summer of 1961, to drive a BSA 500cc twin-cylinder Shooting Star motorcycle across Europe and Asia to Calcutta, as it then was. I had hoped to go all the way to Beijing but was held up in Afghanistan and, with the beginning of Michaelmas term looming, had to settle for India. The father of a school friend ran the Tollygunge Club in Calcutta and he put me up there for a night or two in great comfort.

I couldn't help wondering, as we passed over Kolkata and headed across the Andaman Sea, if the Tollygunge Club was still in business. Did it still serve ice-cool mango? During the course of that long flight, I also wondered what had happened to Corbyn. Had he won? How much had he won by?

When we landed in Kuala Lumpur, at 8am local time, the papers already had the story. The *Sunday Star* had a picture of Corbyn making his victory speech and reported,

"The 66-year-old socialist, whose policies have been compared to those of Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos, was named leader . . . He said Labour was 'united and absolutely determined in our quest for a decent and better society that is possible for all'."

I had time to check my emails before the next flight. One of them in particular intrigued me: "Jeremy Corbyn has asked for suggested questions for PMQs on 16 September. The least we might do is help him understand HS2." HS2! Corbyn's position on the high-speed railway is of considerable interest. As I left England, new plans were being announced in which the construction period at Euston would be extended to 2033. The House of Lords will be debating the economics of the project, following the publication of a devastating report from its economics committee, whose members include such luminaries as Lord Hollick, Lord Lawson and Baroness Blackstone.

As MP for Islington North, Corbyn does not have the same direct constituency interest as Keir Starmer does in Camden but HS2 is a huge budget item and going ahead with the project on the scale envisaged will have tremendous implications for Corbyn's ambitions, as declared in his victory speech, to achieve the "decent and better society that is possible for all". There are huge policy issues at stake here. Can it really be fair to deny residents of urban areas such as Camden any compensation for decades of construction disturbance, when schemes are already in place for rural areas?

It is not just people we are talking about here. Just before I left England, Marian Kamlish, one of my neighbours in Camden, sent me a letter that she had written to London Zoo, which is managed by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), pointing out that HS2's schemes for a vast lorry park in Regent's Park, where the zoo currently has its paying car park, may have a severe impact on

an important population of hedgehogs (as many as 80 have been identified) that live in a "hedgehog hot spot" there. Hedgehogs, Marian pointed out, are among the UK's priority conservation species, having suffered a significant nationwide decline over recent decades.

As soon as I saw Marian's letter, I rang ZSL. Did ZSL fully realise, I asked, the threat to the hedgehogs posed by HS2's plans? As an organisation with a global conservation mission (ZSL makes valiant efforts to save endangered animals *in situ* all over the world), wouldn't it be wonderful if it could do something for the little creatures on its own site? I am happy to say that the ZSL spokesman indicated that he, too, took the hedgehog issue seriously and that ZSL would be following up the matter, both as far as hedgehogs were concerned and on other issues where HS2's plans would have an impact on ZSL.

The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. The Royal Parks, I understand, cannot petition against the government's plans, given that they are, as it were, part of the government. We must hope that ZSL and others will strike a blow for the wonderful Regent's Park, hedgehogs included, even though those most directly concerned (such as the Royal Parks and the Crown Estate) must officially be silent.

I sent Marian's letter on to my old friend Ken Livingstone. Sometimes on a Saturday morning, I am invited to stand in for David Mellor on the LBC show *Ken and David*, which becomes, pro tem, a "Stanley and Livingstone Show". Ken is well known to be fond of newts but I don't see why he shouldn't be interested in hedgehogs, too. Maybe he knows Jeremy Corbyn. Actually, I'm sure he does. That might help. ● Stanley Johnson's most recent book is *Stanley, I Resume: Further Recollections of an Exuberant Life* (Robson Press)