

Stanley Johnson once had ambitions to become the PM himself, he tells **Kathryn Knight**, but he is thoroughly enjoying the consolation prize of being...

FIRST FATHER

Photography MARK HARRISON
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For most of us, seeing one of our offspring being elevated to the highest office in the land would be a source of abundant personal pride.

And make no mistake, Stanley Johnson is no stranger to that emotion. Yet it turns out that the recent election has also sparked a glimmer of thwarted ambition – and (whisper it) even a touch of jealousy – in the father of the Prime Minister.

'I was rather keen on being PM,' he confides. 'As it turns out others have, shall we say, gone further down that route – but, you know, I was here first.' The loud guffaw that follows suggests Johnson senior is thoroughly enjoying the consolation prize of his role as 'First Father', something he cheerfully acknowledges has no constitutional status but brings with it a certain cachet, not to mention scrutiny.

'I think I am ready to recognise that it does behove me possibly not to do anything totally silly, unless I can justify it for other reasons.'

One wouldn't bank on it. He may be a few months shy of 80 – although he looks so much younger that people often mistake him for Boris, to his clear delight – but Stanley has a knack for subverting expectations. He ➤



✦ has a serious career behind him and a history of environmental campaigning long before it was fashionable (his iPhone carries the logo of climate protest movement Extinction Rebellion). Yet this is also a man seemingly happy in the *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* jungle, contemplating kangaroo testicles for dinner.

'Of course, you could argue that these things are a pretty trivial thing for a chap of my standing and seniority to do,' he admits.

'So how do I justify it? First, don't forget you do get paid – and quite often in my case that means a charity gets paid. But also, quite a lot of people out there are going to be watching and it's not impossible that the editors may one day leave in something serious you might have said about biodiversity or something.

'People can be snotty about these shows but they're also unbelievably interesting and really well made.'

But it is not a sentiment his wife Jennifer appears to share. 'She groans every time she sees me heading off to some reality TV show,' he says.

Jennifer, ten years his junior, is Stanley's second wife of nearly 30 years. They have two children – Julia, 38, and Max, 34.

His marriage to first wife Charlotte, an artist, ended after 15 years, but not before the couple had produced four Johnsons – PM Boris, 55, broadcaster and columnist Rachel, 54, strategist and broadcaster Leo, 52, and 48-year-old Jo, a former MP and Government minister turned academic and board chairman.

They are a ferociously high-achieving bunch – Rachel once joked that 'in London you are never more than a few feet away from at least two Johnsons'. All six of his children attended Oxbridge; is it something in the genes?

He snorts at the idea, blustering that he is 'not much one for genes'. Instead, he lays garlands at the feet of his children's mothers and their glittering public school education with what, I suspect, may be deliberate false modesty.

But it's clear they've inherited a lot from him: the relentless energy and drive, for one thing. For his latest novel, a thriller, he got up at 2am

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each day to write and had it finished in six weeks. Then there's the self-confidence and love of the limelight. At Saga's photoshoot he was in his element, regaling the team with tales of the times he has been mistaken for Boris ('sometimes it is just easier not to put them right, too disappointing').

Still, he does acknowledge that the Johnsons are a collective force to be reckoned with. 'We are certainly a quorum,' he says. 'And of course, they now have children of their own so, while we don't rival the Amish exactly, there are a lot of us.'

What do his children make of his adventures in television land? Have any of them ever tried to talk him out of doing one of these shows?

'I don't think anybody has tried to talk me out of anything,' he muses. 'I listen to what people say but

sometimes there's what you might call contrariness in one's character.'

He's certainly had an unexpected career arc for a man of both his vintage and blue-chip credentials. The son of an RAF pilot who retired to run a farm on Exmoor, Stanley was educated at Sherborne and Exeter College, Oxford (he won a classics scholarship and later a poetry prize also won by Oscar Wilde) before working at the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Commission.

In 1979 he became one of the first British MEPs, serving for five years as Member for Wight and Hampshire East.

Then there are the books – he's written nine novels, two memoirs and many other works on the environment – as well as his long-standing work on green and animal welfare issues for which he has won awards over the years.

He's still just as busy and has trips to China,

BLONDE
AMBITION
Stanley with his children Rachel, Boris and Jo

◀ India and Uganda lined up, the latter with Georgia ‘Toff’ Toffolo, the 25-year-old *Made in Chelsea* socialite Stanley befriended on *I’m a Celebrity...* in 2017 with whom he has formed a unlikely friendship.



As for the grandchildren, Johnson claims to be ‘not up to much of it’ as a grandfather. ‘It’s very, very nice to see them and I follow what they’re doing but you’ve got to be careful not to pay too much attention, otherwise someone might say, oh what about the school fees?’

Like many grandparents, he has ‘made a modest contribution’ to the fees of the later grandchildren after returning from the jungle ‘fairly flush’.

‘But the idea I could do 12 sets of school fees – well,’ he shakes his head. ‘The youngest is only four and there may be others potentially en route.’

The mention of grandchildren ‘en route’ makes it impossible not to think of the complicated romantic life of Boris, whose 25-year marriage to second wife Marina Wheeler imploded following continuing allegations of infidelity on his part.

‘First girlfriend’ Carrie Symonds is now ensconced in Downing Street, although the usually garrulous Stanley will say little more on this subject other than to pay tribute to Carrie’s environmental campaigning zeal.

‘We are both Patrons of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and I’m absolutely proud to be there and, on a professional level, I pay tribute to the things Carrie is doing.’

‘I ought to do much more of course, but I do try. On the farm, I’m going to do some serious re-wilding – you know let things go back to scrub, that sort of thing.’

The farm is the family base in Exmoor where Johnson was raised from the age of 11. ‘I’ve still got my prep school reports in a trunk,’ he says. ‘It’s a very, very special place, a deep-sided valley. We have marvellous wildlife; we have swallows, owls, buzzards, otters in the river.’ It is here the Johnson ‘quorum’ will gather later this year to mark Stanley’s 80th birthday in August.

It is quite a milestone, but the always cheerful Johnson is pragmatic. ‘Life is a rolled-up carpet and it unrolls and unrolls and the part left still to unroll gets thinner and thinner and eventually – well, there we are at the end of the carpet.’

‘So all you can probably do in your life is firstly try and do something useful, which in my

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case is the environment stuff, and secondly try to avoid harming other people – although that’s not so easy to do because it does happen in the course of life.’ Christian ‘by background and tradition’, Johnson nonetheless believes that when the lights go out that’s that. ‘If you were to say to me, do you have a sure and certain hope of resurrection, I would say absolutely not,’ he says. ‘I am perfectly ready to recognise that the man in this world is just a tiny smudge.’

If this sounds morbid, it isn’t: Johnson seems constitutionally incapable of being gloomy,

‘When a chap has been as lucky as I have been in terms of jobs, friendships, marriage and family – I don’t think I have any right to be gloomy. I think you have to earn the right to be gloomy. If you can’t do anything else, at least one can entertain.’

The latter would make a wonderful inscription for his gravestone – except Stanley doesn’t want one.

‘I always wonder whether that is laying an obligation on your descendants, “Have you been and put flowers on Granny’s grave?”. My parents were cremated, and their ashes scattered on my farm, and I am minded to do that.’

There is a lot to pack in before then. ‘Oh absolutely,’ he grins.

ALWAYS CHEERFUL
With Boris, leaving the jungle and with his wife, Jennifer

