

Andrew Gimson's Commons sketch: The comedian has learned how to play tragedy



The pandemic has changed Boris Johnson. He is better than he was a year ago at being the sombre bearer of bad tidings, the leader who expresses the nation's grief.

Both at yesterday afternoon's Downing Street press conference, and today at PMQs and in his Commons statement, he struck the right note of unadorned sorrow.

Johnson has always been known as an entertainer, a comedian, a debunker of pieties, a man who in the darkest moments can be relied on to bring us the lighter side of life.

Now it falls to him to express the pieties demanded by 100,000 deaths. The comedian must learn how to play tragedy.

This is not just a challenge for him. It is also a challenge for his audience.

Last March, many of us could not believe he was going to manage it. The comic actor was still there, and from time to time could be glimpsed peering out from behind the stiff funeral robes he had been obliged to put on.

As a sketchwriter, one felt it one's professional duty to

detect and magnify those gleams of levity, and if possible to contribute some levity of one's own.

Johnson's critics continue to insist he is a clown, incapable of rising to the crisis, responsible for a host of errors and unable to learn from what has gone wrong.

Sir Keir Starmer, replying to the Prime Minister's statement, said "how offensive it was to pretend there was a protective ring round our care homes", went on to list many other mistakes, and said these are "a damning indictment" of how the Government has handled the pandemic.

It is the duty of the Opposition to oppose. This column will not join the Prime Minister in reproaching Sir Keir for identifying the many errors, inconsistencies and last-minute changes of mind which have characterised the Government's policy on schools.

But Johnson now communicates a solemn sincerity of which in the earlier part of his career he gave scant sign, and his opponents are going to have to take account of this change.

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