

Stanley Johnson

Animal champion

By Patricia Kelly

09.04.2008 / 12:58 CET

The father of London's would-be mayor and the author of the novel "The Commissioner" looks back at his "most wonderful job" – in the Commission in Brussels.

If Boris Johnson becomes mayor of London, he will be obliged to stand down as a member of Parliament. But that does not necessarily spell the end of the Johnson family in Westminster: his father, Stanley Johnson, refuses to rule out standing for election again. Had he won in 2005, he would have been the first father to follow his son into parliament.

The Boris/Stanley double act never fails to surprise those who see them together for the first time: from the almost identical shock of white-blond hair to the studied self-deprecation and projected image of accident-prone buffoonery, deliberately cultivated to disguise a keen intelligence, clever brain and almost maniacal desire to achieve, they are duplicates. Indeed, self-multiplication seems to be a Johnson hallmark: of Stanley's six children, all, including Boris, followed him to Oxford University. (The exception went to Cambridge.)

So it might come as a surprise to some that the father of an MP portrayed by the liberal Guardian as a loather of the EU made his career in the Commission, ultimately becoming the Commission's director of energy policy, and that he describes the experience with superlatives. If fiction is a guide, he also saw it as offering the potential for excitement, because he is the author of "The Commissioner," a thriller that was turned in 1998 into a film starring John Hurt.

Stanley sees himself as a Eurosceptic and is on record as stating: "Too much of what we do is governed by Brussels." But he also appreciated his time in Brussels, describing himself as "incredibly fortunate" to have worked in the Commission, and describing the Commission itself as a unique and valuable institution because of the powers invested in it by its founding treaty. "Do not think of it as a bureaucracy, but as an extraordinary institution where you can get things done," he says.

He certainly did. He came to Brussels in 1973, after a stint with the World Bank in New York (where Boris was born) and from a post with the International Planned Parenthood Federation, to take up a position as head of the new Prevention of Pollution and Nuisances Division in what was then known as the Environment and Consumer Protection Service. He was young – 32 – and one of the first Britons appointed to a senior post in the Commission.

"At the time, truth to tell, I had not had huge experience of working with the environment," says Stanley. "It turned out to be the most wonderful job you could imagine." In those days civil servants at this level wielded huge political power and Stanley used this to his advantage to cut red tape and push through his proposals; much of today's EU legislation on the environment can trace its origins back to Stanley Johnson. Animals and their habitats were a special concern, and great apes especially. He was a bureaucrat appreciated by campaigners, as major awards from Greenpeace and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals demonstrated.



Stanley Johnson (left) with his son Boris, possibly London's next mayor.

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He left the Commission in 1979, but not Brussels: he took up a seat at the European Parliament as the Conservative member for the Isle of Wight and East Hampshire. He was not away from the Commission for long, returning in 1984 as senior adviser to the environment directorate-general and director of energy policy, a post he left in 1990 for a position in Rome with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

His eyes may now be on becoming a member of the British parliament, but EU affairs would be firmly on his agenda in Westminster. What is going wrong with the European Union, he believes, "is the failure of national parliaments to properly scrutinise EU legislation". Indeed, he contends that "much of the Euroscepticism that exists in the UK would disappear if MPs treated EU legislation with the same attention they give to national laws."

"It would be ironic," he adds, "if the Lisbon Treaty were thrown out because it is the first effort that has been made to strengthen the powers of national parliaments." Greater national oversight of legislation is one element of a vision of the European Union as a looser and wider organisation. A wider Europe is one that, in both Johnsons' view, should include Turkey. There is perhaps a personal dimension to this stance, because Turkey is the home of their ancestors (and, Stanley claims, the source of his and Boris's trademark blond hair). Johnson's paternal grandfather was Ali Kemal, minister of the interior under Turkey's last sultan and a victim of the revolution. Kemal signed an arrest warrant for Kemal Ataturk shortly before Ataturk founded modern Turkey; Ataturk's supporters responded by stoning Kemal to death after the revolution. His son, Osman Ali, whose mother had died in childbirth, was born and brought up in England and changed his name to Wilfred Johnson.

A future parliamentary candidacy would not be the result of a lack of things to do, Johnson is anxious to point out. In recognition of his work on endangered animals, he is one of just three UN ambassadors to the UN Convention on Migratory Species. He is now writing his eleventh book on the environment, adding to his list of nine novels (and the prestigious Newdigate prize for poetry, an undergraduate award that Oxford has bestowed on, among others, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Oscar Wilde). This time he is writing about biofuels and – his words – "what a disaster they are". It is a stance that may appear at odds with his exemplary environmental credentials – but then this is a tireless campaigner for endangered species who just happens to be pro-hunting.

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