turkey October 2023

Good afternoon everyone

 merhaba! It is wonderful to be here again in Istanbul and in Turkey the land of my fathers

and in case you are wondering who I am – because I understand that I am a surprise guest – let me explain

My name is boris Johnson and I am a former prime minister of the UK

-      though there is nothing exceptional about that: we have a ready supply of former UK PMs these days

much more remarkably I am the first British prime minister in almost 300 years to have Turkish roots

 My great great grandfather was a pious muslim from Kalfat who made the haj to mecca

 he was called Ahmed Hamdi and he married a lovely circassian slave girl

 I think strictly speaking he bought her

-      don’t bother to wrap her , he said

-

and in the second half of the 19th century Ahmed Hamdi and his wife made their way to Istanbul

and he became a highly successful capitalist in the sense that he ruthlessly exploited the labour of others

  Have you seen a wonderful Disney film called Bee movie?

It’s about how human beings exploit bees and take their honey

in a brilliant exposition of Marxist theories about the alienation of workers from their labour

and my gt gt grandfather ahmed hamdi did exactly the same

 he exploited bees

Millions of bees – perhaps tens of millions of bees – buzzed and hummed and flew from flower to flower so that Ahmed Hamdi could get rich

  and the only difference was that he didn’t take the honey

 he took the beeswax.

In England when we want to tell people to stop being so nosy about our lives

we say mind your own business – or sometimes the slang version

which is mind your own beeswax

Ahmed Hamdi minded his own beeswax with ruthless effectiveness

and you know what he did with his own beeswax

He didn’t make scented soap, he didn’t make shampoo

he made – you guessed it – candles

and it wasn’t long before he was the biggest beeswax candle manufacturer in the whole of Istanbul

possibly in the whole of Turkey

he had what they call a dominant position in the market

so he was able to command a healthy price for his candles

and he sold them to the mosques and to the government and to the domestic market

and you must understand that this was in the days before the invention of electric light

I am not even sure that they had gas lamps

and if you wanted to go to the mosque for evening prayers or if you wanted to read after dark then frankly you needed the luminescence of my gt gt grandfather’s candles

He was like a one man central electricity generating board

And then something terrible happened

In America a man called Thomas Alva Edison had an idea

instead of setting fire to a thread coated with wax

you could pass an electric current through a filament in a glass bulb

and suddenly my gt gt grandfather’s business model had collapsed

 Can you imagine the horror on his face, as Ahmed Hamdi saw his first electric light bulb

It was like being a rifle manufacturer and seeing that your rival has invented the machine gun

 it was like being a maker of horse drawn carriages and seeing your first motor car

it was like having a vast typewriter business and seeing your first lap top computer

he could see his beeswax fortune melting away

and if we look around the world today we can see the same panic on the part of middle class people

who fear that their lives are about to be turned upside down by a technological revolution

artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber of all kinds

and they are looking wide-eyed and frightened like young children staring at their mother as she comes back from the hospital with a suspicious bundle containing a new baby brother or sister

and they suddenly panic that they are not going to be as loved or as valued or even as necessary as they were before

 and so people in banking or financial services

people in the law, people in journalism, accounting, information technology of all kinds

hundreds of existing professions

are suddenly frightened that they are going to be as redundant as the beeswax candles of Ahmed Hamdi

and to all of you who may be worried about it – all of you who think you could be replaced by AI

I say relax

 in fact I say what I say to my children – and in good Turkish style I now have quite a few children

I say you are all going be important and you will all have great futures

and every technological revolution in history is the same – in that people begin by fearing what it will mean for them

When the Montgolfier brothers first went up in a balloon the French peasantry thought that these big round things were the work of the devil

They chased the early balloonists and beat them up and destroyed the balloons

which was irrational, since without the balloons humanity would never have mastered aviation and it would have taken me a week to get here on the Orient express

 when they unveiled the first steam locomotive in the world – in the UK, as it happens – the machine wasted no time and ran down and killed the British minister for transport – a man called Sir William Huskisson

People believed for decades that the human body would simply disintegrate if it travelled at more than 100 miles an hour

and people called for the railways to be banned

 which would have been a shame, since I wouldn’t have been able to come here even by orient express

 When they produced the first motor car people were so terrified that the British government passed a law saying that a man had to walk five paces in front of every car, carrying a red flag

and when they first decided to detonate an atomic weapon – see the Oppenheimer movie - they worried that it might actually blow up the whole world

and in every case we see the same lessons

 technology has colossal power to change the world

and the pace of technological change is now amazing

but the lesson is that for every job it destroys, a scientific revolution will create thousands more

  ahmed hamdi’s beeswax candlemakers may have lost their jobs

 but how many millions more jobs were made possible by electric light, by being able to work at all hours of the day and night

 when the first motor car was introduced to the streets of London, there was panic among the grooms and the coach drivers and the hundreds of thousands employed in combing the horses and cleaning the stables and fitting the horse shoes

 and yet the motor car gave hope and opportunity to hundreds of millions of people

getting people to work and creating jobs on an unimaginable scale

  far more than anything to do with horses

 and the second lesson is that technology is in itself morally neutral

it is neither good nor bad – it depends what you do with it

and of course we can see the harm that can be done with AI – the fake news, the computer-assisted fraud

and as with any kind of new crime, we will need strict new punishments

We will need global conventions on how to prevent abuse of data of all kinds

But we would be absolutely barmy to try to ban Artificial Intelligence, as I think some European governments initially proposed

It is a tool, and properly used it can be a huge labour saving device

and though we can’t be sure exactly how, history teaches us that an invention on this scale will create huge opportunity

   Of course it is true that before the invention of the motor car there were people who used to go around the streets of London and Istanbul cleaning up the tonnes and tonnes of horse manure

and of course they were good jobs, and steady jobs and it is true those jobs were vapourised

but do you really think that those dung-sweepers did not find better jobs

Ahmed hamdi went bust – but his son Ali Kemal never had to worry about getting stung by bees

he became a journalist and editor and he was quite successful until he said some unwise things and even though he was a great patriot he was unfortunately assassinated

-      politics is a rough game, even rougher in 1920s Turkey than it is in the modern British conservative party

where we have our own methods of assassination

   though the British variety leaves you at least the theoretical hope of a comeback

Ali Kemal left his British descendants with all sorts of legacies

 a belief in free speech, and saying what you think, even if it gets you into a trouble,

and a belief in the partnership between Britain and Turkey

and now is the moment to take that friendship forward to new heights

we are not just old friends and both former imperial powers

both with huge global networks

we are both free market capitalist democracies

conveniently bracketing the European continent

Turkey the indispensable bridge between Europe and Asia

 Britain the indispensable bridge between Europe and the new world of America

 and we both know that in an era of rapid technological change it is the free market capitalist democracies that make the breakthroughs

I want to protect and support free market democracies everywhere

and that is partly a point of principle, a moral point – and that is why I am so utterly committed to freedom and democracy both in Ukraine and in Israel

and oppose those anti-democratic and criminal forces that are currently trying extinguish those states by violence

and I can tell you – they will not succeed

but there is also a practical point

It’s the free market democracies

that have the better music

the better films

 the more dynamic fashion industries

the better night life

the better restaurants

the more informative, more honest and more interesting media

and that therefore attract the greatest creative and scientific talent in the world

and if you want proof look at the covid vaccines

did anyone use sputnik? sinopharm?

 in which country in the world was the first licensed and effective covid  vaccine put into the arm of a human being? the uk

and who made the Pfizer vaccine that was to prove so valuable

 that’s right – it was Turkish scientists

So let’s do more together

I was proud of the many things that President Erdogan and I did to advance our relationship

including some pretty ground-breaking military technological cooperation

but we need to do more

we need a proper free trade agreement

let’s cross-fertilise like the bees of Ahmed Hamdi

let’s cross-pollinate the best new ideas that are blooming in our two countries

and let’s not be afraid of the future

because the future is unwritten

and it’s there to be shaped like a vat of warm beeswax

let’s shape it together –

here’s to all your futures, and the partnership between Britain and Turkey

 thank you very much