

# ElectionWatch

4 November 2019

A CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) INITIATIVE

## Three reasons for ElectionWatch

**ONE.** The role of many national newspapers has become increasingly problematic in their coverage of politics, particularly Brexit. The proper function of the press should be to arm citizens with unvarnished facts. But several national newspapers have done the opposite, with journalists turned into propagandists, inflaming rather than informing public opinion.

We also have the disruptive role of social media. The Tory campaign will place a big emphasis on this, taking inspiration from the Vote Leave campaign of 2016. The Brexit Party is also planning a huge social media drive, creating viral videos and taking their inspiration from US campaigning techniques

Neal Ascherson has predicted this election is likely to be 'the nastiest, dirtiest general election for a hundred years'.

**TWO.** The role of the local and regional media's ability to report on the impact of national politics on their localities has been severely weakened. From 2005 to the end of 2018 there has been a net loss of 245 titles. An estimated 58% of the country is no longer served by a local newspaper.

Many of the remaining local and regional papers are under great stress, with redundancies and cut-backs severely weakening their ability to function as local watchdogs for their communities. When local newspapers are depleted or cease to exist, people lose a communal voice. They feel angry, not listened to and more likely to believe malicious rumours.

**THREE.** We want to focus on election issues affecting the North of England because this will be an area fiercely contested by all political parties, and therefore where some of the most controversial coverage is likely to be. Philip Stevens observed in the *Financial Times*:

"During the 1960s, America's right-wing Republicans embarked on what was called the 'southern strategy' - a populist pitch to white working-class voters who were disenchanted with the civil rights liberalism of the Democratic Party. Mr Johnson has a 'northern strategy'. By casting Brexit as a fight against foreigners and immigration he hopes to win an election by winning over anti-European white working-class voters in traditionally Labour areas. We are promised a campaign that might make even Mr Trump blush."

## Our Plans

This is the first *ElectionWatch* issue produced by CPBF(North). Our aim is to focus on media coverage of the election, highlighting bias and providing alternative sources of information of election coverage. We plan to produce issues throughout the election and welcome feedback, comments and donations to support this initiative.

You can contact us at: [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com)

# Tabloids declare war with alarmist headlines and other scare tactics

**Nicholas Jones** gives his predictions on the direction of the anti-Corbyn attack agenda that is likely to be pursued by the tabloid press on behalf of Boris Johnson

Once the go-ahead was given for the 12 December poll, feature writers for the dominant Tory press began dusting down their vast library of horror stories about life under a future Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Dire predictions have been the stock in trade for highly paid columnists whose anti-Corbyn tirades have been afforded regular full-page treatment ever since he was elected Labour leader in August 2015.

Their rants re-appeared with a vengeance from the first day of the 2019 election campaign: “Corbyn and his cronies who’d turn the UK into Venezuela” (Leo McKinstry, *Daily Mail*, 30.10.2019) harked back to a catalogue of scare stories from the summer of 2017 that linked Corbyn to rioting in Caracas.



Art: Tony Jenkins / www.jenkinsdraws.com



**ALARMING!:** The right-wing tabloid press is relentless in its attacks on Jeremy Corbyn.

“Corbyn’s Caracas to think ‘socialist utopia’ helps poor” (*Sun*, 3.8.2017) or “Damning reasons he’s wrong about socialist utopia” (*Daily Mail*, 3.8.2017).

Given their previous form Conservative-supporting tabloids are sure to draw on a vast repertoire of alarmist headlines to dish Corbyn however slight the news peg might seem.

A pre-Christmas strike is possible at the Royal Mail after a 97 per cent vote in favour of industrial action.

Further talks have been offered to the CWU but perhaps this might become the cue for the Tory press to resurrect images of the 1979 ‘winter of discontent’ and a mock-up of Corbyn wearing a cloth cap complete with red star.

This storyline has plenty of form: a double page spread illustrated with a picture of rotting uncollected rubbish in Leicester Square, had a pointed headline: “Corbyn will not be leading New Labour ... or Old Labour, just ... Dead Labour” (Tony Parsons, *Sun*, 23.8.2015).

TWO YEARS’ worth of wounding tabloid character assassination failed to dent Corbyn’s success in the 2017 general election when Labour made gains against the Conservatives in

the face of Theresa May’s disastrous campaign.

But four years on from his election as leader, the tabloids’ unending rubbishing of Corbyn has had the same corrosive and cumulative effect as the relentless run of anti-immigration stories that did so much to strengthen the Leave vote in the 2016 European Referendum.

VOX POPS responses about Corbyn’s unfitness for office, and the dangers of the country being run by a ‘Marxist cabal’, are all too common in Labour’s Leave-voting constituencies, especially in those identified as having high concentrations of ‘Workington Man’ – said to be Brexit-backing working-class men who live in northern Rugby League towns.

Will Tanner, of the think-tank Onward, suggests that ‘Workington Man’ swing voters might deliver victory to Boris Johnson, a strategy in line with the Conservatives’ aim of targeting northern constituencies where many traditional Labour voters want Brexit delivered.

The challenge for Johnson’s staunchest press supporters – such as the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* – is to develop a credible pro-Conservative narrative

that appeals to a target group which struggles to identify with Corbyn and a potentially hard-left administration.

Events in Northern Ireland, the Middle East or Russia might assist the tabloids in their efforts to reprise their playbook of scares and smears from the 2017 general election campaign: “Jeremy Corbyn is anti-British and a friend to terrorists” (Leo McKinstry, *Daily Express*, 15.5.2017); “Apologists for terror” (*Daily Mail*, 7.6.2017).

THE DOG that never barked for the Tory press in the final days of the Brexit saga before Johnson finally pulled the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, was the debate over the future enforcement of hard-won employment rights.

Almost as an afterthought there was a last-gasp flurry of interest about European input in the struggle to strengthen workers’ rights.

Needless to say the task of explaining the legal protection that British workers have accrued under EU directives was ignored by Brexit supporting newspapers – another example of mainstream media’s wilful failure to relate news coverage to the everyday concerns of working people.

Radio and television could so easily have sought targeted reaction to the value of European-wide standards rather than broadcast the all too often aimless responses of town centre shoppers and passers-by.

Why in the never ending, and often slanted, newspaper opinion polls have there been no questions about the importance of employment rights and the relevance of standards on health and safety if the UK leaves the EU?

Journalists were in the dock in the wake of the EU referendum for leaving the public so ill informed about the impact of Leave or Remain. Will news coverage of a hurried pre-Christmas general election fail again to rise to the challenge?

**Nicholas Jones** was a BBC industrial and political correspondent for 30 years until retiring in 2002. His books include, *The Lost Tribe: Whatever Happened to Fleet Street’s Industrial Correspondents?*

# How to waste £100m

THE government 'paused' its 'get ready for Brexit' advertising campaign when the EU granted an extension until 31 January.

The government's independent watchdog, the National Audit Office, published a report which found that Boris Johnson's expensive campaign had had 'limited impact' because it was attempting to deal with issues that were not 'manageable or resolvable'.

Some estimates put the cost of the government's campaign as high as £140 million. For context, even at the lowest estimate, this was the largest government advertising campaign since the *Tell Sid* nationalisation of British Gas in 1986.

If this was a normal public information campaign this would be bad enough, but this campaign pushed the definition of public interest advertising to its limits.

Promoting preparation for a hard Brexit had obvious political benefits for both Johnson and his Chief of Staff Dominic Cummings. The cam-

art: www.ledbydonkeys.com



Parody of government Brexit poster features Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage.

paign was also intertwined with a Conservative Party campaign that spent £4,000 a day on Facebook, bolstering Johnson as Prime Minister.

Kevin Marsh, former editor of BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, commented on Twitter: "Given that this was, in reality, an exercise in party propaganda rather than government information ... shouldn't CCO [Conservative Central Office] be picking up the bill?"

With three-quarters of the campaign's time limit completed, at least £75 million has likely been spent by

the Government on it. It was, in effect, an advertising campaign with political benefits for the Conservative Party.

Coincidentally, the press component of the £100 million advertising campaign was concentrated in newspaper titles that are most loyal to the government. It's no surprise then that *The Telegraph* was keen to interview Michael Gove about the virtues of the campaign.

One thing is certain. This advertising campaign had a huge budget and little impact. It was a waste of money.

## Was the Leave tweet an ugly taste of things to come?

ON Tuesday 8 October Leave UK, the organisation funded by Aaron Banks, tweeted in response to reports from a 'No 10 Source' that Angela Merkel had insisted in a phone call to Boris Johnson that Northern Ireland remain within the European Union customs union after the UK leaves.

It was a fake story. Downing Street refused to confirm that this was an accurate account of the phone call between the two leaders but it produced the racist tweet from Leave UK.



The tweet generated widespread outrage but both Aaron Banks and Andy Wigmore, the organisation's communications director, defended it. Finally, though, in a rare apology they admitted the tweet went too far.

This first issue of *ElectionWatch* went to press on 4 November 2019

**Editor:** Granville Williams

**Design and production:** Tony Sutton, [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)



CPBF(North) also produces *MediaNorth* quarterly. We are on Facebook – become a friend at Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom North – and Twitter: @campaign\_and Contact [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com) if you would like to receive future online issues of *ElectionWatch*