

# Election Watch

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A CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) INITIATIVE

## Don't trust Boris!

'Almost the only people who think Johnson is a nice guy are those who do not know him'

By Granville Williams

DAY AFTER DAY a powerful bloc of Tory-supporting newspapers hammer home a relentless message. *The Sun* front page (top, right) of 3 December was typical. Interviewing Boris Johnson, the paper's Political Editor, Tom Newton Dunn, warns readers, 'Red Jez's threat to UK: Corbyn is a security risk' backed up by a double-page spread with the headline ENEMY OF THE STATE splashed across them.

Meanwhile, Johnson's own government is refusing to publish a report into Russian interference in British politics amid reports that a number of wealthy business people with links to Vladimir Putin have donated generously to the Tory party.



The same papers which attack Corbyn are silent about this story.

Johnson continually evades questions about the report's suppression before the general election. Why? The only plausible explanation is that it contains information that could damage him.

But here's the thing. There is so much damaging information out there already about Boris Johnson, yet it doesn't seem to sway people. In

their determination to vote for him they dismiss it. Nothing seems to stick to him - he's 'Teflon Boris'.

Why is this? Three examples show the stark difference in the way the media report on Corbyn and Labour, compared with Johnson and the Tories.

Research by Justin Schlosberg of Birkbeck, University of London, draws attention to the striking imbalance in the coverage of manifesto launches. The Institute of Fiscal Studies produced an immediate and strongly critical response to both Tory and Labour manifestos, but 'the IFS response to Labour was covered 10 times on the BBC in two days' compared with 'just one mention' for its criticism of the Tory manifesto in the equivalent period.

Loughborough University's Election 2019 survey reveals a persistent gulf between media reporting on Jeremy Corbyn's party and the Conservatives under Boris Johnson. "The high levels of newspaper negativity towards Labour identified in the first week of the campaign were sustained into week two and increased marginally in week three," the report said. We have tried, through the pieces by

Art: Tony Jenkins / www.jenkinsdraws.com

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## Does Johnson understand that murder should not be used as a political weapon?

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Nick Jones in *ElectionWatch* to put the flesh on the bare statistics and negativity that the survey identifies, and reveal their true savagery.

In the Andrew Marr BBC interview we also saw how Boris Johnson gets away with it. First, he wasn't meant to be on because he wouldn't agree to be interviewed by Andrew Neil, but the BBC relented after the London Bridge deaths. Johnson wasted no time in exploiting the attacks and putting the blame on a 'lefty government'. He peddled a plan – conjured out of thin air with expeditious cynicism – for harsher and more draconian sentences; he blamed Labour for Conservative policies; and he slid into conspiracy theory while rambling that Corbyn wanted to abolish MI5.

All of this was done in defiance of the wishes of the father of one of the victims.

Johnson appears to be incapable of understanding that murder should not to be deployed for political advantage.

Max Hastings, editor of *The Daily Telegraph* when Johnson was the Brussels correspondent, has this assessment of him:

'Johnson would not recognise truth, whether about his private or political life, if confronted by it in an identity parade. In a commonplace book the other day, I came across an observation made in 1750 by a contemporary savant, Bishop Berkeley: "It is impossible that a man who is false to his friends and neighbours should be true to the public." Almost the only people who think Johnson a nice guy are those who do not know him.'

Let's hope in the run-up to the election a lot more people begin to understand what Johnson is really like.



GROUNDED: How the *I*, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Express* ran the Jacob Rees-Mogg story.

## Burying bad news is a well-rehearsed routine

By Nicholas Jones

GOVERNMENTS IN difficulty frequently announce unpopular decisions when the news media is saturated with coverage of a headline-grabbing story. Across Whitehall this routine has been embedded within ministerial offices but the true masters of 'burying bad news' are Brexit-supporting newspapers which have become so partisan that these manipulative tricks are now an everyday occurrence.

Slavish support for Boris Johnson's general election mantra of 'Get Brexit Done' has necessitated the same finessing of what the Tory press presents as news – or dismisses as unimportant or leaves out altogether. High on the list for avoidance are damaging economic or trade related statistics. Woeful under-reporting of the fate awaiting the British car industry is a classic example of the double standards.

When Elon Musk announced that he had chosen Berlin as the site for his Tesla battery factory because 'Brexit made it too risky' to build the plant in Britain, 'Tesla in Berlin' was *The Sun's* headline (14.11.2019) over a five paragraph story on page 49 that failed to mention why Musk

could not risk investing in the UK or the fact that the British car industry had been pinning its hopes on securing the plant to help boost UK electric car production and ownership.

These same techniques can be used to downplay embarrassing revelations or scandals about prominent Boris Johnson-supporting politicians. The shaming of arch-Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg after his insensitivity over the failure of some of the Grenfell Tower victims to reach safety was widely reported across many media outlets but not in the Brexit press where it was shunted inside, towards the bottom or side of the page.

Front-page splashes in the *I* newspaper and *The Guardian* were in sharp contrast to tabloid coverage. 'Mogg's Grovel' was *The Sun's* headline (6.11.2019) over a small story tucked away at the bottom of pages 22 and 23. The headline on a single column story in the *Daily Express* made no mention of either Rees-Mogg's name or the word apology.

Instead of the hounding that might have been expected in similar circumstances if it had been an acolyte of Jeremy Corbyn, the Tory tabloids have left Rees-Mogg largely undisturbed as he potters about in his constituency.



# Channel 4 takes flak

Even before this election, C4 was seen as a hostile broadcaster by the Tories. In the past they have floated the idea of privatising the public service broadcaster, and then backed off. Dorothy Byrne, News and Current Affairs Executive at C4, gave a feisty MacTaggart lecture this year when she described Boris Johnson as 'a known liar' and compared his media strategy to Vladimir Putin's. As the election campaign has unfolded we have seen further flashpoints

## Michael Gove's antics on C4 News

THE TORY party has adopted one of the standard populist tactics: discrediting independent sources of information and attempting to replace them with its own output.

During the ITV leaders' debate the CCHQ Twitter account was switched to resemble an independent fact-checking service named 'factcheckUK'. The party logo was changed to a respectable white tick against a purple background.

The party received a full battering of negative headlines. Then they hit back. Michael Gove was interviewed by Ciaran Jenkins, C4's Scottish Correspondent, about the fact-check incident on C4 News. He would not apologise. But more than that, he opted to launch an all-out attack on the legitimacy of even being asked questions about what the Conservatives were doing.

From the opening moments of the interview he worked to undermine and discredit the journalist. When Gove was shown an image of the 'fact-check' Tory Twitter account on a screen and asked to demonstrate where it revealed that it was in fact from the Tory party, he replied: "I shan't because this is your computer, I don't know what you've been doing with it."

That Channel 4 journalists would doctor a screenshot to paint the Tories in an unfavourable light was Gove's implication.

When Jenkins told him that people thought the Twitter profile was misleading, he replied: "If you find enough people I'm sure you'll find people who will corroborate your version of accounts." There it was



Michael Gove – Ciaran Jenkins' interview with Gove is at: <https://www.channel4.com/news/michael-gove-interview-on-truth-lies-and-brexite>

again. Journalists only interviewing certain people, or ignoring those that weren't useful, in a bid to mould reality.

A withering verdict on Gove's performance came from Jane Martinson in *The Guardian*: "The interview may be used on college courses as the moment the definition of truth lost all meaning."

One of the crucial aspects of the interview was the interviewer's willingness to use the word 'lie'. That is objectively the right word to use for things which are not true and are said in full awareness of that fact. But the Conservatives base their current messaging on the assumption that broadcasters will not have the confidence to go that far. They will ask questions about the information, but then simply end up calling it 'controversial' or 'contested'.

## The climate debate controversy

TWO MELTING ice sculptures represented the absence of Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage from the first ever election debate on the climate emergency on C4. Michael Gove had turned up at the studios but was turned away by C4 which said the debate was for party leaders only.

Before the start of the debate, a letter of complaint was sent to Ofcom on behalf of the Conservatives which dubbed the ice sculptures a 'provocative partisan stunt' and accused the broadcaster of 'a pattern of bias'. The party has also threatened to pull C4's licence, with a party source saying the government could 'review Channel 4's Public Services Broadcasting obligations' if they win the election.

The source said: "Broadcasting organisations are rightly held to a higher standard – and particularly Channel 4 which has a special role enshrined in legislation.

"Any review would of course look at whether its remit should be better focused so it is serving the public in the best way possible."

Ofcom subsequently threw out the Tory complaint over C4 News' climate change debate.

Ofcom said the sculpture was not supposed to 'personally' represent Mr Johnson and that little editorial focus was given to the object throughout the debate. The party sent Michael Gove to the studio to offer to stand in for the leader's debate, but the other leaders taking part in the debate turned him down. Gove arrived at the studio along with a camera, capturing the stunt for the Tories' social media outlets.



# Tory press attacks on student voting erode trust in electoral process

By Nicholas Jones

A RECORD surge in the registration of young voters has given added potency to scare stories appearing in *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* that allege university students across the UK are engaged in 'voting scams and frauds' ahead of polling day.

Brexit-supporting newspapers failed to make any mention of the widespread appeals to young people to ensure they registered to vote before the deadline of 26 November.

But despite a Conservative press boycott, the campaign to achieve the widest possible franchise for polling day on December 12 was backed by regular reminders by celebrities, broadcasters, and other media outlets and their combined efforts did have a dramatic effect.

By the deadline, an extra 3.8 million people had registered to vote since October 29 when the election was announced. On the last day there were 659,000 registrations – a new record for a final day.

According to the Electoral Reform Society, 67 per cent of the registrations were from people aged 34 and under and this included a spike in registrations from those under 25, 'one of the demographics least likely to be correctly registered'.

A refusal by Tory tabloids to help alert young people – or report on the success of the registration campaign – needs no explanation. Most opinion surveys suggest younger voters are far more likely to back Labour than the Conservatives and therefore the only counterattack that could be stirred up by Tory media allies such

as *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* was to denigrate young voters – and especially those at university.

This strategy has the twin objective of strengthening the pressure by Conservative MPs for tighter control on voter registration, especially for young people, and to undermine the demands for the voting age to be reduced to 16, which is now the case in Wales as well as in Scotland for regional and local elections.

Alarmist headlines are second nature to the tabloid press and undermining the public's faith in the electoral process is an easy target.

'First class degree in election fraud' was the headline on Sue Reid's double-page spread (*Daily Mail*, 2.11.2019) which examined abuses she claimed were being perpetrated by students in traditionally Conservative voting uni-





versity towns: “The campus scams: double voting ... postal voting ... personation ... multiple voting.”

*The Sun* waded in, under the headline, ‘Unis accused of voting scampus’ (20.11.2019) alleging that universities and Labour councils had been registering thousands of students ‘without their knowledge in a bid to boost left-wing turnout’.

Next day’s edition – ‘Scampus UK’ (*The Sun*, 21.11.2019) – quoted the Conservative chairman James Cleverly calling on the Electoral Commission to start ‘a nationwide probe’ after claims the ‘Labour-run Plymouth Council had registered 850 students without permission’.

‘A procedural error’ had apparently been detected, but the Electoral Commission insisted there was ‘no evidence of illegal mass registrations elsewhere’. On *The Sun*’s editorial page, columnist Charlotte Gill followed up her paper’s investigation into the ‘shocking’ scandal in Plymouth with a warning that young voters were ‘hardly the most clued-up age group’ and she wondered how the left would respond if 16-year-old voters turned around and said: “Sure, for Boris Johnson – yes, please.”

Having been upstaged by *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail* published Sue Reid’s follow-up, with another double-page spread, ‘Could Labour voter fraud steal the election?’ (23.11.2019) alleging that student housing was being ‘trawled for discarded registration cards ... all to cynically take advantage of our worryingly lax election system’.



Having done so much to ignore campaigns to engage young voters, the *Daily Mail* greeted the decision by the Welsh Assembly to follow the Scottish Parliament to allow votes at 16 by questioning the effect of allowing 70,000 ‘children aged 16 and 17’ to vote in regional and local elections in Wales from 2021 (28.11.2019).

Conservative and Brexit Party Assembly Members voted against the move, but it was approved by just one vote over the required two-thirds majority. The British Youth Council said the Welsh decision was a cause for huge celebration, which only served to highlight the fact that 1.4 million 16- and 17-olds would be denied a vote in the 2019 general election.

**Nicholas Jones** was a BBC industrial and political correspondent for 30 years.

## Our thanks to all

We’ve done it! We’ve produced five issues of *ElectionWatch* and got some great responses to the initiative. This was a self-funding project, and with the money we’ve received and are promised we’ve covered our costs. In addition to those we thanked in issue 4, we’d like to say a big thank you to Unite and an anonymous donor for their financial support.

We couldn’t have produced five issues of *ElectionWatch* without the tireless support and commitment of Tony Sutton whose work on design and production has been exemplary, and Nick Jones, the former BBC Industrial and Political Correspondent, who has contributed distinctive, informative pieces to each issue. We’d like to say a big thank you to both of you and to all the other contributors.

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**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

# NHS ROUND-UP

## BY DON MORT

### Privatisation

■ DONALD TRUMP'S arrival in the UK this week saw a row over NHS privatisation intensify, despite the US president's insistence he was 'staying out' of the election.

The US government wanted nothing to do with the NHS, even if it were handed to them on a silver platter, said Trump, although he previously suggested otherwise.

His remarks followed the release of 451 pages of documents detailing US-UK trade talks which raised concerns over drug pricing, food standards and possible increased market access to the health service.

Jeremy Corbyn was accused of scaremongering after Labour released the documents at a campaign event. But the unredacted papers, previously shared online, showed that among the issues discussed was extending drug patents for pharmaceutical companies, raising the possibility of the NHS having to pay higher prices for medicines.

Research commissioned by the GMB union also showed the scale of private NHS contracting under the existing framework for health service outsourcing. Since 2015, private firms including Virgin Care and Care UK have landed almost £15bn worth of contracts, the research found, raising doubts over Tory claims the NHS is "not for sale", said the union.

Some £3.6bn worth of NHS contracts had been handed to private providers last year alone, an increase of 20 per cent on 2017.

The GMB's Rehana Azam said: "These shocking figures expose the extent to which our NHS is increasingly falling into private hands."

### Staffing

■ RESEARCH BY the Nuffield Trust which found that one in four hospital staff is born outside the UK, compared to 14 per cent of the general

population, added to fears for the future of dangerously overstretched NHS services. Post-Brexit restrictions on freedom of movement would exacerbate a workforce crisis which has seen the number of vacancies in the NHS trust sector reach more than 100,000.

NHS trusts around the country have seen alarming shortfalls in the numbers of registered nurses on hospital wards, sometimes relying on less qualified care staff to plug the gap. Millions of pounds continues to be spent on agency workers, adding to growing financial deficits at some trusts, although restrictions have been imposed on the use of temporary staffing.

Miriam Deakin, director of policy and strategy at NHS Providers, said any solution to recruitment problems would rely on overseas staff. She added: "It will be several years before domestic supply increases enough to help close the gap."

### A&E performance

■ THE CONSERVATIVES will have been glad that performance figures showing record A&E waiting times were the last to be released before the 12 December general election. Fewer than 75 per cent of patients were treated, admitted or discharged within four hours at major A&E units in England during October.

NHS England figures also showed there were 2.17m attendances at emergency departments that month, up by 4.4 per cent on October 2018. The rate of growth in A&E attendances among the over 65s was thought to be double the rate than for those under retirement age.

It left the Tories under pressure to explain their record on the NHS as leading medics said the crisis was no longer confined to winter.

After years of initiatives to provide more services outside of traditional hospital settings, guide

people to alternatives to A&E like out-of-hours GP services and pharmacies, there had been no let-up for busy hospitals.

### Winter funding

■ THE NHS is in worse shape than usual this winter after extra funding was not provided for the first time in eight years, a leading thinktank said.

The King's Fund said the lack of a cash injection to help open more wards, as cold weather leads to rising demand, left NHS organisations with tough decisions to make. In a blog post the thinktank said: "A new government in January 2020 might decide that a rapid injection of winter funding is needed. But for the NHS and winter funding, 2019/20 would be a case of 'too little, too late' rather than 'better late than never'."

### Social care

■ THE PLIGHT of vulnerable and elderly people stuck in hospital or being deprived of support in their own homes will be among the most emotive issues facing the next government.

The lack of concrete plans for the future of social care caused frustration after the launch of the Conservative election manifesto. The Tories would "build a cross-party consensus to bring forward an answer that solves the problem", with the condition that nobody needing care would be forced to sell their home.

As the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) pointed out, it struck a different tone from Boris Johnson's first speech as prime minister in July, when he promised to "fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared."

The Health Foundation said it was a 'shameful omission from the manifesto, almost 1,000 days since a social care green paper was announced but never published'.

“ Expecting newspapers and broadcasters to report the news with a degree of objectivity, separating reportage from comment, is not unreasonable



“ We need to make the fourth estate understand that, and one way of doing that is to stop swimming in those waters

PRICE OF DEMOCRACY? The BBC's Andrew Neil interrogates Jeremy Corbyn.

(Photo: TV screenshot)

# Who made Andrew Neil king?

By Duncan Heining

JEREMY CORBYN'S recent interview with Andrew Neil for the BBC was hardly the Labour leader's finest moment. Tabloids and broadsheets queued up to skewer him for failing to apologise for his handling of the 'antisemitism' issue and gloated as he struggled to justify Labour's spending plans, including on women's pension rights. Corbyn was grilled by Neil and served up on a plate.

But why do we watch politicians being grilled? Media bosses and journalists may not be entirely responsible for the phenomenon. We all carry a smidgeon of blame. Every time one of theirs blustered, flustered and begged to be allowed to finish, we rubbed our hands. But then we scream foul when one of ours gets the 'grilling'.

But our culpability is tiny compared to that of media tycoons and media professionals. Whether Paxman, Humphreys, Redhead or Robin Day invented this gladiatorial interview style is irrelevant. We need to ask, instead, what and whose interests are being served by it?

There was never a golden age when journalists and newspapers just

reported the news, drawing a thick line between reportage and comment. The media has always served the interests of those who own and control it. But whatever lines might once have been drawn about what constituted fair and objective reporting have been long ago disappeared.

This is not just a consequence of increased competition for advertising and revenue. Ultimately, it is about two things - ownership and power, not just ownership of TV, radio stations and newspapers but of the political narrative, of what is said, when, how and how often it is repeated.

It is not even about the power to influence political agendas. Leveson sought to restore a balance in society between the media, elected politicians and broader social interests such as trades unions. Yet the screams from minnows like Ian Hislop to sharks like Murdoch and Viscount Rothermere caused tsunamis across a sea of newsprint in defence of a 'free press'.

But a 'free press' that is accountable to no-one but its owners is no servant of democracy. We need to ask, 'freedom for what and for whom?' Expecting newspapers and broadcasts to report the news with a degree of

objectivity, separating reportage from comment, is not unreasonable.

Nor is it unreasonable to expect interviewers to let politicians present their policies to their electorate, while still questioning those policies. The Paxman/Neil approach does neither, but seeks to cast politicians as bumbling fools, and aggrandising the media as the true guardian of democracy.

We do not get to vote for Neil, Paxman, Murdoch or Rothermere. Our political system has huge shortcomings but at least it asks us to choose. Mainstream media, by contrast, offers remarkably little choice. Apart from the centrist *Guardian* and *Mirror*, choice is between one Tory-supporting newspaper and another.

With power comes responsibility. We need to make the fourth estate understand that and one way of doing that is to stop swimming in those waters, whether with the sharks or the minnows. The promotion of a democratically accountable and pluralistic media must be our long-term goal. But it is also time for politicians of integrity to stop swimming with sharks.

*Duncan Heining has been writing books and reviews about jazz since 1996*



# Tory election videos banned as Lib Dems publish fake papers

TWO TORY election videos have been banned from YouTube following complaints from the BBC. They have already been removed from Facebook after the BBC complained about copyright issues.

The widely criticised videos used footage of BBC news reader Huw Edwards and political editor Laura Kuenssberg.

They were edited to suggest the journalists were agreeing with Conservative propaganda. One video showed Kuenssberg saying the phrase 'pointless delay to Brexit' - but the full video made clear that she had been quoting Boris Johnson.

The removal of the videos from YouTube comes just days after par-



CAUGHT OUT: Two of the fake Lib Dem newspapers.

ent company Google banned eight different Tory ads from the site. Google did not say why it had removed those ads but its guidelines ban 'the promotion of products or services that are designed to enable dishonest behaviour'.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats

have been accused of peddling misinformation after distributing fake newspapers with names similar to local newspapers.

They have produced publications in more than a dozen seats with titles such as *Cheltenham Courier*, *North West Leeds News* and *York News* to promote their candidates. Each 'newspaper' has a similar look to a traditional local newspaper but is accompanied by a small line of text saying it is a party publication.

Newsquest, which owns titles in many marginal seats, said it was outrageous that the Lib Dems had produced a publication called *The Gazette* to promote their candidate in an area close to their *Basingstoke Gazette* title.

## MediaNorth Conference

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### SPEAKERS CONFIRMED:

- Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Current Affairs, Channel 4
- Nick Jones, former BBC Political and Industrial Correspondent
- Dr Justin Schlosberg, Media Reform Coalition & Birkbeck, University of London

For booking details contact CPBF(North) at [cpbfnorth@outlook.com](mailto:cpbfnorth@outlook.com)

Leeds Art Gallery is 10 minute walk from Leeds Railway Station and a 15 minute walk from the city centre bus station