

ElectionWatch

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A CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) INITIATIVE



Boris Johnson delivered a flimsy election manifesto that earned withering reports from both the Institute for Fiscal Studies' Paul Johnson and the *Financial Times*. Photo: TV screenshot

Tories unveil a dodgy election manifesto

By Granville Williams

THE FLIMSY Tory manifesto document *Get Brexit Done* hasn't gone down well. Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, gave a withering verdict on it: 'As a blueprint for five years in government the lack of significant policy action is remarkable.'

He continues, 'Health and school spending will continue to rise. Give or take pennies, other public services, and working age benefits, will see the cuts to their day-to-day budgets of the last decade baked in.'

Boris Johnson promised to 'fix the crisis in social care once and for all'. But that promise has disappeared into thin air.

On the tax side Paul Johnson points out: 'The biggest, and least welcome, announcement is the triple tax

lock: no increases in rates of income tax, NICs or VAT ... It is also part of a fundamentally damaging narrative – that we can have the public services we want, with more money for health and pensions and schools – without paying for them. We can't.'

The *Financial Times* points out one item about investment 'in the electric vehicle infrastructure including a national plug-in network and gigafactory; and clean energy'.

The FT comments. 'A gigafactory eh? Those are expensive: Tesla and Panasonic's one in Nevada, not even half complete, has cost \$4.5bn to date. The one announced in Germany a fortnight ago is mooted to cost \$4.4bn.'

Chancellor Sajid Javid said in the manifesto document that 'our plans are responsible and fully costed'. As the FT points out, not this one.

EDITORIAL

Dangerous narrative

THE WARNING by the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, that the vast majority of British Jews were 'gripped by anxiety' at the idea of Jeremy Corbyn in No 10 dominated the media on 26 November.

The two most widely read Jewish newspapers in the UK, the *Jewish Chronicle* and the *Jewish News*, have been running a campaign against Corbyn since September 2015 when he was elected Labour Party leader.

As this General Election campaign got underway, the *Jewish Chronicle*'s editorial stated, "The impact of a Labour victory is almost unimaginable for our community ... The prospect is truly frightening."

This language suggests that a Corbyn government would create a hostile environment against Jews across the country. Such an idea is grotesque.

Branding Corbyn as antisemitic has always been about influencing the wider UK electorate. Conservative-supporting national newspapers have all been enthusiastic amplifiers of the 'Corbyn is antisemitic' narrative. Neither these national newspapers nor the more liberal *Guardian* or the BBC have shown much interest in seriously interrogating, let alone challenging, the allegations.

We are witnessing the weaponisation of anti-semitism for political ends. It's a dangerous and unpredictable game to play but the Tories are unlikely to stop now.

Labour and antisemitism: The questions that didn't get asked

By Tim Gopsill

THE MEDIA attack on Labour over its claimed antisemitism got a shot in the arm with the destructive intervention of the Chief Rabbi on the very day the Labour Party launched the declaration of religious tolerance in its 'Race and Faith' manifesto.

Ephraim Mirvis gave the right-wing press an excuse to ratchet up the action, with all of them happy to report the rabbi saying that Jeremy Corbyn was 'unfit for high office'.

None asked why the opinion on the leadership of the Labour Party of a person with such right-wing Zionist politics should be of any interest. None questioned his lurid assertion that 'a new poison – sanctioned from the very top – has taken root in the Labour Party' when all the evidence shows that the incidence of antisemitism is much higher on the right of politics.

In 2016 Mirvis lectured Jews



GOOD FRIENDS: Boris Johnson and the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis.

and other ethnic minorities that they must comply with the former Tory minister Lord Tebbit's idiotic 'cricket test', in which they are required to support the England cricket team. This is an old favourite of the right wing, who think everybody must follow a cricket team, but is generally regarded as mindless bigotry.

Mirvis then went off to Israel to join the Jerusalem Day march, which according to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* is a 'gender-segregated extreme-right, pro-occupation religious carnival of hatred, marking the anniversary of Israel's capture of Jerusalem by humiliating the city's Palestinian Muslims ... marchers vandalized shops in Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter and chanted "Death to Arabs"'.

There is doubt over the extent to which Mirvis – or anybody – can claim to speak for the 'Jewish community' – but the media compounded their disregard for this by reinforcing his message through the mouth of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who can hardly speak

for most of the English either.

Sadly, some Labour MPs, including shadow cabinet members, joined in as well, but that was the intention: not to swing votes against Labour because the issue has little electoral traction, but to destabilise and divide the party.

The 'antisemitism' smear has little if anything to do with race or faith. Labour members know there is hardly any of it about – one reason why the numbers disciplined are so disappointingly low to the party's enemies. All the evidence supplied to the party's processes is from social media; much of it of dubious provenance; the bulk of those posting are found not to be party members.

Members know rather that it is heavily political: that the desultory way in which disciplinary cases were handled for the first couple of years of Corbyn's leadership was engineered by the bureaucrats of the ancien regime to discredit him. Cases were left untouched for months, even years, while Corbyn, lacking control of the apparatus, took the rap.

The new regime of Jennie Formby got rid of those responsible, and these were most of the characters that showed up in John Ware's disgraceful BBC *Panorama* programme in June, complaining of antisemitism!

The irony was sickening. The whole smear campaign is outrageous and indeed anti-semitic in itself: it abuses Jewish people's lives and belief for political ends, and stirs up more Jew-hatred against them on social media.

And it says a lot about the mindset of the media industry that (as predicted in *MediaNorth* in September) the *Panorama* programme has been nominated in two categories in the 2019 British Journalism Awards.

Our thanks

Welcome to the fourth issue of *ElectionWatch*. Our previous issues have won lots of positive comments. *ElectionWatch* is a self-funding initiative and we welcome donations to sustain our work. Thank you to Manchester & Salford NUJ, London Magazine NUJ, Edinburgh & District NUJ, Unison (Yorks and Humberside), John Bamford, Len & Marion Holden, and Maggie Mort for your donations.

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Vote Labour, says anarchist author of *V for Vendetta*

ANARCHISTS REJECT hierarchy, authority, and promote participatory democracy. So they don't vote.

Well that's the idea but there have been exceptions. Civil rights activist and historian Howard Zinn was a socialist/anarchist who endorsed voting for the political party that will do the least damage to citizens. Noam Chomsky has said much the same.

Now in this election anarchist Alan Moore, author of *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, has said that the last time he voted was more than 40 years ago, because he was 'convinced that leaders are mostly of benefit to no one save themselves'. Now he is asking people to vote for the Labour party.

Moore says these are 'unprec-



edented times' and that a victory for the Conservative party in December's general election would leave Britain without 'a culture, a society, or an environment in which we have the luxury of even imagining alternatives'.

In his statement, Moore says: 'Although my vote is principally against the Tories rather than for Labour, I'd observe that Labour's current manifesto is the most encouraging set of proposals that I've ever seen from any major British party ... If my work has meant anything to you over the years, if the way that modern life is going makes you all fear for the things you value, then please get out there on polling day and make your voice heard with a vote against all this heartless trampling of everybody's safety, dignity and dreams.'

Not much common sense in Farage's plan for BBC

IT'S surprising to find that one of Nigel Farage's policies is to phase out the BBC licence fee.

He moans that he and the Brexit Party don't get enough coverage on the BBC, but it's difficult to understand why he is so hostile to it. After all, by 8 May 2019 he'd had a record 33 Question Time appearances.

Or is he sore about the long years in which the Brexit Party received absolutely no coverage at all from the biased BBC on the flimsy grounds that it didn't actually exist yet?

Farage seems to believe it is the



duty of a public broadcaster to turn up to every single one of the £2.50-a-ticket events he holds.

NHS ROUND-UP / Don Mort

Trump Trade Files

THE RELEASE of hundreds of pages of the so-called #TrumpTradeFiles has highlighted the media's role in influencing voters' perceptions of who can be trusted with the NHS.

A scramble to decipher a dossier detailing UK-US trade talks began after Labour shared the documents, claiming they show new corporate access to the health service and the potential for hikes in drug prices.

Details of the meetings were first requested by the action group Global Justice Now, which lodged a Freedom of Information appeal after papers were released with the text redacted.

As rolling news outlets posted updates on Wednesday, it emerged that the full documents were first leaked online weeks earlier.

Had the mainstream press simply missed the story, or did this prove the documents were not as significant as Labour claimed?

Further questions are expected in the run-up to election day, as the 451 jargon-filled pages are further analysed and deciphered.

The Cliff Edge

IT IS known as the 'graph of doom' – a chart showing how councils would struggle to meet the rising cost of social care after budget cuts were imposed back in 2010.

First created by Barnet Council in north London, it plotted rising care costs against stagnant overall spending power, showing councils' entire budgets would eventually be swallowed up.

As the social care cliff edge approached, the Government came under growing pressure to find a solution.

A social care green paper was promised but never published. But now the Conservative election manifesto has been criticised over a commitment to 'urgently seek a cross-party consensus in order to bring forward the necessary proposal and legislation for long-term reform'.

The Queens of Mean show no sisterly love for Jo Swinson

By Nicholas Jones

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS have grown accustomed over the years to press coverage that usually ignores their policies or belittles their party leader. The traditional tabloid path – unless there is an incident that can be whipped up into a scandal – is to treat the Lib Dems as a footnote, meriting no more than a few sentences at the bottom of the page.

Jo Swinson has at least benefited from the recent moderation in language being used to challenge women in politics. Nor has she been subjected to the full panoply of cruel jibes and crude headlines that were regularly deployed to ridicule her predecessors, Nick Clegg and the late Paddy Ashdown.

But whereas headline writers and her political opponents are on their guard to avoid sexist attacks, women diarists and columnists writing for the Tory press – sometimes known as the queens of mean – had no intention of expressing sisterly solidarity.

As Ms Swinson has moved centre stage with campaign speeches and appearances in televised debates, the snide bitchiness of earlier coverage has been amplified by sketch writers and cartoonists.



From the start of the campaign, Sarah Vine, wife of Michael Gove, was irritated by Ms Swinson's 'bossy, holier-than-thou election style' which was too 'head-girly' (*Daily Mail*, 20.11.2019).

'Up her own bottom, but not far enough so we can still hear her', was an anonymous quote used by Allison Pearson (*Daily Telegraph*, 20.11.2019) in justifying the headline, 'The more we see her, the less we like her. ...'

Ms Swinson's credibility was on the line when she spoke at the CBI conference, and then launched the Lib Dems' manifesto, two high-profile engagements that were an open invitation to the Tory commentariat to patronise her performance.

'Smiley Swinson gave the City fat cats the cheery nurse treatment', was Henry Deedes' account (*Daily Mail*, 19.11.2019) of how 'Auntie Jo' tried to woo the CBI.



Ways in which the *Daily Mail* newspaper used its pages to demean the Liberal Democrats' policies and Jo Swinson, the party leader.

Deedes was equally withering in his sketch on the Lib Dems' 'limp manifesto launch' (*Daily Mail*, 21.11.2019). The thrust of the headline over the paper's main report – 'The Lib Dem priorities? Legalise cannabis and tax frequent flyers' – was shared by the *Daily Telegraph*, 'Swinson to raise £1.5bn by legalising cannabis' (21.11.2019).

A manifesto pledge to decriminalise cannabis was a gift for Tory-supporting newspapers which used it to divert attention from the party's key commitments to the electorate: 'Remain bonus will help fund £60bn spending, say Lib Dems' (*The Guardian*, 21.11.2019); 'The Lib Dem offer: Europe, green taxes and a pot of money' (*The Times*, 21.11.2019).

Both *The Sun* and *Daily Express* followed their usual practice for indicating the irrelevance of the manifesto launch: five sentences near the bottom of page 8 sufficed for *The Sun* (Jo "lurch left" spree) and the *Daily Express* managed three sentences ('Swinson's labour deal') at the bottom of page 9.

But not to be outdone, the *Daily Express* wheeled out its regular columnist Leo McKinstry to deliver the inevitable hatchet job, and without hesitation he answered the question posed by the headline, 'What exactly is the point of Lib Dems leader Jo Swinson?' (21.11.2019).

His conclusion was that the Lib Dems had 'sunk to new depths' under 'her hectoring manner and her poor judgement'.

She came across as 'a prim, inadequate, over-promoted deputy head-teacher of a primary school ... Her



An invented story about Swinson torturing squirrels was picked up by *Times* cartoonist Peter Brookes.

immaturity is reflected in a host of poor decisions.'

Ms Swinson has faced the strongest attacks in the *Daily Telegraph*, anxious to warn off Conservative Remainers from being tempted to vote Liberal Democrat.

Full-page coverage of her first appearance up against Johnson and Corbyn in BBC *Question Time* had the headline, 'Swinson savaged by both sides over vow to halt Brexit', and was described as 'a torrid time ... as she struggled to get her message across' (23.11.2019).

Like the other leaders, she has become the target of fake news. She insisted a bizarre tweet from a Brexit Party supporter claiming she had tortured squirrels was totally false.

This invented story succeeded in provoking a mini Twitter storm and attracted the interest of *The Times*'s cartoonist, Peter Brookes (21.11.2019).

The closing stages of the cam-

paign will pose a challenge to the Tory tabloids in deciding how to respond should the prospect of tactical voting gather pace and indicate an acceleration in a swing to the Lib Dems.

Except for sure-fire targets like legalising cannabis or highlighting her 'shrill hectoring tone' in televised debates, the Brexit press has largely been following the path of side-lining the Lib Dems in the belief that a two-horse race between Conservative and Labour is far better for Johnson.

The critical time will be the final run-up to polling day and there might well come a moment when tabloids decide to resurrect some of the skeletons in the chequered history of previous Lib Dem leaders.

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?*

Voice of a muted Tory paper

THE YORKSHIRE POST was an interesting read the day after the Tory election manifesto launch. Absent were the ringing endorsements splashed across the bloc of Tory-supporting national newspapers.

One front-page column headline was 'Yorkshire towns hit by biggest cuts over last decade'. The critical report highlighted that Scarborough and Barnsley councils have seen the biggest drop in government funding in the region over the last decade.

The party manifesto was criticised in another front-page piece as being 'remarkable' for its lack of policies and the editorial headline was 'Johnson still to win the North: Where is money coming from?'

The editorial said, 'Mr Johnson needs to explain to voters, in an election where trust is a central issue, precisely how he intends to pay for his spending plans when the Tories are ruling out increases to tax, National Insurance and VAT for the duration of the next Parliament.'

It concluded that, given Johnson's 'poor response to this month's South Yorkshire floods, he still has much to do to win the trust of voters here.'



The *Yorkshire Post* criticised Boris Johnson for ignoring the flood damage and not calling a national emergency



Boris Johnson on the *Question Time: Leaders' Special*, 22 November 2019.

BBC admits another editing mistake

THE BBC has said editing footage of Prime Minister Boris Johnson for a news bulletin was 'a mistake on our part'.

The Prime Minister appeared on *Question Time: Leaders Special* on BBC One on Friday 22 November.

The audience laughed when he was asked a question about how important it is for people in power to tell the truth. But the laughter and subsequent applause was absent from a cut-down version of the exchange on a lunchtime news bulletin the following day.

"This clip from the BBC's *Question Time* special, which was played out in full on the News at Ten on Friday evening and on other outlets, was shortened for timing reasons on Saturday's lunchtime bulletin, to edit out a repetitious phrase from Boris Johnson," the BBC said in a statement.

"However, in doing so we also edited out laughter from the audience. Although there was absolutely no intention to mislead, we accept this was a mistake on our part, as it didn't reflect the full reaction

to Boris Johnson's answer.

"We did not alter the soundtrack or image in any way apart from this edit, contrary to some claims on social media."

The BBC's statement follows an error on BBC Breakfast last month when out-of-date footage of Mr Johnson laying a wreath was broadcast due to 'a production mistake'.

The BBC has apologised for mistakenly running an out-of-date clip of Boris Johnson laying a wreath.

It said a production error that led to BBC Breakfast showing images purporting to be the prime minister attending this year's Remembrance Day service, when in fact the clip was from 2016.

Some members of the public questioned the BBC's impartiality on social media. The BBC was accused of using the older footage because Johnson had looked more dishevelled this year, in a blue suit instead of a black one and with both his coat and jacket undone.

He was also accused of setting off to lay his wreath too early, and then of placing it upside down.

TV debate: An 'oven ready' demolition job on Corbyn

By Nicholas Jones

WHEN REPORTING the head-to-head televised debates that have made such a welcome re-appearance in the 2019 general election, Conservative-supporting newspapers have – to quote Boris Johnson – an 'oven ready' recipe for delivering yet another demolition job on Jeremy Corbyn.

Whatever the reality of the confrontation that has taken place, the tricks of the trade of tabloid reporting can be manipulated to achieve the desired outcome: Corbyn trashed and humiliated, out-punched and outclassed by Johnson.

Even before a debate has taken place, an anti-Corbyn agenda is trailed in advance: readers have been forewarned of the lies and evasions they can expect as Johnson puts the Labour leader on the spot.

Snap opinion polls of viewers are another device for strengthening the pre-determined narrative and headlines. Unfavourable results can be over-looked, or the surveys twisted to suit the story line.

Hostile questioning, jeering or

hollow laughter can either be ignored or blamed on the broadcasters for having selected an audience weighted against the Conservatives.

'Corbyn TV Brexit showdown' was the headline on the *Daily Mail's* preview of the first debate (19.11.2019) declaring that Johnson would be urging the Labour leader to 'come clean with voters' and end his 'Brexit dithering'.

The Sun followed suit, predicting a 'Corbynquisition' as the Prime

Minister pursued his pre-briefed demand for answers to Labour's 'dither, delay and uncertainty' on Brexit.

Headlines next morning followed the pre-prepared script: 'Dither v Deliver' trumpeted *The Sun* (20.11.2019), which claimed Corbyn had refused 'nine times to say if he'd back Brexit'.

A YouGov snap opinion poll of viewers, which suggested the Prime Minister had just edged it with 51 per cent saying he did better than Corbyn, was used to back up *The Sun's* report that Johnson had 'humiliated' the Labour leader.

In a show of unity, the front pages of the Brexit press hammered home the same message that Labour had no answer to Johnson's 'oven ready' deal to exit the European Union.

'Laughable, Mr Corbyn' was the *Daily Mail's* banner headline (20.11.2019) over its report that Corbyn had refused 'nine times to say if he'd back a Brexit deal – to mocking derision of studio audience'.

When the BBC *Question Time* debate (22.11.2019) provoked jeers and hollow laughter for both Johnson and Corbyn the tabloids could call on another 'oven ready' routine for lambasting Labour while lauding the Conservatives.

The main news line was that Corbyn revealed that if he became Prime Minister, he would personally remain neutral in a second referendum while the country voted on a future EU trade deal to be negotiated by an incoming Labour government.

'Jeers as Corbyn vows to dodge Brexit question' (*Daily Express*, 23.11.2019) was the top line for the Brexit press ridiculing him for an 'abject failure of leadership' (*Daily Telegraph*).

'Tragic Grandpa' was *The Sun's*
Continued on Page 8



The Brexit debate

From Page 7

verdict on a 'shell shocked' Corbyn 'ripped apart by an angry tv audience'.

By contrast 'Firm PM weathers BBC bias' was *The Sun's* headline over its report alongside about how Johnson kept his cool and fended off a 'lefty crowd ... an audience packed full of students and public sector workers'.

Readers might have been puzzled by the fact that this same audience jeered both Corbyn and Johnson, but the paper said the blame lay with the BBC as host Fiona Bruce and the Prime Minister were 'heckled by watching Labour supporters'.

On this occasion, *The Sun* ignored snap surveys of viewers and



relied instead on a poll of *Sun* readers which indicated 52 per cent support for Johnson.

Determined as ever to pursue its campaign to try to erode the BBC's credibility, the *Sun on Sunday* (24.11.2019) claimed to have identified an audience member who spoke up in support of Corbyn. He was a

'red Jez activist' – further proof of BBC bias in audience selection.

Turning any set-back in a tv appearance by a Tory party leader into an attack on the BBC is a tried and tested formula and has again been brought into sharp focus given the extensive coverage for the election debates.

Tory manifesto – shape of things to come?

By Barry White

THE CONSERVATIVE manifesto for the general election, page 48, reads: "After Brexit we also need to look at the broader aspects of our constitution: the relationship between the government, parliament and the courts; the functioning of the Royal prerogative; the role of the House of Lords; and access to justice for ordinary people. The ability of our security services to defend us against terrorism and organised crime is critical. We will update the Human Rights Act and administrative law to ensure that there is a proper balance between the rights of individuals,

our vital national security and effective government."

Fair-enough? Not according to Sean O'Grady writing in the *On-line Independent* on 25 November. He warns: "I think they're going to scrap the remaining practical rights and prerogatives of the House of Commons in an act of spite."

Referring to the parliamentary procedures used by the Commons to take back control over the order of business of the house and making ministers accountable for their actions he warns that ... "a Johnson administration, if elected, is going to stop all that malarkey. They will also – it is more or less explicit – inter-

fere in the judiciary and restrict the powers of the Supreme Court to rule on issues such as the prorogation of parliament.

"There has been talk – not in this manifesto admittedly – of making the judges politically accountable, by being ratified via hearings by parliament, in the way they are in the United States. They have not forgiven Lady Hale and her colleagues for their ruling that the suspension of parliament in the autumn was unlawful, null and void. Neither would I be surprised if they pack the Lords with new and obedient Tory peers."

We know Johnson's record and now we have been warned!

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