

UK: Labour-controlled Leeds City Council censors conference questioning official Syria narrative

By Julie Hyland
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In an outrageous assault on free speech, Leeds City Council in West Yorkshire has cancelled the Media on Trial event, exploring relations between Western governments and their media with terrorist groups in Libya and Syria.

The event, scheduled for May 27 at Leeds City Museum, was to feature an expert panel including Professor Piers Robinson (University of Sheffield), Tim Hayward (University of Edinburgh), investigative journalist Vanessa Beeley, independent researcher Robert Stuart, Peter Ford, former UK ambassador to Syria and Patrick Henningsen (21stcenturywire).

Leeds City Council, which is controlled by the Labour Party, claimed that after “concerns” had been raised about some of the speakers it had decided the museum was “not an appropriate venue for this event.”

Its actions amount to blatant censorship in line with the efforts of the Conservative government and the official media to silence any opposition to their policy of regime-change, implemented so bloodily in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and underway in Syria.

Advertising for the meeting stated, “Recent conflicts in both Libya and Syria have involved Western support for militant extremist and internationally designated terrorist groups.”

Such actions, it added, “very probably stand in violation of international law prohibiting the overthrow of sovereign states.”

Media on Trial specifically cited General Assembly Resolution 2131 (XX), which rules that “no State shall organize, assist, foment, finance, incite or tolerate subversive, terrorist or armed activities directed towards the violent overthrow of the regime of another State, or interfere in civil strife in another State.”

In light of this, the expert panel assembled by Media on Trial intended to “focus on the media’s propensity to embed its journalists directly with extremist militants and terrorist groups, such as ISIS and Nusra Front, Al Qaeda in Syria.”

It pointed specifically to “Channel 4’s Krishnan Guru-Murthy embedded with Nour Al Din Zinki (a US-supported extremist group) and the *Guardian*’s Martin Chulov, embedded with ISIS and Al Qaeda in Idlib and East Aleppo,” as well as referencing the Syrian White Helmets.

Supported by US and UK funding, the White Helmets “has been demonstrated to have clear affiliations to a number of extremist and terrorist groups while being multi-million-financed by governments who have a publicly declared objective of ‘regime change’ in Syria,” the advertisement read.

Media on Trial posed the entirely legitimate question whether the mainstream media by “gaining entry into sovereign nations by way of these forces, and by presenting these groups as merely ‘activists,’ ‘rebels’ or ‘opposition forces’” has “violated legislation controlling the platforming of terrorist and extremist ideology and propaganda in order to achieve the foreign policy aims of their respective governments?”

The only group cited as having raised “concerns” about the event are the Leeds Friends of Syria, which complained that it was “completely unacceptable” for the museum to be hosting a “pro-Assad propaganda event” featuring “apologists for murdering dictators.”

Friends of Syria are a mouthpiece of Western imperialist intrigue in Syria. It was formed by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012, and initially comprised a “diplomatic” coalition of 70 countries,

including the US, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt.

At its meetings in Qatar in April 2013, “Foreign ministers of the Friends of Syria group, who are meeting in Qatar, have agreed to provide urgent support to rebels who are fighting President Bashar al-Assad,” the BBC had reported, quoting then Qatar prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber bin Mohammed bin Thani Al Thani, that “providing arms may be the only means of achieving peace.” The meeting was attended by William Hague, then Conservative First Secretary of State under David Cameron.

In addition to funding, organising and providing direct military aid to the Western-backed Islamist insurgency against the Syrian regime, the forces assembled from within Syria were touted as the embryo of a government in waiting—the “legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”

By 2013, riven by factional divisions, as well as divisions between its major instigators, the Friends of Syria had dwindled.

The Media on Trial event is clearly regarded as a threat by such forces. Reports in the official media had described the panel as “controversial” and featuring “pro-Assad” speakers and “conspiracy theorists.”

The slandering of anyone questioning the official narrative on Syria and other imperialist interventions as “pro-Assad apologists” is now standard form. But it has been stepped up a gear in the last weeks, as the US, UK and French governments joined forces to launch military strikes on Syria.

Just as the bombing raid was underway, on April 14 Murdoch’s *Times* newspaper published a scurrilous article smearing academics questioning the government’s lies over Syria, as “Assad’s useful idiots.”

Then, as now, Hayward and Robinson were cited specifically in the series of witch-hunting articles run by the *Times*. Both are members of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (SPM), set up recently to “facilitate research and debate with respect to the 2011-present war in Syria and the role of both media and propaganda.”

Their work has clearly struck a nerve. In January, Hayward exposed the *Guardian* for smearing “critical discussion” on the White Helmets as being the work of

“anti-imperialist activists, conspiracy theorists and trolls with the support of the Russian government.”

When readers tried to complain, the *Guardian* closed down its comment section and did not allow a right of reply to those singled out for denigration. Likewise, the *Times* refused to publish a letter by 20 academics protesting its attack on the named academics as an effort “through smear tactics and guilt by association to try and get them no-platformed or sacked.”

“Readers will not have missed the irony of your unsubstantiated allegations appearing on the day that they heard that the governments of the US, the UK and France bombed Syria on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations,” the letter stated.

A statement by Media on Trial noted that Leeds City Council’s decision to cancel the event took place on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, inaugurated to defend independent press freedoms. The council had also informed the media of the cancellation before informing Media on Trial organisers and had offered them no right to reply.

The statement read, “Leeds City Museum has cancelled an event that threatened mainstream media and UK Government narratives that have enabled another regime change war to be waged against Syria, financed by British taxpayers’ contributions.

“The cancellation of the event denies public consensus a platform to express its profound dissatisfaction with the systematic disinformation campaign run by a British media that protects power from truth, rather than holding truth to power.”

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