

BBC accused of pro-Tory propaganda during UK general election

By Thomas Scripps
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In its coverage of the 2019 general election, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) repeatedly protected incumbent Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson while promoting false and then illegally obtained information that would negatively affect the Labour Party's campaign.

So naked were the BBC's displays of political bias that, in an interview with Radio 4's "Today" programme, Labour's Shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald said the BBC had "consciously" played a part in Labour's election defeat. If "the BBC are going to hold themselves out as somehow having conducted themselves in an impartial manner, they've really got to have a look in the mirror," he said.

The incidents of alleged bias during the campaign began when the BBC doctored footage shown in its news programmes to save Johnson embarrassment.

On November 12, the BBC *Breakfast* show replaced a video report of Johnson's participation in this year's Remembrance Day event with footage of him attending the ceremony as foreign secretary in 2016. Johnson was widely regarded to have made a fool of himself at this year's event and was criticised for laying his wreath the wrong way around. The broadcaster claimed that an "administrative error" was responsible.

During a November 22 Leaders' BBC "Question Time" event, which saw Johnson and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn take half an hour of questions from a studio audience, Johnson was asked, "How important is it for someone in your position of power to always tell the truth?"

The audience laughed at this obvious nod to Johnson's record of lying, as the prime minister struggled to reply. In a subsequent BBC news report, the laughter was edited out of the footage.

This was only a foretaste of what was to come. In the final days of the election, BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg first disseminated demonstrably false Tory propaganda, without checking her sources, contravening broadcasting rules and later broke electoral law—both in order to comment negatively on the Labour Party campaign.

On December 9, the early news reports were dominated by photos of a sick four-year-old child forced to sleep on the floor of a Leeds hospital A&E department on a makeshift bed of coats while waiting hours to be seen by a doctor.

Things were made worse after Johnson, confronted by a reporter, refused on camera to look at a picture of the child and then pocketed the phone of the reporter who tried to show it to him.

That night Kuenssberg repeated false claims circulated by Tory sources that the Conservative Health Secretary Matt Hancock had been assaulted by a Labour activist. She tweeted, "So Matt Hancock was despatched to Leeds General (sorry not just Leeds Hospital), to try to sort out mess, hearing Labour activists scrambled to go + protest, and it turned nasty when they arrived—one of them punched Hancock's adviser," followed by "not entirely clear what happened, but Tories suggesting Labour campaigners offered to pay cabs for activists to go and heckle Hancock—fair to say not panning out as anyone had expected in what has been a relatively flat campaign."

When this lie was exposed, Kuenssberg issued a pro forma apology. But this came long after the original claim had gained a large readership.

Two days later, in an interview with the BBC's *Politics Live* the night before Britain went to the polls, Kuenssberg stated, "The postal votes, of course, have already arrived. The parties—they're not meant to look at it, but they do kind of get a hint—and on both sides people are telling me that the postal votes that are in are looking pretty grim for Labour in a lot of parts of the country."

Postal ballots are forbidden from being counted at opening sessions and communicating any information from these sessions is an offence. The BBC's efforts to take down footage of Kuenssberg's statements is a tacit admission of their illegality.

The BBC is so thoroughly exposed that a report in the Observer *Sunday* stated that the broadcaster "is considering restricting its journalists' use of Twitter. If the plan is approved, top correspondents will be told to move away

from using online platforms to break stories or offer instant analysis.”

Despite this, Kuenssberg has not only avoided any police questioning but was kept at the very centre of the BBC’s political coverage. She gave live commentary on the election the night after her illegal act and within a week was narrating a programme on the government’s Brexit policy.

This is not the first time Kuenssberg has been involved in disinformation campaigns against Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party. In 2017, she was censured by the BBC Trust for inaccurately reporting Corbyn’s views about shoot-to-kill policies in the aftermath of the terror attacks in Paris in 2015. This July, she oversaw the *Panorama* witch-hunt featuring an array on Blairites and supporters of the Zionist Jewish Labour Movement, “Is Labour Anti-Semitic?”

After McDonald’s heated remarks, the exposure of the BBC’s naked bias will likely never be raised again by the Labour Party. As a party of state, its MPs would never bring into question the BBC’s pose of impartiality because of the vital role it plays for British imperialism worldwide.

In 2003, a report revealed that the BBC had been the most pro-Iraq war of all the major TV broadcasters in the UK.

The BBC World Service was acknowledged in the 2018 National Security Capability Review’s “Fusion Doctrine” as a vital form of “soft power” used in pursuit of British interests abroad.

Today, the BBC refuses to publish on the groundswell of support for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange—the most high-profile political prisoner in the world, held without charge in Belmarsh prison. The BBC’s last comment on the issue came on November 19 with one article reporting, “Julian Assange: Sweden drops rape investigation” and another titled, “Julian Assange: Campaigner or attention seeker?”

The broadcaster ignored a letter signed by over 60 eminent doctors and sent to the Home Secretary and shadow home secretary warning that Assange’s life is in danger and demanding that he be given access to medical treatment. This is despite the initiative receiving wide coverage across major print and online media, with significant pickup on social media. In doing so, the BBC facilitated the British ruling class’s efforts to prevent Assange’s persecution from becoming an issue in the general election—an effort backed by Johnson and Corbyn alike.

By contrast, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) sought to challenge the blackout, sending a complaint to the BBC regarding its non-coverage of the doctors’ letter, noting its “clear political bias and censorship” and demanding that the organisation “does its job as the national broadcaster.”

A reply which states “we had referred your complaint to

the relevant people and regret that it may take a little longer before we can reply. Please do not contact us in the meantime” suggests no answer will be given.

However, in opposing the BBC’s censorship, the SEP is articulating a growing popular distrust of the broadcaster and its coverage.

According to a recent YouGov poll, just 44 percent of Britons trust BBC news journalists to tell the truth. This lack of confidence increased markedly in the period of the election, with the percentage of people who do not trust the BBC “at all” jumping from 14 percent to 20 percent since the end of October.

This is the reason for the recent statements made by BBC Director General Tony Hall and leading newsreader Huw Edwards accusing those who criticise the broadcaster of engaging in “conspiracy theories” and “toxic cynicism.” As Edwards openly worries, such criticism might “undermine trust in institutions which have been sources of stability over many decades.” The answer, according to Hall, is the effective censorship of social media, which “offers a megaphone to those who want to attack us and makes this pressure greater than ever... And I think it’s something social media platforms really need to do more about.”

Hall is lining up behind a programme of censorship being pursued by the British ruling class—as part of a global attack on democratic rights—which will soon see whatever limited independence sections of the BBC can exercise wholly curtailed. Johnson’s new government is reported to be seriously considering decriminalising non-payment of the licence fee households must pay to legally access the broadcaster’s programmes. This would amount to abolishing the fee, costing the BBC hundreds of millions of pounds and making the organisation more dependent on the government.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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