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# NHS at 70

James Linney denounces the the Tories and their ongoing programme of privatisation

July 5 marks 70 years since the foundation of the national health service, but anyone who values the principle of healthcare provision that is free of the influence of profit will surely feel little enthusiasm to join the official celebrations: open days, high street exhibitions, staff awards, glittering services at Westminster Abbey and York Minster. In fact the NHS's 70th year has possibly been the most difficult since its creation in 1948.

Yet, as the suffering of those people who use the NHS, or are employed by it, multiplied during another harsh winter, there are noticeably some who will be celebrating; because for them that suffering is simply an opportunity to open the NHS up to greater privatisation. Over the past 10 years, private healthcare providers have been allowed an ever greater piece of the NHS brand and, like a shark with a taste for the blood of its prey, they have a genius for exploiting weakness.

In this article I am going to look in more detail at one of the biggest 'sharks' in the pond: Virgin Care. I will use this as a case study to help illuminate how private healthcare providers have been allowed more and more access to the NHS and how, if this is allowed to continue, we could see the fall of the NHS in the near future.

According to its own website, Virgin Care operates "more than 400 health and care services throughout the country" and has "treated more than six million people".<sup>1</sup>

Before examining its role in more detail, let us remind ourselves briefly of how Virgin itself came to be. It was, of course, created by Richard Branson - British capitalism's favourite poster boy. However, his fame, and indeed his fortune, owes more to his genius for self-promotion and PR than anything else.

## Criminal

Branson learnt an important lesson early in his career, when in 1971, after being caught for tax evasion, he spent a short time in prison: namely, that tax avoidance is best done legally and for that you first need money (and a big team of lawyers and accountants). So when, a few years later, by luck, he made the first part of his fortune



Over worked and underpaid

by releasing Mike Oldfield's *Tubular bells* album, he was quick to establish his very own tax-avoiding paradise, when he bought Necker, part of the British Virgin Islands. Here he established his family trust fund and to this day it remains the registered headquarters of Virgin Group (the parent company to all the other Virgin offshoots).

Of course, living on a remote, uninhabited island and limiting his time in the UK to less than 90 days is not about denying the exchequer taxes. As Branson himself stated, "I have not left Britain for tax reasons, but for my love of the beautiful British Virgin Islands ... a place where my family and I are able to truly relax." Fortunately for Branson, he has not been *too* focused on relaxing. He was still able to set up a complex web of innumerable subsidiaries, the parent company's status ensuring they pay very little in tax.

Fast-forward to 2008 and Virgin's first attempts to profit from the NHS, which got off to a bit of a false start. It planned to open 50 large-scale health centres around the country, the idea being that patients would attend their NHS general practitioner, who would then - for a fee - refer them for treatment directly to the onsite Virgin-branded pharmacies, physiotherapists and gyms. The idea was abandoned, however, partly because the General Medical Council raised the point that *paying* GPs to refer patients to Virgin raised just a little bit of a "conflict of interest".

At that time, as Virgin discovered, the NHS was not organised in a way that allowed large profits to be made out of GPs and community services. However, then came the most significant reorganisation in NHS history, with the introduction of the Tories' Health and Social Care Act in 2012. This introduced clinical

commissioning groups - supposedly led by GPs, but in reality headed by bureaucrats and management firms who are now responsible for contracting out services; no longer from other NHS departments, but from 'any qualified providers' (AQPs).

Thus, the Tories - always ideologically opposed to the principle of free healthcare - had set up a pincer movement to trap the NHS. On one flank it was devastated by cuts in funding, the results of which were evident this winter: a demoralised and dangerously overstretched workforce, operation cancellations and corridors full of patients waiting for a bed in jammed-full wards. On the other flank was the acceleration of privatisation - something that has always been present in the NHS to some extent. But this was privatisation on steroids: the AQP process now allowed private health firms to cherry-pick the most lucrative services. Initially this meant winning contracts for radiology, physiotherapy, phlebotomy, elective operations and so on. But the ability to throw huge sums of money and teams of contractors into the tendering process meant these transnational firms could easily win the service contracts that were previously provided by NHS teams.

Virgin was determined not to miss out and in 2010 it bought out Assura Medical - Virgin Care was born. In 2011-12 its first major contract went live: a Teesside sexual health clinic. On the outside was the familiar NHS logo; on the inside, slightly less visible, was the Virgin Care branding. This was just the start and since then Virgin has expanded its role in NHS provision faster than any other private firm. In 2012 it won a contract for providing community care in Surrey and children services in Devon - the first contracts of their kind for a private company. Soon to

follow were others covering community services, including ones in West Lancashire, Essex, North Kent, Wiltshire and Luton. Last year Virgin was awarded a £700 million contract to run Bath and North East Somerset council's community care and health services and another for £108 million to provide children's health services in Lancashire.<sup>2</sup> In 2016-17 alone, Virgin won £1 billion worth of NHS contracts, out of the £3.1 billion (representing 43% of all NHS contracts) paid to all private health firms.<sup>3</sup>

## ACOs

The next step - or huge leap more accurately - in the privatisation of the NHS will be the creation of Accountable Care Organisations (ACOs) - health secretary Jeremy Hunt's scheme to allow AQPs (ie, health, finance or insurance companies) to be responsible for all health and social care for a particular region. This idea has been transplanted directly from the US and is a stepping stone towards a fully insurance-based, private health service. A group of doctors and NHS activists secured a full judicial review over May 23-24 to test the lawfulness of the proposals (the ruling by Mr Justice Green is expected in the next few weeks).<sup>4</sup> This may delay the process temporarily, but of course, the medium-term threat remains.

No doubt Virgin Care will be one of the major players in the setting up of ACOs, the consequences of which we have only seen hints of so far. For example, the company reportedly asked staff not to report safety concerns to the health watchdog in Bath,<sup>5</sup> while in Teesside it missed targets for chlamydia screening and so sent a memo to get staff to carry out the screening on family members, and in Wiltshire it was

reported to have cut care packages for seriously ill children. After failing to secure a contract to provide children's health services across Surrey, worth £82 million, Virgin also decided to sue the local clinical commissioning groups - the NHS settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, said to be in the millions of pounds.

Suing an already crisis-ridden NHS is bad enough, but this is nothing compared to the potential harm that would result from a health company like Virgin pulling out of an ACO if it was deemed no longer profitable or if the company collapsed. Despite his talent for accumulating vast sums of money for himself, Richard Branson has left plenty of failed business ventures in his wake: Virgin Cola, Virgin Clothes, Virgin Vie at Home and Virgin Cars, to name a few.

The case of Virgin is just one amongst several transnational companies who have already been profiting at the expense of the NHS and who are queuing up to be part of the next phase of privatisation. The extent to which these companies are already embedded within the health service demonstrates how the NHS crisis is about more than just 'lack of funding'. The many thousands who marched in February in opposition to all these attacks demonstrated that the working class in particular is not prepared to let the NHS be demolished without a fight.

But a successful struggle needs an effective strategy and this means an organisation able to express the will of the working class. In the short term the Labour Party is promising a respite and in the next general election the NHS will be the major issue that could conceivably see Corbyn lead the Labour Party to victory. But Labour's pledge to modestly increase funding and undertake measures of renationalisation is grossly insufficient.

There is no better example of how illogical and damaging a system capitalism is than that provided by healthcare. Ultimately the issue is not really that people like Branson are greedy tax-avoiders (which they are), but the fact that capitalism has at its core the continuous accumulation of capital for the benefit of a tiny minority. Capitalism creates the miserable conditions that are the *cause* of a good many ailments and conditions - and then profits from the treatment these demand.

This cycle of misery will not end until capitalism itself is replaced by a system that has at its core democracy at all levels - a system that can only be attained through the will and organisation of the working class ●

## Notes

1. [www.virginicare.co.uk/about-us](http://www.virginicare.co.uk/about-us).
2. [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/virgin-care-contract-approved-social-care-nhs-privatisation-a7411386.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/virgin-care-contract-approved-social-care-nhs-privatisation-a7411386.html).
3. [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/29/richard-branson-virgin-scoops-1bn-pounds-of-nhs-contracts](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/29/richard-branson-virgin-scoops-1bn-pounds-of-nhs-contracts).
4. <https://keepournhspublic.com/acos-acss/update-following-judicial-review-23-24-may-challenging-acps/>.
5. [www.bathchronicle.co.uk/news/bath-news/virgin-care-asks-bath-staff-581823](http://www.bathchronicle.co.uk/news/bath-news/virgin-care-asks-bath-staff-581823).

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# No politics, please

The July 15 'Momentum national conference' in Durham will be a very special one, reports **Carla Roberts**: no motions, elections or decision-making of any kind

Labour Party Marxists is very much looking forward to the "Momentum national conference" on July 15 in Durham. We have prepared motions on how to transform the Labour Party, will be fielding a couple of candidates in the elections to the national coordinating group and are making preparations to intervene in the open and frank policy discussions that will determine Momentum's campaigning priorities in the next 12 months.

Sorry, I'm only pulling your leg. Momentum conferences are rather more special than the tedious events of the past, where delegates sat around all day, talked, argued and - you know - made decisions. Bo-ring. We can leave all of those things safely in the hands of Jon Lansman, the founder, owner and self-crowned king of Momentum.

There will be no motions, no position papers, no elections and certainly no decisions taken in Durham. The Momentum website also describes the event (rather more honestly) as a "summer gathering" and that about sums it up. It has three aims: to help participants "get skilled up" by attending "training sessions"; "get to know other Momentum supporters"; and "celebrate everything we've achieved". And that is all in terms of public information on the event. There is not even a timetable or

a speakers list available. As if to underline how unimportant this 'conference' really is, just look at the date: it actually takes place on the same day as the football World Cup final (kick-off 4pm).

No doubt, there will be dozens of young and keen Momentum interns handing out leaflets about the event to the 200,000 or so people participating in the annual Durham Miners Gala on the day before. And you might even get a couple of hundred people coming to next day's event.

But it is, of course, not a conference. After all, just a few weeks before Momentum was to have its first, *real* conference in 2017 (with motions, elections and everything), Jon Lansman simply abolished it all at a stroke. During the now infamous Lansman coup of January 10 2017, he got rid of all national and regional decision-making structures in the organisation, cancelled the conference, imposed an undemocratic constitution and organisational structures, and installed himself as the unchallengeable leader of his little realm.

Many Momentum branches collapsed as a result of the coup or in the months following it. In other areas, rightwingers and councillors have begun to join and are now often dominating Momentum to make sure their career in the party is safe. The organisation's database of well over 100,000 Corbyn supporters means that

in some areas it can help swing election results by mobilising supporters to come out and campaign (or not). It also played a useful role at last year's Labour Party conference when it got leftwing delegates to vote along broadly pro-Corbyn lines, by sending them text messages before important votes. But Jon Lansman will not allow Momentum to do more than that: members are simply seen as voting fodder, used to push through the decisions and policies that Jon Lansman wants to see implemented (which most of the time coincide with what Jeremy Corbyn wants).

For example, there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of Corbyn supporters and Momentum members support the demand for mandatory reselection of parliamentary candidates. It is an eminently democratic, long-standing demand of the Labour left. A real, democratic conference of Momentum members (or delegates) would in all likelihood vote *in favour* of such a basic democratic measure - but it would put the organisation very quickly in direct confrontation with Jeremy Corbyn, who is stubbornly persisting in his misguided attempts to try and appease the Labour right.

Such a real democratic gathering of the Labour left might even make criticisms of Corbyn's complicit silence, when it comes

to the witch-hunt against his supporters in the party. In other words, a genuinely democratic organisation of Labour left members would actually put pressure on Corbyn to start behaving like the socialist they were hoping he was.

That is why Momentum will not go down that road. Instead, Jon Lansman decides its policies and shamelessly manipulates its "digital democracy platform" to get exactly the results he wants (as was the case when Labour Against the Witchhunt almost succeeded in submitting a 'winning' proposal to Momentum's input to the Corbyn review).

Political debate and discussion in Momentum are far from being an integral, democratic part of the organisation - they are merely tacked on as a way to recruit people. Which is probably also why, somewhat interestingly, Lansman feels the need to describe this July 15 event as a "conference". There clearly is a huge democratic deficit - not just in society, but also the Labour Party. People who have been inspired by what they believe Jeremy Corbyn stands for actually *want to talk* about politics and how to change society. So Jon Lansman throws them some rather pathetic scraps.

For now, he has succeed in outsourcing political discussion to training sessions and events like 'The World Transformed', where people can talk about anything and everything, without ever coming to any decisions that could threaten the position of Jon Lansman or publicly criticise Jeremy Corbyn.

## People, Pits and Politics

The People, Pits and Politics event is very much part of that apolitical culture. This two-day event takes place just before the Miners' Gala. In general, it is a pretty nifty initiative to set up an educational political event prior to one of Europe's biggest political gatherings (even if the vast majority of the visitors at the Durham Miners Gala are not necessarily Corbyn supporters or even interested in politics - it is very much a family day out with a huge fair and lots and lots of booze).

We read with great concern, however, the following paragraph in the long list of 'terms and conditions' for participants at People, Pits and Politics:

"No literature or other products may be sold or distributed, no flyers handed out or placed on seats, no papers sold, in any festival venues without prior written permission of the festival organisers. Breaking this rule will invalidate your ticket, and you will be asked to surrender your wristband and leave."

This deeply sectarian move is clearly aimed at the organised left - sellers of *Socialist Worker*, *The Socialist*, etc, and those pesky Labour Party Marxists who ruin everybody's fun by handing out their paper that talks about transforming the Labour Party. Yawn!

A political festival without political discussion, in other words. Well, that sounds very much like our Jon. And, while the event is kept quite separate from Momentum's 'conference' (presumably in order to reach further in terms of its potential audience), it is very obvious that the speakers, organisers and political/organisational methods of both events will be pretty similar.

The main organiser of the PPP event is Jamie Driscoll. He is also the sole director of the limited company set up in January for the sole purpose of organising the event

(another hint that Jon Lansman is involved - he just loves setting up, renaming and closing down companies, as a quick glance at Company House's database shows).

Driscoll is author of a book called *The way of the activist* and founder of 'Talk Socialism', which organises training workshops and reading groups, particularly around Newcastle. He is also chair of Newcastle Momentum and in December 2016 organised "Momentum's first regional conference" in the city. We believe it was Momentum's *only* regional conference to date, maybe because its main claim to fame was the fact that it was addressed by socialist stalwarts such as Nick Brown, Chi Onwurah, Emma Lewell-Buck and Ian Mearns. They are all local MPs, in case some of their names did not ring a bell.

At Momentum's "inaugural conference" on March 25 2017 in Birmingham, Driscoll was one of those called upon by Lansman to run the various workshops. I am sure he and his comrades at Talk Socialism have the best intentions at heart and are seriously committed to changing society. But a problem arises when those types of 'workshops' are used to substitute for proper political debate and decision-making. Here is what we wrote about that particular 'conference', which will no doubt have been very similar to what comrades can expect in Durham:

Labour Party Marxists supporters attended workshops that were run by The World Transformed, Talk Socialism and even Hope Not Hate. They were clearly based on 'training sessions' that these organisations run on a relatively frequent basis - utterly devoid of any real politics, focusing only on 'method' and run by young, overly eager people who reminded me of Duracell bunnies.

They included icebreakers like telling the person sitting next to you what you had for breakfast, shouting "one-word answers" about what you liked or disliked about the European Union 'leave' or 'remain' campaigns and writing "objectives" on paper plates, then sticking post-it notes onto a flipchart grid. You get the drift. It was really, really grim. Worst of all - any of these workshops could just as easily have been presented to Progress or Labour First.

Having said all of that, Driscoll does not seem to be a mere Lansman stooge. He signed an open letter against the expulsion from the Labour Party of Ella Thorp, a supporter of the Alliance of Workers' Liberty. According to Lansman's Momentum constitution, that also bars her from Momentum membership.

That is another decision that would probably be quickly overturned at any real, democratic conference of Momentum members ●

## LONDON COMMUNIST FORUM

Sundays, 5pm: Weekly political meeting and study group organised jointly by Labour Party Marxists and CPGB. Details in *Weekly Worker*.

VENUE:  
The Calthorpe Arms,  
252 Grays Inn Road,  
London WC1X 8JR

## Sacked for daring to tell the truth

Contribute to the fight to reinstate Stan Keable, urges **David Shearer**

The implications of Stan Keable's victimisation by Hammersmith and Fulham council is a matter of grave concern for all democrats, defenders of free speech and, indeed, those of us who simply believe it is legitimate to reference historical facts to make points about contemporary politics.

Comrade Keable is the secretary of Labour Against the Witchhunt, a leading supporter of Labour Party Marxists and was a housing enforcer for the west London council for 17 unblemished years. He attended a counter-demonstration organised by Jewish Voice for Labour to challenge the March 26 'Enough is enough' anti-Corbyn provocation staged in Parliament Square by a coalition of Zionist organisations and a bevy of rightwing parliamentarians (including the Democratic Unionist Party, Norman Tebbit, John Mann and Luciana Berger). The comrade mingled with the anti-Corbyn crowd, distributing leaflets and engaging individuals in conversation.

One of his encounters was secretly recorded by the BBC *Newsnight* editor, David Grossman. In this, comrade Keable can be seen alluding to the well-documented collaboration between the early Nazi regime and the Zionist movement (the same episode that Ken Livingstone has been crucified for citing).

This snippet of a conversation was spread

on social media, and local Tory MP Greg Hands demanded action be taken against Stan, appealing to Stephen Cowan, Hammersmith and Fulham's Labour leader. The next day the council suspended our comrade from work for the nebulous crime of having "brought the council into disrepute" - a charge that was upheld when comrade Keable was dismissed on April 21 after a disciplinary hearing. "Disrepute" in whose eyes? *How* does this verifiable 1930s episode bring shame on Hammersmith and Fulham council?

To make matters worse, he was also let down by Unison, which advised him to apologise instead of fighting the charges. When he refused that advice, the union informed him that it would not represent him.

The council's justifications for its actions state that comrade Keable

"failed to avoid" the situation, not only by "making the comments", but also by "attending [the] counter-demonstration"! This is made explicit later in a letter where - incredibly - we are told that "in attending a counter-demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament on March 26 2018, Stan Keable knowingly increased the possibility of being challenged about his views and subsequently proceeded to express views that were in breach of the council's equality, diversity and inclusion policy and the council's code of conduct".

There is some slippery use of language here. Comrade Keable certainly aired his views on March 26, but the issue of Nazi-Zionist collaboration, no matter how sensitive it now is, remains an historical fact of which people can have different interpretations - but it did happen. Apparently, however, referring to any of this equates to "offensive comments", according to Hammersmith and Fulham council. And anything deemed to be "offensive" is - literally - unsayable.

Comrade Keable is campaigning for reinstatement and intends to challenge this political victimisation at an employment tribunal. He needs £20,000 to mount a legal defence and to cover potential costs. Please contribute here: [www.gofundme.com/ReinstateStanKeable](http://www.gofundme.com/ReinstateStanKeable) ●



**Stan Keable: needs solidarity**

# And then they came for LRC

John McDonnell has a political history, writes **Carla Roberts**. But, unfortunately, not much in the way of a backbone

Recently *The Sunday Telegraph* came out with a scoop: it has “emerged”, according to the paper, that shadow chancellor John McDonnell is president of the Labour Representation Committee (June 2). And *The Jewish Chronicle* was so impressed that it copied the article almost word for word. Having made such a major discovery, the *Torygraph* thinks that McDonnell’s position is simply untenable. It quotes usual suspect John Mann MP, who calls on McDonnell to resign from the LRC (we will get to Mann later).

Why? Because, on the one hand, McDonnell said he would follow Jeremy Corbyn in rooting out anti-Semitism from the Labour Party. After all, has he not just promised former Labour councillor and campaigns officer of the rightwing Jewish Labour Movement, Adam Langleben (who inexplicably lost his seat in Barnet after ranting and raving for months against the terrible level of anti-Semitism in the party), that he would “call out hard-left news websites if they promote conspiratorial and anti-Semitic stories”? (As an aside, Jewish Voice for Labour, on the other hand, has been trying unsuccessfully for almost a year now to secure a meeting with either McDonnell or Corbyn.)

But McDonnell cannot fool the eagle-eyed investigative journalists of the *Telegraph* so easily, who diligently managed to dig out McDonnell’s association with the LRC (which only goes back to the refounding of the organisation in, oh, 2004 - a mere 14 years ago). The problem, as far as the *Telegraph* is concerned, is that the LRC dares to come out in defence of Labour Party members who have been unjustly suspended and expelled over the last two years: to the LRC’s credit, there are numerous articles and statements on its website defending Ken Livingstone, Jackie Walker, Marc Wadsworth and Stan Keable.

In the words of *The Sunday Telegraph*, the LRC is “campaigning for Labour figures accused of anti-Semitism”. It quotes an unnamed Labour MP: “Jeremy Corbyn says one thing on anti-Semitism, but his cheerleaders say quite another. This isn’t a good look for Jeremy or John McDonnell, as it makes what they’re saying on anti-Semitism look quite insincere.”

Needless to say, our fearless investigators fail to mention the fact that *none* of those “accused of anti-Semitism” and defended by the LRC have actually been subject to discipline for that offence. Had Ken Livingstone not resigned, he would undoubtedly have been expelled under the charge of “bringing the party into disrepute”. The same catch-all phrase was used to get rid of Marc Wadsworth and Tony Greenstein. Now Stan Keable, secretary of Labour Against the Witchhunt, has been expelled from the party for his association with Labour Party Marxists - and sacked from his job for - you guessed it - “bringing the council into disrepute”. Jackie Walker, when her case is finally heard, will in all likelihood also be charged under the same clause.

Of course, it is true that all those comrades have *been accused of* anti-Semitism - by the right in the party, the pro-Israel lobby and the mainstream media. *Falsely* accused, that is. But never charged with it. Because the charge would never hold up - not even in front of Labour’s highly politicised kangaroo court, the national constitutional committee, which is still dominated by the right and chaired by Maggie Cosin, “a leading force in Labour First”, according to investigative journalist Asa Winstanley of the award-winning *Electronic Intifada*.

None of the comrades have said anything even remotely anti-Semitic. Marc Wadsworth criticised Ruth Smeeth



Grow one

MP, who happens to be Jewish. Stan Keable and Ken Livingstone pointed out the historically verifiable fact that the early Nazi government and the Zionist Federation of Germany signed the infamous Ha'avara transfer agreement in 1933. Even Tony Greenstein, who has used the word ‘Zio’ - which Jeremy Corbyn and Jon Lansman now want to ban as representing an expression of the rather mythical “new anti-Semitism” - was booted out not for anti-Semitism, but basically for being rude.

As if it were out to highlight the deeply irrational nature of the ongoing witch-hunt, the *Telegraph* in its article quotes at length John Mann MP. He pretends to be simply outraged by this particular paragraph in the LRC’s statement on Ken Livingstone:

When we consider political pygmies like John Mann and Wes Streeting accusing Ken of anti-Semitism, it is worth asking oneself, ‘What have these people ever done in their lives to advance the cause of Labour?’ Livingstone has done quite a lot.

Mann complains not about the correct observation that rightwingers like himself seem chiefly interested in *damaging* the Corbyn-led Labour Party rather than building it. Instead, he now considers “filing a formal complaint” against the LRC over its “appalling racist language”. You see, he is also the “chairman of the parliamentary group on the Great Lakes of Africa” and in this very important role he has managed to meet real pygmies and knows what they go through. Anybody using “this racist insult should hang their heads in shame, and be expelled from the Labour Party. I am sure John McDonnell will want to resign immediately.”

I must confess, I did laugh out loud when

I first read this. This is such a monumentally stupid charge, it almost beggars belief that the *Telegraph* would print such nonsense. However, the LRC steering committee has now changed the phrase “political pygmies” to “self-publicists”. It has done this without any explanation, as far as I know - a missed opportunity in our view to criticise the outrageous hypocrisy of John Mann, who, as everybody knows, could not give a hoot about really fighting racism.

Clearly, this is part and parcel of painting Jeremy Corbyn and his allies as a bunch of cranks and anti-Semites who can never be trusted to reliably run capitalism. In this case, they are trying the old trick of guilt by association.

## Grow a backbone

In other words, this latest attack by the *Telegraph* was a splendid opportunity for John McDonnell to come out and defend his party against the lazy and politically motivated charge of anti-Semitism. A chance to proudly stand up for his comrades in the LRC. A chance to speak out against the ever-increasing witch-hunt in the party and wider society. And perhaps even a chance to grow a backbone.

But of course, we knew he would do no such thing. His response has been as disappointing as is now expected of him and the rest of the Labour leadership (actually, it could be worse: he might still resign his long-held post in the LRC, but we doubt he will). His spokesman half-heartedly tried to dismiss the story, stating that McDonnell was “just an honorary president of the LRC, and played no role in the content or decision-making process of the organisation”.

Well, he actually helped set up the

LRC. And he used to be *chair* - that is, until Jeremy Corbyn made him shadow chancellor in 2015, when he was replaced by Matt Wrack, leader of the Fire Brigades Union.

But unfortunately, rather than stand with their LRC comrades in openly opposing the witch-hunt against the Labour left, McDonnell and the Labour leadership continue to give credence to the lie that the party has a huge problem with anti-Semitism. Yes, there are a few crackpot anti-Semites in the party. Just as there are sexists, racists and there may also be a few paedophiles. Statistically speaking, it would be virtually impossible for a party of almost 600,000 *not* to have members whose views are unacceptable. Such a huge membership simply cannot but reflect some of the prejudices that exist in today’s society.

That is why Jeremy Corbyn’s promise of enforcing a “zero tolerance” policy towards anti-Semitism is so wrong-headed. Firstly, taken to its logical conclusion, it means a system of intimidation and thought control. Secondly, it is just politically wrong. The way to fight backward ideas is not by throwing out anybody who makes a stupid, racist, sexist or nationalistic comment, but by education, by open debate and by thorough discussion. The opposite of what is happening in the party today, in other words. Many comrades are now scared of discussing *anything* contentious, out of fear of coming onto the radar of the witchfinders and having their reputation and livelihood ruined in the process.

Unfortunately, Jeremy Corbyn has to take a fair share of the blame for this McCarthyite atmosphere. After all, it is only the continued policy of trying to appease the right and the pro-Israel lobby emanating from the Labour leader’s office that has given the ‘anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism’ narrative the traction it now has. Once the media found that Corbyn was willing to give ground, they kept piling on the pressure with one ridiculous accusation after another.

For over two years, the Labour leadership has been sitting on the report into anti-Semitism produced by Shami Chakrabarti. Despite the despicable role the lawyer played in forcing Ken Livingstone out of the Labour Party, her recommendations, at least when it comes to due process and natural justice, would have led to the exoneration of pretty much all those recently expelled. The cases of Marc Wadsworth, Tony Greenstein and Jackie Walker come to mind.

But Corbyn seems to have been advised that it is best to see through those ‘problematic’ cases first, before he green-lights the long overdue reform of Labour’s disciplinary process. This is both cowardly and foolish. The right will not give up, but will continue to throw everything they have at him.

For the right and the pro-Israel lobby, the treatment meted out to Jackie Walker, Marc Wadsworth, Tony Greenstein, Stan Keable and all the other victims of the witch-hunt is not primarily about those individuals. They will fight tooth and nail to stop the transformation of the Labour Party into a democratic, anti-imperialist, working class party that will resist the drive for yet another devastating war in the Middle East.

For us on the left, these victimised comrades need to be publicly and vigorously defended with every available weapon at our disposal. We will defend them alongside comrades from the LRC, Labour Against the Witchhunt, Jewish Voice for Labour and all other groups that fight against unjust suspensions and expulsions from the Labour Party.

But which side are John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn on? ●

1. The central aim of Labour Party Marxists is to transform the Labour Party into an instrument for working class advance and international socialism. Towards that end we will join with others and seek the closest unity of the left inside and outside the party.

2. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, waste and production for its own sake. Attempts to rescue the system through Keynesian remedies are diversionary and doomed to fail. The democratic and social gains of the working class must be tenaciously defended, but capitalism must be superseded by socialism.

3. The only viable alternative is organising the working class into powerful and thoroughly democratic trade unions, co-ops, and other schools for socialism, and crucially into a political party which aims to replace the rule of the capitalist class with the rule of the working class.

4. The fight for trade union freedom, anti-fascism, women’s rights, sexual freedom, republican democracy and opposition to all imperialist wars are inextricably linked to working class political independence and the fight for socialism.

5. Ideas of reclaiming the Labour Party and the return of the old clause four are totally misplaced. From the beginning the party has been dominated by the labour bureaucracy and the ideas of reformism. The party must be refounded on the basis of a genuinely socialist programme as opposed to social democratic gradualism or bureaucratic statism.

6. The aim of the party should not be a Labour government for its own sake. History shows that Labour governments committed to managing the capitalist system and loyal to the existing constitutional order create disillusionment in the working class.

7. Labour should only consider forming a government when it has the active support of a clear majority of the population and has a realistic prospect of implementing a full socialist programme. This cannot be achieved in Britain in isolation from Europe and the rest of the world.

8. Socialism is the rule of the working class over the global economy created by capitalism and as such is antithetical to all forms of British nationalism. Demands for a British road to socialism and a withdrawal from the European Union are therefore to be opposed.

9. Political principles and organisational forms go hand-in-hand. The Labour Party must become the umbrella organisation for all trade unions, socialist groups and pro-working class partisans. Hence all the undemocratic bans and proscriptions must be done away with.

10. The fight to democratise the Labour Party cannot be separated from the fight to democratise the trade unions. Trade union votes at Labour Party conferences should be cast not by general secretaries but proportionately according to the political balance in each delegation.

11. All trade unions should be encouraged to affiliate, all members of the trade unions encouraged to pay the political levy and join the Labour Party as individual members.

12. The party must be reorganised from top to bottom. Bring the Parliamentary Labour Party under democratic control. The position of Labour leader should be abolished along with the national policy forum. The NEC should be unambiguously responsible for drafting Labour Party manifestos.

13. The NEC should be elected and accountable to the annual conference, which must be the supreme body in the party. Instead of a tame rally there must be democratic debate and binding votes.

14. Our elected representatives must be recallable by the constituency or other body that selected them. That includes MPs, MEPs, MSPs, AMs, councillors, etc. Without exception elected representatives should take only the average wage of a skilled worker, the balance being donated to furthering the interests of the labour movement ●

# A very British cover-up

Conspiracies do happen, as the Jeremy Thorpe scandal proves. And **Eddie Ford** reckons the establishment might also conspire against Jeremy Corbyn in the event of a Labour victory

The world does not operate according to diabolical plots hatched by small, sinister cabals. Having said that, conspiracies *do* take place - attempts are made to make something happen that serves the interests of this or that person, group, lobby or body.

After all, someone tried to kill the Skripals in Salisbury, whether it was the Russian or Ukrainian 'security services', MI5 or some other actor. Somebody, somewhere conspired to bring that event about. Then there is the 'murdered' Russian journalist, Arkady Babchenko, turning up very alive at a press conference in Kiev - again, someone conspired to pull that particular hare-brained stunt. Things are not always what they seem, and the fact that some crackpots believe that too does not necessarily make it untrue.

Which brings us neatly to the recent three-part BBC mini-series premiered on May 20, *A very English scandal*, starring Hugh Grant as former Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe and Ben Whishaw as Norman Scott. The title of the drama, written by Russell T Davies, was perhaps a nod in the direction of Chris Mullin's influential *A very British coup*. The last episode, aired on June 3, was directly followed on BBC4 by a documentary made by BBC veteran journalist Tom Mangold, entitled *The Jeremy Thorpe scandal*. In 1979, Mangold was the *Panorama* reporter who led an investigation into the trial of Jeremy Thorpe and others for conspiracy to kill Thorpe's former lover from the early 1960s, Norman Scott. That was when homosexual acts were illegal, of course, and so any disclosure about his relationship with "Bunnies" - his pet name for Scott - would have ended Thorpe's seemingly glittering political career.

Convinced that the Liberals' ex-leader would be found guilty, as was everybody else, a special *Panorama* post-trial programme was prepared - but had to be hastily scrapped when the jury returned a verdict of not guilty on Thorpe and the other defendants, with the BBC's director-general of the time ordering that all copies be destroyed. Wisely, Mangold kept a copy. Edited and updated with new information about a fresh 2015 inquiry by Gwent police - which was dropped two years later under slightly mysterious circumstances - the programme clearly shows how powerful political forces right at the top of the British establishment tried to protect Jeremy Thorpe. He was, after all, considered one of their own, being Eton and Oxford-educated and all the rest of it.

The programme featured fascinating interviews from 1979 with Norman Scott, chief prosecution witness and former Liberal MP for Bodmin Peter Bessell, and Andrew 'Gino' Newton, the hit man. Newton, as shown grippingly in the drama, shot dead Scott's Great Dane dog on Bodmin Moor in 1975 and then tried to kill Scott too, but fortunately for



**Jeremy Thorpe: establishment united to defend him ... that will not happen with Jeremy Corbyn**

the latter the gun jammed and he is still alive today to tell the tale - unlike Thorpe himself, who died in 2014.

In my view *A very English scandal* was superb - all readers should watch it. Hugh Grant's performance as Thorpe was almost uncanny in the way it perfectly captured the Liberal leader's physical mannerisms and personality - what an actor: it could have been Thorpe himself staring languidly at you from the TV screen. Ben Whishaw was also excellent - even if Scott, now 78, apparently "hates" the way he was portrayed as a "mincing weakling" (not how it came across to me when I watched the show: rather he seemed quite a resilient character).

For readers of an older generation - or perhaps students of comedy - one of the main memories of this affair is Peter Cook's brilliant 1979 sketch, 'Entirely a matter for you', which ruthlessly satirised judge Joseph Cantley's notoriously biased closing remarks to the jury. Needless to say, those remarks were a near pristine example of the 'old boy network' at work, not to mention general class prejudice and bigotry. According to Cantley, Scott had a "warped personality" and was an "accomplished sponger", "crook", "fraud", "proven liar", "whiner", "parasite" and, of all things, a "male model". Enough said.

The judge did not think much of Peter Bessell either: he was a "humbug" whose entire evidence was a "a tissue of lies" - he had signed a "deplorable" contract with *The Sunday Telegraph* for the serialisation rights of his memoirs and his fee of £25,000 would double, were Thorpe to be convicted. But Thorpe, on the other hand, was a fine man of "hitherto unblemished reputation" in the judge's opinion, and a "national figure with a very distinguished public record" - why would he consort with a low-life such as Scott?

Judge Peter Cook's summing-up said it all, when he instructed the jury "now to retire ... to carefully consider your verdict of not guilty". In denial almost right to the very end, it seems, Thorpe told *The Guardian* in January 2008 that if his affair with "Bunnies" happened now, "I think the public would be kinder". In other words, he was no longer denying that the two had had

a homosexual affair, but he did not even mention - let alone express any remorse about - conspiring to murder his ex-lover. You would almost believe that *he* was the victim, not Scott.

## Context

Returning to the main point, the entire Jeremy Thorpe scandal clearly represents an extensive cover-up - or conspiracy, if you prefer. Obviously this did not just involve leading figures in the Liberal Party, but also the Tory government at the time - especially the then home secretary, the infamous Reginald Maudling.

Scott told his story in May 1971 to Emlyn Hooson (chairman of the Liberal Party in Wales and MP for Montgomeryshire) and a certain David Steel, later to become the Liberal leader. An internal party inquiry was set up, chaired by Lord Byers, the party's leader in the House of Lords. However, at the inquiry Byers became immediately hostile to Scott - who felt "like a boy at school up before the headmaster" (Byers remarked, judge Cantley-style, that Scott was a "common blackmailer" who needed "psychiatric help"). The inquiry then questioned police officers about the extremely intimate "Bunnies" letters sent by Thorpe to Scott early in their friendship. The police claimed in 1962 that they were "inconclusive" - even though they were nothing of the sort. Thorpe persuaded Maudling and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, John Waldron, to inform Byers that there was "no police interest" in Thorpe's activities and no evidence of wrongdoing on his part. As a result, very conveniently, the inquiry dismissed Scott's allegations.

In order to fully understand the Jeremy Thorpe story, it is vital to remember the wider political context. Thorpe's personal standing was greatly enhanced in March 1973, when he married Marion, countess of Harewood, whose former husband was a first cousin to the queen. More importantly still, the general election of February 1974 saw the party win six million votes and 14 seats, putting the Liberals in a strong position because the election had resulted in a hung parliament.

In subsequent negotiations, Thorpe was to be offered a cabinet post by Conservative prime minister Edward Heath, if he would bring the party into a coalition - junior ministries would be allocated to other senior Liberals. Many people at the time thought that Thorpe was a shoo-in for deputy prime minister - an early Nick Clegg, but with more gravitas.

Meaning that in this period Jeremy Thorpe was very well connected and potentially a very important mover and shaker - maybe even a kingmaker. No way could a "parasite" like Norman Scott be allowed to upset the establishment's plans to ensure political stability. Hence they rallied to defend Thorpe and that carried on into the 1979 court case, and beyond. Always stick together, old boy.

The Gwent police's re-investigation of the case in 2015 was eventually dropped because Andrew Newton was apparently dead. But where was the death certificate? With the BBC drama, plus a *Mail on Sunday* 'exclusive' on June 3, revealing that Newton - just like Arkady Babchenko - was actually alive and well, the police reopened their investigation. Strangely, the police did not appear to know how to do a simple Google search (unlike *Mail* journalists), given that his name appears in a 1994 article. This reported on an inquest, where a man called Hann Redwin was accused of foul play over the death of a woman, but it emerged that Redwin was, in fact, Andrew Newton, who was then living in London (he was cleared of foul play at the inquest).

We also discover, quite incredibly in some ways, that four years ago another potential hit man, Dennis Meighan, told the *Mail* that in 1975 he was offered £13,500 - the equivalent of £140,000 today - by a 'representative' of Thorpe to *silence* Scott for good, because it was feared that he was about to go public with all the details of their past relationship. Meighan initially agreed to kill Scott, but got cold feet and went on to confess to the police - making explicit Thorpe's involvement in the plot. But curiously his original statement disappeared - to be replaced by one that removed all incriminating references to Thorpe and the Liberal Party, surely at

the behest of elements within the British establishment.

If it looks like a conspiracy and quacks like a conspiracy, then it probably is a conspiracy. Yet, as is nearly always the case with the British establishment, these things start to come out so long after the event that most of the people involved are either dead or too old to be held to account. Gwent police now claim to be "satisfied that there is no basis to re-refer the matter to the CPS and the investigation remains closed".

## Implications

In view of what the Thorpe affair demonstrates, it does seem appropriate to finish with a few thoughts about that other Jeremy - current leader of the Labour Party. If Corbyn does lead Labour into the next general election, and it ends up with a majority or as the biggest party, it is highly questionable whether he would actually become prime minister. This possibility seems to baffle most on the left, who seem to believe that the British ruling class would never do anything that is not in strict accordance with Queensberry rules.

We say, think about the Jeremy Thorpe case and tell us seriously that the establishment would not take steps to ensure such a government never happens. For all those on the left who refuse to believe this, look at your TV screen and *learn* - the BBC has provided the working class movement with valuable information about the workings of the establishment, knowingly or not. If you want to talk about dangers to the stability of the capitalist system, then we in Labour Party Marxists can reassure you that Corbyn is a far bigger danger than poor old Norman Scott - he was a *victim* of the establishment, not a radical opponent, as the Labour leader is still deemed to be.

If you take the ongoing campaign to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, this is fundamentally about preventing a Corbyn-led administration. Thus, for example, if Labour did win the next election, is it not possible that the queen would decline to invite this 'anti-Semite' to form a government? Would she not follow the advice of her privy council and look for someone else in the Labour Party who is not tainted by accusations of anti-Semitism, such as that nice Sir Keir Starmer? (Such accusations are a load of bull, of course - which is what Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell *should* be saying, not coming out with claptrap about how there is an 'anti-Semitism' problem within the party, and so on.)

The left also tells us that if the queen moved against Corbyn in such a manner there would be a revolution - what utter nonsense. How can there be a revolution if you have not split the army, or have failed to win the working class to the idea of actually taking power? ●

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