

A rigged system: the price of justice

It's money that matters. Russian oligarchs fund libel suits

By Granville Williams

On July 2021 Catherine Belton, the author of *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West*, published in 2020, faced a daunting challenge.

Her book, which received lavish praise when published, was under attack. Proceedings brought by three Russian billionaires and the state-owned oil company Rosneft began against publishing house HarperCollins in the English High Court. The law suits all named HarperCollins as a defendant, while some also named the author, a former *Financial Times* journalist who now works for Reuters.

The Russian billionaires were Roman Abramovich, Mikhail Fridman and banker Petr Aven.

The other defendants settled or withdrew their claims but Abramovich pursued his libel action over the claim in the book that he 'was acting under Kremlin direction' when he bought Chelsea football club for £150 million in 2003. He settled in December 2021 but no damages were paid to him or the others.

The case never went to a full hearing but the case still cost HarperCollins £1.5m. Both



Catherine Belton's book won rave reviews for its hair-raising revelations about Putin's corrupt regime and the oligarchs supporting it

sides paid their own costs. Had the libel trial gone ahead in the high court the legal bill would have exceeded £10m.

The case was a deliberate attempt by wealthy and powerful entities to silence a journalist and publisher.

Catherine Belton said, "This last year has felt like a war of attrition in which HarperCollins and I have been bombarded from all sides with

lawsuits from Russian billionaires and the Kremlin's oil champion Rosneft.

"Though the claimants have denied it was coordinated, it has seemed to me similar to the Kremlin's multi-pronged campaign against Ukraine in which it has sought to exhaust the West into making security concessions over NATO's expansion. Thankfully, the fate

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EDITORIAL

Official secrets and BBC bashing

This issue has articles which link to the two events we are holding at this year's Festival of Debate (p8). We encourage *MediaNorth* readers to support and publicise both events.

The subject of the first event, Official Secrecy, is back in the news. Attorney General Suella Braverman is seeking an injunction to prevent the BBC broadcasting a report about an MI5 agent with 'dangerous, extremist and misogynist beliefs' who used his status to abuse, control and coerce a former partner. Due to national security concerns, the case was held partly in private.

Martin Bright (p2) revisits one of the themes of our Official Secrecy meeting, the threat to whistleblowers and journalists posed by proposed changes to the Official Secrets Bill.

And the theme of our second Festival of Debate event, *What Has The BBC Ever Done For Us?* is the subject of two pieces by **Nick Jones** (pp4-5). There is also a review of a new book on the BBC on p7. It could be argued that the attacks on the BBC by Nadine Dorries early in January have done some good. Certainly, it has galvanised a number of organisations, including ours, to ramp up activity. We plan to produce a BBC *MediaNorth* booklet on the BBC, timed to come out for our event on 12 May.

It will attempt to answer key questions about the BBC and offer a roadmap and policies to build support for a reformed BBC fit for the 21st century.

The online activist group 38 Degrees has also launched a poster campaign 'to shine a spotlight on the reasons why we, the Great British public, value the BBC'.

You can get your poster from: <https://home.38degrees.org.uk/2022/02/28/order-a-backingourbbc-poster/>

A full-on assault on media freedom

Martin Bright on the threats posed by government proposals to reform the Official Secrets Act

It is now over 20 years since the *Guardian* and *Observer* fought off attempts by the government to force the newspapers to hand over documents in the case of MI5 whistleblower David Shayler.

At judicial review Judge Igor Judge concluded demands to hand over journalistic material: “would have a devastating and stifling effect on the proper investigation of the... story”.

The case reinforced the special status of journalistic sources in law – even in official secrecy cases – and established the principle that the police should not use journalists as informers.

As the *Observer* journalist responsible for writing the stories about Shayler’s disclosures, which included allegations of the involvement of UK intelligence in a plot to topple Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi, I was particularly concerned to see the latest proposals for reform of the Official Secrets Act.

Authoritarianism by stealth

These include enhanced search powers to give police access to just the sort of journalistic “special procedure material” (notes, emails and recorded interviews) we fought so hard to keep from the police two decades ago. The

new OSA would thus enshrine in law the “devastating and stifling effect” on journalism that so concerned Judge Judge.

The new act is authoritarianism by stealth: a full-on assault on media freedom, carefully hidden behind an apparently reasonable desire for reform.

The National Union of Journalists has rightly sounded the alarm over plans to increase the maximum sentence for breaches of the OSA, which currently stands at two years. This will have a significant chilling effect on journalists investigating government wrongdoing and their civil servant sources.

More worrying still is the distinction now being made between espionage and so-called “unauthorised disclosure offences” (i.e. leaks to journalists). As the consultation makes clear, this government believes “there are cases where an unauthorised disclosure may be as or more serious, in terms of intent and/or damage”. The argument is that a large-scale digital disclosure could benefit a number of hostile actors, whereas espionage is usually carried out by a single state. The effect, in practice, is that a journalist in receipt of secret documents could face a longer sentence than a spy.

Where the government really lets its authoritarian slip show, however, is in a section of the consultation about the number of successful prosecutions under existing legislation. The government argument is as follows: “This is primarily due to the sensitive nature of the



Official Secrets (2019) is a skilful and vivid account of GCHQ whistleblower Katharine Gun and her trial. Keira Knightley played Katharine Gun and Matt Smith and Martin Bright (below)



evidence that would typically be required to be disclosed in order to bring prosecutions, but also because of the age of the legislation, which means many of the offences are not designed for the modern world. Prosecutions as a result are challenging and rare.” This is patent nonsense. In most cases Official Secrets prosecutions fail because they should not have been brought in the first place.

Ministerial embarrassment

Since the Shayler case, I have been involved in other high-profile Official Secrets cases. The most celebrated of these concerned Katharine Gun, a GCHQ whistleblower, who leaked details to the *Observer* of a covert US/UK operation to fix the vote at the United Nations Security Council in advance of the Iraq War in 2003. As the recent film of the case *Official Secrets* made clear, the problem was not disclosure of evidence of the crime (Gun confessed to the leak), but disclosure that would lead to ministerial embarrassment about the legality of the war.

For those who care about free speech, civil liberties and democracy, the most serious concern should be the resistance of the government to a public interest defence in official secrets cases.

This is where the British state and the British people come into direct conflict. In the Gun case,

there is no doubt she acted in the public interest to reveal uncomfortable truths for the government. Their revelations served not just the public interest but the national interest. If the new legislation had been in place at the time, it is quite possible that Katharine Gun would have been sent to prison.

Our journalist Prime Minister has said he doesn’t want to see a world where people are prosecuted for doing their public duty. I look forward to his column condemning his government’s own Official Secrets proposals, which will create just that nightmare world.

Martin Bright is the editor-at-large of Index on Censorship. He was previously Home Affairs Editor of the Observer and Political Editor of the New Statesman and the Jewish Chronicle. He is one of the speakers at our Festival of Debate event on 28 February (see page 8).

A longer version of this article appeared in the British Journalism Review

The Press escapes regulation – yet again

Julian Petley highlights gaping get-out clauses for newspapers in draft bill

Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries boasts it will be a ‘world leading bill’ but a coalition of free expression organisations, #SaveOnlineSpeech, thinks the Online Harms Bill ‘risks creating one of the most censorious online speech regimes in the Western world’.

Although the British press was itself extremely slow to enter the online world, it was quick to spot a potential competitor, and, from the get-go, did its utmost to demonise the new medium. Thus as far back as 1996 John Naughton wrote in the *Observer* that ‘to judge from British coverage of the subject there are basically only three internet stories: “Cyberporn invades Britain”; “Police crack Internet sex pervert ring”, and “Net addicts lead sad virtual lives”’. Post 9/11 we could also add “Cyberterrorists stalk the net”.

Nearly 30 years of stories such as these have led successive governments to threaten various forms of internet censorship, but none as draconian and all-embracing as the euphemistically titled Draft Online Safety Bill. This was published in May 2021 and will make Ofcom responsible for administering a regulatory system designed to ensure that internet users in the UK are shielded from a veritable plethora of ill-defined harms online. It has been described by the Open Rights Group as ‘a bloated Bill [that] contains so many risks to free speech that it’s hard to know where to start’, a view widely shared by many



Photo: DCMS / Jake Johnstone / Flickr

No gongs for Nadine Dorries whose bloated Online Harms Bill poses threats to free speech

other organisations concerned with freedom of expression both on- and off-line.

Today, of course, British papers have a massive and highly lucrative online presence, but anyone hoping that the Bill might offer a means of regulating their online editions would be doomed to disappointment. Absolutely inevitably, and as documented in *Fix the Media*, the moment that the consultation process that resulted in the Bill was launched in April 2019, the massed ranks of the British press, spearheaded by

the Society of Editors, the News Media Association and IPSO, launched a ferocious lobbying operation to ensure that absolutely nothing that they published online could fall within the Bill’s remit.

In the event, the press got absolutely everything it demanded – hardly surprisingly, given the nature of the press/government nexus in the UK. Thus the Bill completely exempts from its remit content produced by a ‘recognised news publisher’. Such a publisher, as defined by section 40(2), has as its principal purpose the publication of news-related material, and such material – (i) is created by different persons, and (ii) is subject to editorial control, (b) publishes such material in the course of a business (whether or not carried on with a view to profit), (c) is subject to a standards code, (d) has policies and procedures for handling and resolving complaints.

‘News-related’ material is of course defined sufficiently broadly to encompass exactly the kind of tendentious opinion-mongering that passes for ‘journalism’ in much of the national press, section 40(5) making it

clear that it includes ‘(a) news or information about current affairs, (b) opinion about matters relating to the news or current affairs, or (c) gossip about celebrities, other public figures or other persons in the news’. Meanwhile the requirements for a ‘standards code’ and ‘policies and procedures for handling and resolving complaints’ are obviously satisfied by the existence of industry stooge IPSO, even though its record of upholding standards and dealing with complaints is absolutely lamentable.

Furthermore, section 39(2) specifically exempts what many would regard as the most poisonous and hate-filled sections of online national titles, namely ‘comments and reviews on provider content’.

But there’s more. Sections 14 and 18 make it abundantly clear that whilst search engines will have a duty to protect the public from exposure to allegedly harmful material, this duty does not extend to content present on the website of a ‘recognised news publisher’, or content that reproduces or links to a full article that emanates from such a publisher. Thus, quite apart from all the other negative consequences of the Bill, we are threatened with the prospect of a two-tier system in which the journalism most in need of regulation once again escapes it, and online publications that are frequently highly critical of that journalism, but are not officially ‘recognised’, fall within its scope.

Absolutely inevitably, the press has welcomed these gaping get-out clauses as striking a great blow for press freedom. Others might regard them as a striking demonstration of the power of the press to protect, and indeed advance, its own interests.



● To buy *Fix The Media* go to:
www.medianorth.org.uk/?p=237

BBC in the crosshairs

Former BBC political correspondent **Nicholas Jones** assesses the challenges ahead for the BBC

Repeated failure to be impartial' ... 'in built bias' ... these are the favoured lines of attack for Conservative-supporting newspapers as they seek to galvanise the BBC's opponents for what might become a final, make-or-break assault on the licence fee.

Battle lines were drawn when Nadine Dorries fired the starting gun in January with her infamous tweet that the most recent 'licence fee announcement will be the last'.

Despite her later attempt to fudge the finality around the wording of her pronouncement, in declaring that the £159 annual charge would be frozen for two years, the Culture Secretary took her cue from the Tory press and said immediately that the priority for the BBC was to address issues around impartiality'.

Attacking and undermining the BBC on the grounds that it is no longer impartial is by far the most effective line of attack for newspaper proprietors determined to secure the downsizing of the BBC.

Their relentless, hostile coverage is tantamount to hacking away at the BBC's Achilles heel.

If media owners can convince the country that BBC's news output cannot be trusted, then the universal licence fee can no longer be justified, and hence its services must be slashed to make way for their own rival radio and television channels and websites.

Allegations of bias are often hard to refute and especially so for the BBC. Its commitment to try to provide balanced coverage can upset one side or the

other and trigger complaints.

I know to my cost that it was – and is – a struggle for a BBC journalist to be impartial. Often in my 30 years as a BBC correspondent I felt I was walking a tightrope, and just about to fall off.

Undoubtedly the most testing time for me personally was coverage of the year-long miners' strike of 1984 when Margaret Thatcher took on Arthur Scargill, President of the National Union of Mineworkers.

It was the most challenging industrial dispute since the general strike of 1926 and by far the most violent. The country was polarised: Mrs Thatcher mobilised the police as never before to control Scargill's flying pickets who were accused of attempting to close down the coal industry by intimidating working miners.

I was constantly on the radio. But for some listeners my name and voice were despised, condemned by Mrs Thatcher's supporters because I was giving a platform to strikers who were challenging law and order.

But that hatred of my journalism was even greater in the mining villages.

When I return to Yorkshire to give talks, which I do regularly, some of the ex-strikers still treat me with contempt. They accuse me to this day of being a cheerleader for Mrs. Thatcher, of encouraging the

It was Punch and Judy broadcasting which was a turn-off for most viewers and listeners



The Conservative supporting newspapers want to curb and dismantle the BBC

return to work.

In the years that have elapsed since the conflicts of the Thatcher decade there has been a relentless assault on the standards of BBC journalism and that has had a chilling effect on the quality and the depth of the BBC's reporting.

Take the BBC's coverage of the European Referendum in 2016. Much of it was a cop-out. In its struggle to maintain impartiality – to avoid bias – the BBC went for stopwatch journalism.

By constantly giving equal time on radio and television to those arguing for and against Brexit, what we ended up with was the balanced coverage deemed necessary by programme editors.

But it was Punch and Judy broadcasting – one side said this, the other side said that – which was a turn off for most

viewers and listeners.

There was little context or explanation, just a stream of contradictory soundbites.

Fearful of complaints of bias, we did not get BBC journalists drilling down, investigating, and assessing, what voters in the so-called Red Wall constituencies were really thinking about immigration, or what would be the fate for fishing, farming and a myriad of small businesses who now





tactic, so hard to challenge but one that can be used time and time again.

Fears of uncontrolled immigration were played up continuously ahead of the 2016 EU referendum. Indeed, it was the success of the scare tactics of the Conservative press which many observers believe won the Brexit vote.

Day after day we can see that same level of venom and hostility directed towards the BBC across the pages of Conservative-supporting newspapers such as the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Telegraph*.

Do they ever question the impartiality of their own reporting or the level of public trust in their new radio and television stations and websites? No, because it does not suit their commercial interests to do so.

Rupert Murdoch and the Harmsworth and Barclay families have had an unwritten pact with successive Conservative Prime Ministers – a relationship that Boris Johnson does little to hide.

In return for the continued support of their newspapers, they demand that the BBC is cut down to size – and so long as that downsizing continues, they will continue to back the Conservatives.

Much will depend in the coming months on Johnson's precarious hold on the Premiership but his tactic of throwing red meat to the hawks in his party and the press has undoubtedly spurred on his hard-line supporters.

There are many tests of whether the BBC offers value for money in entertainment, sports, music and so on...but to challenge the BBC solely on grounds of impartiality of its news coverage is a loaded political question.

Changing minds...

Nicholas Jones reflects on Exeter University debate on BBC future

Nadine Dorries' rallying cry has had the desired effect in giving a further push to what is certain in the months to come to be a highly politicised argument about the future of the BBC licence fee.

I had to face the full force of that hostility when invited by the University of Exeter Debating Society to respond to a proposition that was straight from Dorries' playbook: "that this House believes the BBC has failed as an impartial news organisation."

Leading the charge was former BBC journalist Robin Aitken, author of *Can We Trust the BBC?*, and Conservative Councillor Yolonda Henson, Deputy Lord Mayor of Exeter.

Aitken has become a regular critic of the BBC and the go-to columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* on controversies regarding BBC impartiality and bias. He billed himself as a social conservative who had come to realise after 25 years with the BBC that its record on impartiality was a huge fiction, a point that he had now spent many years arguing.

In the 2016 EU Referendum the BBC had 'aligned' with the Remain campaign. He said evidence of that bias was research which was conducted in the ten years from 2005 to 2015 that showed out of 4,725 interviews on the *Today* programme, only 132 were supporters of EU withdrawal, which was less than 3 per cent. That bias had continued with the BBC lining up as anti-Trump and in favour of Black Lives Matter.

"The people who find the BBC does not represent their views are people on the right, social conservatives essentially...the BBC stands for the progressive viewpoint and social conservatives are left out of the argument."

In responding I argued that the clamour to dismantle the BBC was a politically driven agenda and my task was to defend its record on impartiality. My surprise on being invited to debate this at Exeter University was that students at an institution whose roots in education went back a couple of centuries – twice that of the BBC – were not debating a motion that approached the BBC's future from an entirely different perspective.

Indeed, the motion might have said the direct opposite: "that this House should be standing by the BBC when its very future is under threat from the government of the day."

I could not resist asking my hosts in the debating society to consider their own billing of Aitken as an 'author' – the term author implied impartiality. But if the students cared to Google Aitken's name, near the top of the list was 'Robin Aitken – *The Telegraph*', a paid for entry that promoted his many anti-BBC columns, just one illustration of the determination of Conservative newspapers to drive what has clearly become a political objective.

I was fortunate that the other speaker in my support, Scott Locke, was a top debater at the university who seized on the word 'failed'. He argued that the BBC had not failed as an organisation because it was trying continually to avoid bias – a reason why it should be supported.

At the start of the debate a majority of students were in favour of the motion – but, to the surprise of the chair, that was turned on its head with a two thirds majority to reject the original proposition.

say they can no longer afford to trade with the EU.

In its struggle to avoid bias, the BBC failed the British public. Voters admit they felt cheated by the news media, they did not understand the full consequences of Brexit, either for or against.

Such is the polarisation of today's political agenda – and such is the impact and effectiveness of the campaign by Conservative supporting newspapers – that their clamour to curb and dismantle the BBC is driving the government's agenda.

Ever since the Conservatives defeated Labour in the 2010 general election, the Tory press has stepped up its pressure on successive Conservative Prime Ministers to reign back the BBC.

The proprietors' aim is blatant. They want to encourage people to continue to buy and read newspapers while at the same time boosting other commercial opportunities for their broadcasting and online services.

Focussing on BBC 'bias' is a classic piece of propaganda, a tabloid newspaper trick, a scare

Tim Gopsill on the vital issues raised by the Chris Mullin case

Police hound former Labour MP to identify his sources



Determined stand by Chris Mullin in defence of the journalistic principle of protecting your sources

The journalist and former MP whose investigations freed six men unjustly jailed for the Birmingham IRA bombing is under threat of imprisonment from the police who failed to solve the crime.

In 1974 two Birmingham city-centre pubs, the Mulberry Bush and Tavern In The Town, were bombed and 21 young people killed in 1974. It was the worst terrorist atrocity that led to the gravest miscarriage of justice in Britain for years.

The Birmingham Six were innocent Irish men arrested soon after the bombings and forced into making false confessions after being savagely beaten and intimidated with dogs and guns by the West Midlands Serious Crimes Squad. All quickly withdrew the confessions, but the courts accepted them.

There were no attempts by police to trace the true perpetrators, even after the Six had their convictions overturned in 1991. Their release was largely down to Chris Mullin, an enterprising left-wing freelance journalist who took on the task and succeeded, not only meeting the bombers in Ireland but securing confessions, including from the only one still living.

Chris Mullin made a series of documentary TV programmes and wrote a book entitled *Error of Judgement*. In none of these were the perpetrators named.

When conducting the interviews, he had pledged to keep the names secret. There are times when reporters have to do this, if a subject dare not talk on the record. Once the promise is made, it must always be honoured.

Out of the blue, in 2018, 44 years after the bombing, West Midlands Police (WMP) succumbed to decades of pleas from the families of those who died and announced an investi-

The application was heard at the Old Bailey in London on 25 February before Judge Mark Lucraft, who will deliver his judgement later.

In the hearing Chris Mullin declined to answer questions on the identities of his interviewees. He said: "I interviewed many of those who were active in the IRA's West Midlands campaign. To gain their co-operation I gave repeated assurances, not only to

be of "substantial value to a terrorist investigation". The court was told that the intention was to obtain information "that might prevent the commission of crime" – and told by an impeccable source: Charles Falconer, Solicitor General in the government of the time, who gave evidence. He said: "The idea that WMP could obtain a Production Order in respect of the work undertaken by Chris which helped to reveal wrongdoing would have been completely at odds with the background understanding."

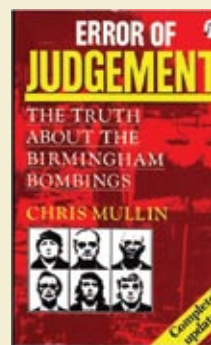
Chris Mullin also had the support of his union, the NUJ, which holds that the journalist's right to protect confidential sources is fundamental. General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet said: "The case risks compromising that core principle and undermining press freedom which is why the NUJ stands four-square behind Chris."

Chris Mullin said: "If West Midlands Police had carried out a proper investigation after the bombings, instead of framing the first half-dozen people unlucky enough to fall into their hands, they might have caught the perpetrators in the first place."

After the Birmingham Six were acquitted in 1991 the Serious Crime Squad was wound up in disgrace and a string of convictions based on its evidence were quashed.

Error of Judgement?

When Chris Mullin's book *Error of Judgement* was published in 1986 *The Sun* commented: "Loony left MP Chris Mullin has turned his twisted fight to free the six Birmingham pub bombers into a personal crusade." *The Sunday Express* view: "A book that could put him in prison ... Mr. Mullin ... is either a liar or a hypocrite".



gation. Chris Mullin – who had been Labour MP for Sunderland South from 1987 to 2010 – sent them some of his notes but with the names redacted.

WMP have now demanded that he abandon his principles and hand over his full notes, identifying the individuals. They have applied to the courts for a disclosure order under the 2000 Terrorism Act and if it is granted and Chris Mullin fails to surrender his notes he could be jailed for contempt.

the guilty, but to innocent intermediaries, that I would not disclose their identities. I cannot go back on that now ... My purpose was to help free the six innocent men who had been convicted of the bombing."

He added that "to eliminate any concerns" it was necessary to state that he would not do anything which might identify confidential sources.

The 2000 Act provides powers to compel a journalist to hand over material that might

The BBC's creative and conflicted history

This book is an ambitious attempt to condense 100 years of BBC history into one volume. One theme stands out: how external pressures (commercial and political) forced changes, mostly positive, some destructive, on the BBC.

Take for example the early years of radio. Fleet Street was opposed to the expansion of broadcasting, and professional radio critics like Jonah Barrington of the *Daily Express* and Collie Knox of the *Daily Mail* criticised the BBC at every opportunity. In January 1934 a glossy new magazine *Radio Pictorial* was launched and threaded through its pages were attacks on the BBC for not giving listeners what they wanted. One article, 'Is The BBC Wasting Your Money?' revealed details of the earnings of actors and dance bands. Sounds familiar?

From August 1934 *Radio Pictorial* also published the programme schedules of European commercial radio stations, Radio Normandie and Radio Luxembourg. A younger, working class UK audience tuned in and the BBC was forced to respond, setting up a new variety department.

This pattern of new entrants and competition was there with the launch of ITV in 1955 which forced the BBC to spend money on light entertainment, and pirate radio which led to the creation of Radio 1 in 1967.

But what is more striking is how political pressures on the BBC's independence have been remorseless. The role of the BBC under Reith in the 1926 General Strike is analysed, and there is a riveting recollection by David Attenborough, part of the team responsible for Prime Minister Anthony Eden's broadcast at the time of the Suez debacle. He finds Eden in bed 'looking dreadful in his pyjamas'



**THE BBC:
A People's History**

David Hendy

Profile

£25.00

with his wife frantically dabbing mascara on his moustache. He desperately asks Attenborough for his detailed opinion on what he should say. Attenborough observed, "To me as a young television producer it seemed dreadful that the fate of the world should be in the hands of a very sick man."

When Opposition leader Hugh Gaitskell requested a television broadcast of his own Eden was opposed and he threatened to take the BBC over, as Churchill had threatened during the 1926 General Strike. Unlike Reith, the BBC man responsible, Harman Grisewood, was clear: "The country was divided and

our job, our principles, made us give a voice – a very full one – to those who opposed the venture altogether." Gaitskell's reply to Eden attacked the 'criminal folly' of invading Egypt and called on the prime minister to resign.

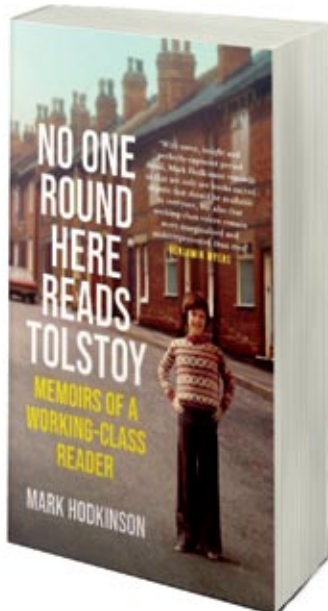
But it is the final section of Hendy's book, *Attack and Defence*, which contains the grimest examples of political hostility to the BBC. Labour and Tory governments have both played a role but Conservative governments, starting with Margaret Thatcher in 1979, ramped up the attacks. She was frustrated in her plan to kill the licence fee and to make the BBC take advertising. However she did get rid of Director General Alasdair Milne, install Marmaduke Hussey (on Rupert Murdoch's advice) as BBC chair and more.

For those who didn't live through those years the chapter 'Trade and Treachery' is an essential read.

Hendy points out 'the most lethal weapon' was 'the ability to set the level of the BBC licence fee – and slash the BBC's spending power' and that is what has been happening since 2010. He ends the book with the question, "When its political enemies are circling with such murderous intent..." will people stand by the BBC? We shall see.

– *Granville Williams*

Seeking 'brainy' books in Rochdale



Mark Hodkinson's book is about the joy of discovering and reading books. His story begins in working class Rochdale in the 1970s and '80s. In an environment hostile to his love of books – at home they had only one book and the notion of reading was totally alien – he was deemed not brainy enough to take O levels at his local comprehensive, and ended up taking CSEs amidst often violent classmates.

He immersed himself in books and celebrates the books which stimulated him – Barry Hines's *A Kestrel For A Knave* and JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

**NO ONE ROUND HERE READS
TOLSTOY: Memoirs of a
Working-Class Reader**

Mark Hodkinson

Canongate / £16.99

After reading Salinger's novel he wanted more and describes how he found two of them on a second hand book-stall on Rochdale market. "Most of the stall was given over to romances, westerns and thrillers...Jammed amongst them was a small cardboard box with a flap up, on which was marked 'Brainy'."

Mark went on to be a journalist and to launch Pomona Press.

– *GW*

Festival of Debate events

The Festival of Debate is the largest annual politics festival in the UK and *MediaNorth* has organised two high-profile, topical events for this year's programme. Both events are free.

Thursday 28 April 18.00-19.30

Official Secrecy: How government plans threaten journalists and whistleblowers.

The government wants to tighten up the Official Secrets Act. The draft proposals contain punitive measures which would criminalise investigative journalists and whistleblowers and eliminate a 'public interest' defence. A panel of experts delves into the details and threats to investigative journalism in the government's plans and highlights what we can do to challenge them.

SPEAKERS:

Martin Bright has over 30 years of experience as a journalist, working for the *Observer*, the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman* among others. He broke the story of Iraq War whistleblower Katharine Gun, which was made into the movie *Official Secrets* (2019) starring Keira Knightley.

Stephen Dorril is an historian,



researcher and investigative journalist and has been researching the activities of the British security and intelligence services for nearly forty years. He has written several books, including *Smear! Harold Wilson and the Secret State*.

Annie Machon was an intelligence officer for the UK security service MI5, before resigning to blow the whistle on the crimes and incompetence of British spies.

Michelle Stanistreet is General Secretary, National Union of Journalists. The NUJ has a proud history of defending a free press and the public's right to know.

Thursday 12 May 18.00-19.30

What Has the BBC Ever Done For Us?

Back in January the culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, announced a freeze on

the BBC licence fee for two years and also tweeted that the fee settlement running to 2027 would be 'the last'. The BBC is under attack. This event addresses key questions about what the BBC needs to do if it is to survive after 2027.

SPEAKERS

Patrick Barwise is the co-author (with Peter York) of *The War Against the BBC* (Penguin).

Dorothy Byrne has had an impressive career in broadcasting, including working on Granada's *World in Action* and as Head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4. She is the current President of Murray Edwards College, Cambridge.

Paulette Edwards is a presenter with BBC Radio Sheffield

Dr Tom Mills is chair of the Media Reform Coalition and author of *The BBC: Myth of Public Service* (Verso)

How To Book

These are online events hosted through the Festival of Debate. The programme will be out for you to book from 16 March: <https://festivalofdebate.com>

The price of justice

● From Front Page

of my book does not involve the lives of tens of millions of people."

Prescient comments from Catherine Belton. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine the UK government wants to impose tougher sanctions but is making slow progress. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss boasts about drawing up a hit list of Russian oligarchs linked to Pu-

tin's regime to be sanctioned. But in a revealing comment she said, "We've already had letters to the Foreign Office threatening us. So we have to be properly prepared and we have the right evidence before we sanction these individuals." She says the sanctions will take 'weeks and months'.

At the same time the European Union announced Mikhail Fridman and business part-

ner Petr Aven were on a list of oligarchs sanctioned by Brussels over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Outlining their reasons for imposing sanctions, EU officials described Mr Fridman as 'a top Russian financier and enabler of Putin's inner circle'.

And Abramovitch is back in the news too. He employed the law firm Harbottle & Lewis to write to News Ltd threatening to sue *The Sun* if it published an article based on leaked government documents. Labour MP Chris Bryant got around this attempt to suppress the story. In the House of Commons he read from the leaked Home Office documents, from 2019, which acknowledged Abramovich's 'links to the Russian state and his public association with corrupt activity and practices'.

Just what Catherine Belton was stating about the three oligarchs in her book.

Murdoch gets his way . . .

Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries has removed all legal barriers on Rupert Murdoch interfering in the editorial independence of *The Times* and *Sunday Times*.

The restrictions were put in place in 1981 by Margaret Thatcher's government as part of a compromise deal to allow Murdoch to buy the two papers without needing approval from monopoly regulators.

Since then, the papers had been legally required to keep largely separate editorial teams. Murdoch also nominally had to answer to a group of independent directors on key editorial matters. Murdoch was often able to sidestep the restrictions. He had long railed against the restrictions, describing them as state interference. It's no coincidence that his complaints were listened to more sympathetically after July 2019, when Boris Johnson became prime minister.

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