

Just who is making the policy in new Truss government?

Granville Williams on the influence of secretive right-wing think-tanks behind the new PM

On Sunday 31 July the Taxpayers' Alliance issued a news release calling on the government to introduce regionalised pay rates for public sector workers which would result in savings of £8.8bn. A day later Liz Truss was promoting this policy as 'a war on Whitehall waste' citing exactly the same savings figure as the Taxpayer's Alliance.

Late on 2 August the foolishness of this policy had been exposed and Truss, in a screeching U-turn, scrapped it. No acknowledgement that it was a cut and paste policy lifted from a right-wing think tank which produces poorly researched reports (see p8). Instead, she went on the attack – her policy had

been 'wilfully misrepresented' in the media.

This was in an early stage of the seemingly endless leadership contest with Rishi Sunak and it should have rung alarm bells about her flexible relationship both with the truth and in snatching at dodgy policies to address the crises she will now confront as Prime Minister.

Open Democracy identifies more than a dozen of Truss's campaign policies which are drawn from other right-wing think tanks – the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies.

Truss has close connections with them, particularly the IEA. She hired its former communications director to run her campaign and *The Daily Telegraph* ran a piece on 27 July headlined 'How Liz Truss snapped up the finest minds in wonkland to run her bid for No 10'. It stated, "The Tory leadership hopeful has ensured she has the brightest and best policy and special advisers from well-known think tanks by her side."

They appear to be driving the Truss government's agenda.

As the respected media commentator Ray Snoddy points

out: "*The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and the *Daily Express*, who see Truss picking up the reins dropped by their beloved Johnson, will cheer her every failure to the rafters. Or, if they can't manage that, at least ignore them."

As Prime Minister she will be in the thick of it attempting to tackle a series of crises. She has already demonstrated similar traits to Johnson in handling the media. In the final week of the leadership contest she dropped out of an interview with the BBC's Nick Robinson. Her team said she 'could no longer spare the time'.

Her default tactic is to attack the media when she makes mistakes and those sections of the media which pose awkward questions and probe her policies will become the enemy.

You can forget prime ministerial interviews on the BBC, ITV or Channel 4. She will work with the fawning right-wing national newspapers which supported her, and fringe broadcasters such as *GB News* and *TalkTV*.

We're about to see what damage she will unleash and it's a grim prospect.



Big struggles ahead as first priority of Truss (right) as PM is tax cuts for the rich



Pressure put on C4 bosses over report

Good investigative journalism from the *Yorkshire Post*. Political Editor Chris Burn obtained, through Freedom of Information, email exchanges between the DCMS and Channel 4.

The DCMS sought to make 10 changes to Channel 4's annual report. On 9 June a table setting out the sections they wanted changes to was sent to Channel 4. The name of the official who sent the email has been redacted but the job title is Deputy Director of Television Policy.

The first change was to the title of the report, *More Than One Side To Every Story*, above a picture of Channel 4 chair Sir Ian Cheshire. The DCMS note read '...it can be construed to mean the Chair is not fully supportive of the Government's decision. Suggest change title'.

In his report Cheshire points out, accurately, that the balance sheet improvements 'serve to underline Channel 4's long-term sustainability'. The DCMS wanted this removed as it contradicted its view.

Substantial changes were also demanded in the statement by Alex Mahon, the chief executive of Channel 4. One section of a longer sentence stated '...our job is to deliver what Parliament tasks us to do and if or when that changes.' They wanted this deleted because the decision to privatise the channel had already been made by the government.

The report was published unamended in spite of the threat contained in the email that 'unless these issues have been addressed I am afraid I can't put the report to Ministers...'

For the record the broadcaster's revenue exceeded £1bn for the first time in its history. As the *Yorkshire Post* commented, 'Hardly signs of an ailing enterprise'.

Tory attacks on Channel 4 and the BBC are still high on agenda

No change on media policies from Truss

By Tom O'Malley

When Boris Johnson was rejected from the premiership in July, Tory media plans for *Online Safety* legislation, the privatisation of Channel 4 and a review of the BBC licence fee were put on hold.

As Liz Truss takes over, it is worth looking at where she stands. Unless her government is completely bogged down with the cost of living crisis, all of these issues will return to the centre of the policy agenda.

The *Online Safety Bill* exposes faults in the Tory Party. Many welcome its attempts to, as Truss put it, 'make sure that those without decision making capabilities ... are protected from harmful content'. But she declared, "It is important that we don't have censorship ... it is about getting the balance right."

Her former rival for the leadership, Kemi Badenoch, stated, "We should not be legislating for hurt feelings." This reflects the view among Tories that parts of the Bill are responding to what they see as unjustified concerns about the harm online content can do. Although there have been many criticisms about the negative implications of the Bill for freedom of expression, Truss is unlikely to fun-

damentally retreat on its main provisions.

Both Truss and her leadership rival, Rishi Sunak, support privatising Channel 4. Truss told reporters, "Where possible, it's best to have companies operating in the private sector."

She has joined the chorus of right-wing critics of the BBC, commenting to Alistair Stewart on *GB News* that, unlike the BBC, 'you actually get your facts

ter of BBC impartiality'. Gibbs' presence on the Board, and Truss' deep prejudice against the Corporation, are more examples, if needed, of the relentless pressure the Corporation is under from the free marketeers.

On the key issue of the licence fee, Liz Truss backs current Culture Secretary, and prominent Truss supporter, Nadine Dorries' plans for a review. This is likely to be stacked in favour of abolishing it.

Labour has pledged to bolster the political independence of the BBC, and give longer term funding settlements to insulate the Corporation from short term political pressures. But that depends on the outcome of an election two years away.

There will be a Media Bill this session. It threatens to weaken further the obligations on ITV, Channels 4 and 5, to provide wide-ranging PSB content, and to privatise Channel 4. Truss owes her position, in part, to the easy ride she was given during her leadership campaign by public service broadcasting hating press. She's unlikely to row back on any of the key elements of the media policies she has inherited.

It's clear then that we have to gear up for a very intense and high stakes battle over the future of the media.



Wikimedia

Emily Maitlis ruffled TV top brass with criticism of news output.

right'. This is surprising given that BBC Board member, Robbie Gibbs, a founder of *GB News*, has been identified by former BBC *Newsnight* journalist Emily Maitlis as an 'active agent of the Conservative party' who is shaping the broadcaster's news output by acting 'as the arbi-

Panorama case comes to trial

The first libel case over the BBC *Panorama* programme 'Is Labour Antisemitic?' will come to the High Court in London on 7 November.

The programme's presenter John Ware is suing investigative journalist Paddy French over an article first published in the online magazine *ColdType* and reprinted in the *Press Gang* pamphlet *Is The BBC Anti-Labour?*

published in December 2019.

After the programme was broadcast in July 2019 the Labour Party sued the BBC, but when Keir Starmer took over as leader he settled, despite legal advice that the case was strong.

Ware then sued the party for defamation, along with the seven former party staffers interviewed in the programme, presented as 'whistleblowers'.

Under Starmer's direction Labour apologised and paid a reported £180,000, with an estimated £400,000 in legal costs.

Ware is now suing a number of Labour Party members who have been critical of the programme. Paddy French, editor of *Press Gang*, is trying to raise £75,000 for his defence. His crowdfunding page is: www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/em-french

Julian Petley highlights the hypocrisy of those who attacked the author and now praise him after a failed attempt to kill him

In the immediate aftermath of the attack on Salman Rushdie on 12 August, politicians and newspapers fell over themselves to praise the author for risking his own life in the cause of freedom of expression.

How different from February 1989, when the fatwa was announced on account of *The Satanic Verses*.

Notoriously Norman Tebbit called Rushdie ‘an outstanding villain’, a man whose ‘public life has been a record of despicable acts of betrayal of his upbringing, religion, adopted home and nationality. Now he betrays even his own sneers at the British establishment as he cowers under the protection of a government, a police force, and a society he once denounced as racist and undemocratic’.

The venom of such attacks increased when Rushdie met prime minister John Major in 1993 and foreign secretary Robin Cook in 1997, reaching their apogee in 2007 when he was knighted. Inevitably the *Mail*, which Rushdie in his memoir *Joseph Anton* refers to as the *Daily Insult*, was always at the forefront of this campaign.

In the *Atlantic Magazine*, March 1994, Geoffrey Wheatcroft described such reactions as ‘naked schadenfreude’ and ‘malicious glee run riot’, and in the *Guardian*, 2 February 1993, Melvyn Bragg noted not only the racism of these attacks but also ‘the baying of brute philistinism, and a poverty-stricken inability to recognise and support the call to a noble cause – the defence, in this country, of freedom of speech within the law’.

Utterly indifferent

So why the volte-face by the forces of the Right in 2022? The simple answer is because they could weaponise him in their obsessive culture war against the ‘woke’ and ‘cancel culture’.

In 2015 Rushdie had criticised those authors who had withdrawn from the PEN American Center gala in protest at

Salman Rushdie: From Zero to Hero



Salman Rushdie was stabbed 12 times on 12 August by 24-year-old Hadi Matar.

PEN’s decision to honour *Charlie Hebdo*. This was because they considered offensive to Muslims the cartoons which had brought about the murder of many of its staff.

Suddenly he became an icon of free speech for exactly the same kind of people who were utterly indifferent to his exercising this right in 1989 and to the personal consequences of steadfastly defending it in the decades following.

At this point the term ‘woke’ had not yet been mobilised as a term of abuse by the Right, but the attack on Rushdie provided the press with a field day in their culture war.

After the knife attack, J. K. Rowling, who has been involved in bitter disputes over trans issues, tweeted: “Horrible news. Feeling very sick right now. Let him be OK,” and Meer Asif Aziz, a student political activist based in Karachi, responded: “Don’t worry you are next,” and described the attacker as a ‘revolutionary Shia fighter’. There is

not the slightest reason to think that Aziz’s threat had anything remotely to do with Rowling’s views on gender and sexuality, of which he was probably entirely ignorant, but the press fuse had been well and truly lit.

History being rewritten

For example, the *Mail*, 15 August, enquired in its Comment column: “What’s the difference between an Islamist fundamentalist and a trans rights extremist? Not as much as we may have thought, it seems. Where crushing free speech is concerned, they are very much on the same page.”

In the same day’s *Mail-Online* Frank Furedi attacked ‘the cowardice of leftists who fail to

The forces of the Right refused to support Rushdie in 1989 and, in some cases, bitterly attacked him

defend free speech’ and Dan Wootton argued that, “It’s the same type of organisations and individuals who bravely backed Rushdie back then who now so casually call for the cancellation of Rowling in 2022,” and complained that, “free speech is being eroded as the cancel culture mob bows to external malevolent forces on a regular basis.”

Two days later in the *Mail-Online*, Gillian Philip, in an article headed ‘It’s a bitter irony: how the literati pledging support for Rushdie are too often cheerleaders of woke censorship’, alleged that, “The cracks in the liberal façade of resolution showed almost as soon as the fatwa was pronounced ... Even at the time there were many public figures who equivocated or even sided with the bigots and book burners.”

What is happening here, and in similar articles in other right-wing papers, is that history is quite simply being rewritten. It was predominantly the forces of the Right that refused to support Rushdie in 1989 and, in some cases, bitterly attacked him in his plight.

Now papers such as the *Mail* are both drawing a veil over their own malign role in the original *Satanic Verses* affair and engaging in a defence of freedom of expression which appears to extend only to forms of expression of which they approve and which they can fit to their own ideological purposes. Thus, for these papers, Rushdie’s right freely to express himself would appear to depend solely on whether what he is actually saying accords with the *Mail* ideological line – which is not a meaningful right in any sense of the word.

Cristophe Kokemann / Wikimedia

Press boosts Truss' anti-union attacks

Nicholas Jones tells why she put attacks on unions at centre of election campaign

From the start of the Conservative leadership contest there was a bidding war on new policy initiatives with Liz Truss way out in front in offering what her supporters believed was a true Thatcherite agenda.

She promised the party membership she would implement a raft of punitive restraints on workers' rights – a shopping list that was so far-reaching and malevolent that it would have delighted Norman Tebbit.

Spurred on by her backers in the Tory press

she seized on the summer's rail strikes as final justification for the introduction of the Conservatives' much-touted new laws to enact a minimum level of service during walkouts in essential services.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps – a leading promoter of rival leadership contender, Rishi Sunak – was equally forthright in pushing his own 16-point crackdown on 'Luddite trade

unions' who were blocking reform of railway working practices.

There was remarkable similarity in the two programmes on offer, with them both proposing even tighter restrictions on strike action, but Truss gained by far the greatest traction in the news media.

Her agenda for legal restraints on a wide range of trade union activity secured repeated front-page coverage in the Conservative supporting newspapers which had been eager to give her their endorsement.

She promised that, within 30 days of becoming Prime Minister, she would



'put an end to the mindless misery of rail strikes' – a pledge that was greeted by the *Daily Mail* with the headline 'Truss Vow to Curb Militant Unions' (26.7.2022).

With the disruption continuing through August, each round of strike action provided Truss with a fresh opportunity to repeat her pledges – and her cheerleaders responded: 'Truss promises new laws to smash strike misery' was

front page splash for the *Daily Express* (19.8.2022).

Almost a month had elapsed since she first announced that she would 'stop militant trade unions trying to paralyse the economy' but her previously announced crackdown was continuing to make headlines.

Repeating the same pledges was an illustration of the propaganda advantage which Truss had secured in the Tory press at the expense of Sunak. Almost from the start of the campaign she had been attracting regular front-page en-



under-estimated during elections and leadership contests.

Print circulations might be falling but the front-pages have immediacy and are reproduced and discussed on late-night television and radio programmes and appear again on breakfast shows next morning.

These same images have a life online gaining further exposure on the websites of BBC, Sky and other news providers, and frequently become a talking point on Twitter, Facebook and across social media.

As the Tory press bandwagon accelerated behind Truss, she was warmly applauded for her pledge to stand up to the unions when she appeared at leadership hustings and events. Repetition in news stories of the details of her proposed crackdown had served her well and not surprisingly it was Truss rather than Sunak who became the target of trade union opposition.

New laws to enact a guaranteed minimum level of operation in essential services during strike action had been promised in the Conservatives' 2019 manifesto. Truss said that within her 'first 30 days as Prime Minister' she would introduce the necessary legislation.

The minimum notice period for strike action would be increased from two weeks to four weeks; there would be a new legally enforced cooling off period; further strike action would not be permitted during the six-month period after the initial ballot; a fresh vote would be required

to authorise another round of strikes.

For good measure, and in what seemed like a throwback to the infamous reductions in social security benefits for the families of striking mineworkers in the 1984-85 pit dispute, Truss promised to target strike pay.

She would put an end 'to union members receiving tax-free payments on the days they are striking'. It was not right, she declared, that 'those striking should get something for nothing'.

In his prospectus, Shapps had followed Truss in seeking to introduce higher thresholds for strike action.

He also proposed restrictions on picketing in the vicinity of critical national infrastructure sites such as mainline stations. ('We will take on these Luddites...just like Thatcher' *Daily Mail*, 18.8.2022)

But so unexpected was the severity of her crackdown that Truss faced a united onslaught from the three rail unions as well as the wider labour movement.

A shopping list so malevolent it would have delighted Norman Tebbit

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch warned that the unions could respond with synchronised strike action of the kind not seen since the 1978-9 'Winter of Discontent' – a prospect that triggered a fresh round of alarmist headlines. 'UK general strike threat if Truss takes on unions' (*J*, 28.7.2022).

In sharp contrast to the punitive steps Truss had outlined, Rishi Sunak's pledge to take a tough line on the unions steered clear of detailed sanctions. He limited himself to a promise to deliver the party's 2019 manifesto commitment to require minimum service levels during transport strikes.

"As Prime Minister, I will stop the unions holding work-

ing people to ransom. I will do whatever it takes to make sure that unions cannot dictate how the British people go about their daily life."

Not surprisingly Sunak secured only the briefest of mentions in news coverage of the rail strikes, and he seemed content for the lead to be taken by Shapps, his former cabinet colleague and leadership supporter.

Shapps' determination to confront Lynch head on earned him favourable headlines in the Tory press which had no hesitation in urging the Transport Secretary to go all the way with the toughest possible restraints on the rail unions.

In a further escalation of the management's response both Shapps and Network Rail's chief executive, Andrew Haines, threatened to go over the heads of union leaders directly to the membership.

Shapps had tried in vain with repeated appeals to Lynch to put Network Rail's two-year 8 per cent pay offer out to a vote among RMT members.

When Lynch responded by accusing Shapps of working behind the scenes to dictate the outcome of the negotiations – and insisting RMT members were prepared to continue the dispute 'for as long as it takes' – the provocation proved too much for the Transport Secretary.

'Shapps: It's End of the Line, Mick' was the *Sun's* headline (20.8.2022) over a report that Shapps had vowed to use 'hard-line powers' to impose modernisation by 'ordering train companies to fire and re-hire workers' – a reminder of the tactics used in the sacking of 800 seafarers by P&O Ferries.

Mick Lynch rounded on Liz Truss's punitive proposals: "If she rams through any more anti-trade union laws it will be a direct attack on civil liberties... What you are going to get is a wave of solidarity action, synchronised action. And you'll see it in every section of the economy, in education, in health, in wider parts of the transport system, in all sectors, the private sector as well."

dorsements for her policies. Newspaper editors are only too well aware of the potency of their front pages. Often they can be a blatant political statement, a showcase for a favoured politician. Their value cannot be

The Labour Party's unreported world

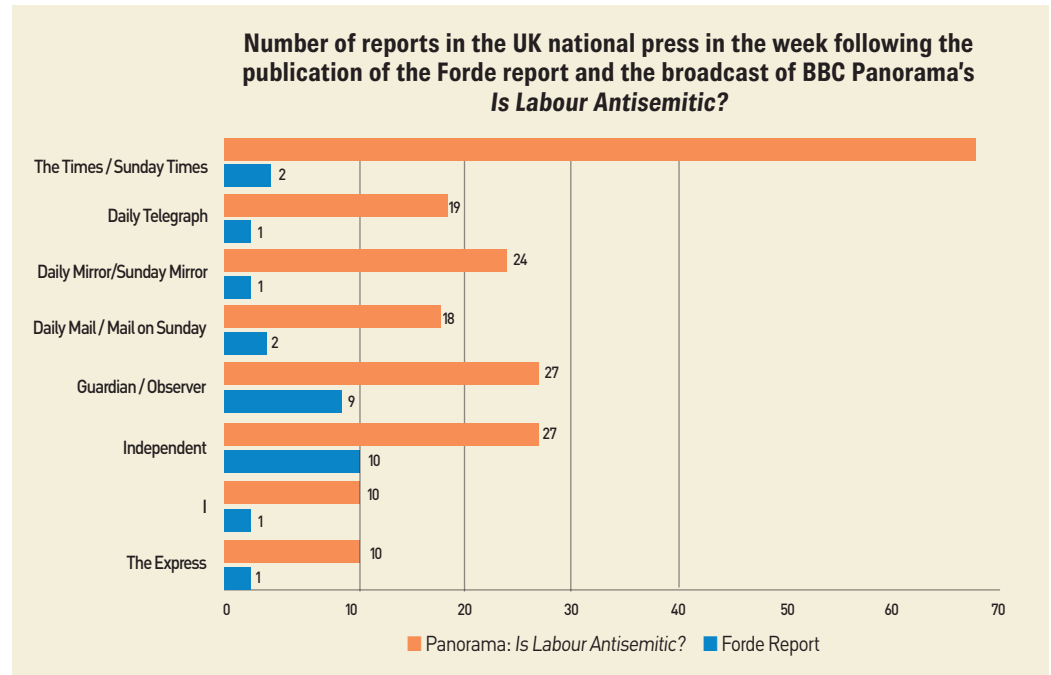
Tim Gopsill on the glaring gaps in the reporting of the Forde Report

When the national media barely cover a big political story it can tell you more than when they go over the top. In July they virtually ignored the release of the Forde Report into the faction-fighting in the Labour Party during the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, and that said a lot.

The inquiry, headed by Martin Forde QC, largely substantiated the shocking allegations contained in an 800-page dossier of party documents leaked in April 2020 that detailed the dirty tricks employed by party officials against Corbyn and his team. These include the use of antisemitism allegations to undermine the leadership, the allocation of resources to boost anti-Corbyn MPs in elections, and a vile culture of misogyny and racism within the party machine.

Though expressed in balanced language, the report is damning of the right-wing party bosses' conduct towards an elected leader. It might shock people, if it was properly reported. But it wasn't.

The radical sociologist Tom Mills has produced a chart showing the national paper coverage achieved by the Forde report, compared with that of the BBC *Panorama* programme, 'Is the Labour Party Anti-Semitic?', broadcast in July 2019, which Mills took as a high point of the anti-Corbyn offensive. That programme was a relentless attack on Corbyn's party, with its evidence coming from officials responsible for the conduct in



This chart shows the stark contrast between coverage of the Forde report and the BBC *Panorama* programme.

the leaked dossier, who were presented as 'whistleblowers'!

Mills's figures contrast the number of articles published in the week after the Forde report came out (27) with the equivalent seven-day numbers in 2019 based on the *Panorama* programme (202 – more than seven times as many). On Murdoch's *Times* and *Sunday Times*, taken as a single publisher, the respective numbers were 2 and 67.

Most papers had just one article (see graphic). Only the *Guardian* and *Independent* ran anything other than short news reports, mostly stating that the inquiry 'completely debunks the conspiracy theory that the 2017 general election was somehow deliberately sabotaged by Labour Party staff opposed to Corbyn's leadership'. That was from a Labour press release, though some reporters dropped the quote marks and made it a fact.

This allegation arose after

HQ staff secretly diverted resources from the 2017 drive to win new Labour seats into defending anti-Corbyn MPs whom officials feared might lose. In fact, Forde condemned the officials concerned, but he could not conclude that it cost Labour the election. This was hardly a vindication for them, but it's the best the officials could get from his report -- and they could rely on the papers to stick to it.

So why should the Tory press, that only three years ago was demonising the party, now want to protect it from fair criticism? The question answers itself.

When the Tories have run the country into the ground, which a Truss government shows every likelihood of doing, the Tories could collapse and Labour win power with the mandate to sort out the mess. This has happened before in history, but it has to be a Labour Party that can be trusted by the state to do the job. That requires

purging the left from the party.

The new leader Keir Starmer has set out on this path. He may give the impression of stumbling around in a daze, but he knows he has to get rid of Corbyn and his supporters, through suspensions, expulsions and rigged elections. These include, amazingly, numerous left-wing Jewish activists, a group of whom are suing the party for breaking its rules; all this unreported outside the left. The party machine is still at work.

He also had to reverse the progressive policies he announced to get elected; this is now largely done, notably by abandoning the renationalisation of public utilities. Harder still, with the economic crisis rapidly worsening, he must disown and condemn workers taking strike action.

Unions and most Labour members, however, carry on fighting the Tories. But Starmer has the media on his side!

Granville Williams on a high-quality television series

Acclaimed BBC drama tackles miners' strike

The BBC's six-part *Sherwood*, shown this summer, got a powerful, mainly positive, critical reception. It's one of the state-of-the-nation political dramas at which the BBC used to excel, with series like *Boys from the Blackstuff* and *Our Friends in the North*.

The writer, James Graham, knows his territory – North Nottinghamshire – scene of the bitter divisions between Notts miners who scabbed and joined the Union of Democratic Miners and those who remained loyal to the NUM during the 1984-84 miners' strike. He based *Sherwood* on real events.

In July 2004, in Annesley Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire, Robert Boyer shot ex-miner Keith "Froggy" Frogson, an NUM loyalist during the year-long strike, with a crossbow on his doorstep. The same month, another man, Terry Rodgers, was living with his daughter Chanel close by at her home in Huthwaite, when he shot her four times.

Both Boyer and Rodgers



L to R: David Morrissey, Lesley Manville and Robert Glenister

went into hiding in the same woodland, leading a huge number of police to descend on the former mining village as the search for them took place.

Graham uses these events to craft a drama which highlights the buried hurt which is still alive today, nearly forty years on. The whole series is a reflection on the miners' strike, what it meant for those involved and the cost to the communities around the pits, all of which

have now closed. It is also a detailed story about working-class people, which is unusual on television these days. Sweeping shots of *Sherwood* Forest contrast with the gloomy miners' welfare club and the rows of tiny terraced houses.

It has an outstanding cast: David Morrissey plays Ian St Clair, the lead investigating officer from the local force, Robert Glenister the Met officer Kevin Salisbury. Lesley Manville is

Julie, the wife of murdered Gary Jackson (played by Alan Armstrong) who is estranged from her sister Cathy, played by Claire Rushbrook. There is a powerful scene where they talk to each other on either side of a wall. Interestingly, David Morrissey prepared for his role by talking to Harry Paterson, author of the excellent *Look Back In Anger* on the miners' strike in Nottinghamshire.

Undercover policing and surveillance were pervasive during the strike, and many of the villages were effectively occupied by the police. The key event in *Sherwood* which altered the lives of so many of the characters for the worse depicts the clash of tensions between strikers, police and scabs, and central to its occurrence is the role of the undercover police officer.

I thought the final scenes of reconciliation in *Sherwood* were unconvincing but overall this was a tremendous achievement.

You can watch *Sherwood* on BBC iPlayer.

NUJ campaigns against channel mergers

The NUJ thinks the decision to close the BBC News Channel and BBC World News and create a new rolling news service in April 2023 is a major mistake. The

union's campaign to challenge the merger has won the support of the TUC's leader Frances O'Grady who has written to BBC Director General Tim Davie to express concerns that closing the existing BBC News channel 'would substantially reduce news-gathering and airtime for

domestic stories and affect UK democracy'.

The proposed BBC channel closures and subsequent loss of 70 jobs form part of a £500m cost-cutting and redistribution mission by Tim Davie to create a 'digital-first' organisation and help achieve cuts of £285m a year necessitated by the government freezing the licence fee for two years.

But the NUJ thinks the level of cuts forced on the BBC, and

certain decisions by its management, are leading to a hollowing out of BBC news coverage.

The NUJ has called on the regulator Ofcom to step in and hold an inquiry into the BBC's proposal because it is a major change to the service. The union believes that both TV channels have crucial and distinctive roles which will be diminished in a combined service.

It states: "BBC News Channel has a special role in covering stories across the devolved nations and its audience is more diverse, across all categories,

than BBC One or the other BBC channels. Many local stories will be lost if they have to compete with international events for airtime."

The NUJ also points out that BBC World News has a weekly audience of about 364 million people around the globe – so why close it? Also the new service will carry adverts for its international audience and the NUJ questions, "How can licence fee money be spent on a commercial project? This must surely have implications for competition."



Fixing the facts to fit the story

Mick Lynch, RMT general secretary, recently reflected on the standard of questions he has faced when challenged by reporters and broadcasters, especially when being interviewed on union doorsteps or out on picket lines.

In an interview with Zoe Williams in *The Guardian* (23 August) he said, “The state of journalism? The questions they ask are so...dopey. They obviously don’t know what trade unions are. They think that we are all these clichés they perpetuate. I’m a baron. My members are pawns. I can just move them about according to who I want to annoy that morning. Which is completely

Rail union journal challenges hostile journalists over dodgy information

the wrong way round: unions are very democratic. It sounds a bit pompous, but the members are sovereign in this union. They tell us what to do.”

One good example of this ignorance was in the August issue of *ASLEF Journal*. After the union announced industrial action the Taxpayers’ Alliance issued an ill-informed press release on the pay of the union’s general secretary and assistant general secretary describing them as ‘loaded union leaders’.

This was picked up by the right-wing press. Michael Knowles, *Daily Express* Home

Affairs and Security Correspondent, contacted Keith Richmond, who handles the union’s press and PR.

Keith gave Knowles some home truths about the Taxpayers’ Alliance: ‘Its research is desperately poor, and usually inaccurate, and its figures – including the ones you have been spoon fed – are invariably wrong.’

Knowles’s response was: ‘But I’m under pressure to write this story. We don’t like trade unions.’

Keith was also contacted by Ashley Armstrong, Business

Editor of *The Sun*. He gave her the same accurate information as he’d given to Knowles.

She challenged this, saying it didn’t include his NI contributions and pension. This led to the following exchange: ‘No, but that’s his salary.’

‘But I’ve been told to make it look as big as possible.’

‘You don’t do that for CEOs.’

‘No, but he’s a trade union baron and the editor doesn’t like him and I’ve been told to turn him over.’

For the record, the Taxpayers’ Alliance is a secretive right-wing pressure group which refuses to disclose its income or the names of wealthy individuals who donate to it.

Journalists take action

A one-day strike on 31 August by Reach (formerly Trinity Mirror) journalists will be followed by a work to rule and a three-day strike from 14-16 September. More strike days may be added unless the company increases its paltry offer of a 3% pay rise or £750.

More than 1150 journalists took part in the action across the company’s titles, including *The Mirror*, *Express*, *Daily Record*, *Sunday Mail*, *Western Mail*, *Manchester Evening News*, *Liverpool Echo*, *Birmingham Mail*, *The Journal*, *Bristol Post*, *South Wales Evening Post* and the *Live* websites.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said: “NUJ members are clear where responsibility lies here, and that is shown in a unanimous vote of no confidence in Reach chief executive Jim Mullen.”

It’s great to be back!

Our first event at Wortley Hall’s South Yorkshire Festival since 2019 was a great success. *Trade Unions and the Media* explored media coverage of the upsurge in trade union militancy in the wake of inflation, rocketing energy and food prices, and below inflation wage offers by employers.

Former BBC Industrial Correspondent Nick Jones showed how sections of the media, particularly the right-wing national press, reverted to the sort of coverage and clichés they used during industrial disputes in the 1970s and ’80s. One example he cited was the ASLEF rail strike over flexible rostering in 1982, when Ray Buxton was General Secretary, and compared it with media coverage of Mick Whelan now.

Sarah Woolley, Bakers Union General Secretary, gave an



Sarah Woolley and Nick Jones taking questions at our event.

informative contribution drawing on her experiences with the media and the importance of members using social media more actively to promote their cause.

The two presentations were followed by a lively Q&A session with a copy of Nick Jones’s book *Strikes and the Media* (1986) going to the person who asked the best question.