

Tittle-tattle

Tom Easton

Conspiracies and cover-ups

The past year has not been an easy one for those who view history as just one bumbling cock-up after another.

The Hillsborough inquiry¹ revealed a co-ordinated effort by a large number of public servants not only to deny justice to the families and friends of those who died in 1989, but one that blamed those deaths on the victims themselves. The newly launched Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign² is seeking a public inquiry into a systematic effort by police and prosecutors to pervert the course of justice a few years earlier in the same part of the world.

The apparent scale of stitch-up required to produce the LIBOR rate-rigging 'scandal' – the Prime Minister's word – led him to set up a parliamentary inquiry headed by Andrew Tyrie, the chairman of the Treasury Select Committee.³ Though Sir Desmond de Silva's review into the murder of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane⁴ found no evidence of an 'overarching state conspiracy', he did find plenty of evidence of 'shocking state collusion'. Quite where 'collusion' shades into 'overarching conspiracy' was not specified, but enough was revealed about the dirty war to cause the Prime Minister to offer a 'complete, absolute and unconditional' apology to the Finucane family.

We've not had quite the same *mea culpa* from Her Majesty's Government over the Mau Mau massacre cover-up revealed in all its ugly details in the High Court last year.⁵ But

1 <<http://hillsborough.independent.gov.uk>>

2 <www.facebook.com/OrgreaveTruthAndJusticeCampaign>

3 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-18677356>

4 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20662412>

5 <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/nov/30/maumau-massacre-secret-files>

contrast the approach of the late Barbara Castle, who long campaigned against British treatment of the Kenyans, with that of her protégé and successor as Blackburn MP, Jack Straw. He records nothing in his memoirs about Mau Mau treatment or the documented concoctions and cover-up of his Foreign Office officials.⁶

Lord Justice Leveson could have gone much deeper and wider in his inquiries, but his report showed plenty of nefarious results of the corrupt networks of influence in the worlds of press, police and politics extending over many years. Criminal trials may reveal yet more about Murdoch, the Met and the Chipping Norton set. Then perhaps Murdoch, the South Yorkshire Police and the Margaret Thatcher set followed by Murdoch, the 'war on terror' warriors and the Tony Blair set?

The Birtists

The demise of BBC director general, George Entwistle, was hastened by a lacklustre performance before the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.⁷ He was accompanied there by David Jordan, the BBC's director of editorial standards and policy, who continued to defend the Newsnight decision not to run the Savile exposé with a version of events long shown to be untrue.⁸

Apart from gossipy little tales about Jordan's relationship with Tory MP Tracey Crouch, the mainstream media offered little background on this important figure at the BBC for more than 20 years. In his broadcasting youth, Jordan, along with Peter Mandelson and David Aaronovitch, was part of the London Weekend Television team recruited by John Birt for his *Weekend World* current affairs show. This, according to Birt, was going to display a different kind of broadcast journalism, one he famously explained with its initial presenter, Peter Jay, the son-in-law of former prime minister Jim Callaghan, as

⁶ Jack Straw, *Last Man Standing: memoirs of a political survivor* (London: MacMillan 2011)

⁷ <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20039602>

⁸ <www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/oct/27/jimmy-savile-bbc-policy-newsnight>

driven by a 'mission to explain'.

When Birt, now Lord Birt of Liverpool, became deputy director-general of the BBC in 1987, Jordan and Aaronovitch crossed the Thames with him, leaving their old friend Peter Mandelson, now Lord Mandelson of Foy and Hartlepool, in south London as the Labour Party's director of communications. Aaronovitch, after executive positions at the BBC, left to become a columnist in turn for *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and now *The Times* and the *Jewish Chronicle*. Jordan, meanwhile, rose in the BBC first with Birt, who became director-general in 1992, and then his successors.

In part the BBC ineptitude revealed by the Savile fiasco was a legacy of the Birt era, and the 'Birt speak' language of shuffled responsibility and tick-box leadership was much in evidence as the saga unfolded.

The huge payoff to Entwistle and the £670,000 the BBC gave to Caroline Thomson for not landing his job a few months earlier followed the pattern set by Birt when he became the first 'self-employed consultant' to head the BBC.⁹ In his train came huge earnings and tax-convenient forms of payment, layers of 'managers' and with many of the top dogs at the corporation enjoying private healthcare paid for by the licence fee of viewers and listeners.¹⁰

The Thomson network

Thomson has been part of a cosy establishment network since working for Lord Jenkins of Hillhead in the early 1980s. She is already Lady Liddle on account of her husband, Roger Liddle, an old ally of Lord Mandelson, being Lord Liddle of Carlisle. (*Lobsters passim*) The former lobbyist, who survived exposure by *The Observer* while a Tony Blair adviser at No 10, enjoyed a spell as a Brussels eurocrat with Mandelson before both took ermine and Rothschild cash to fund the launch of their Policy Network 'think tank'. Ms Thomson's father was Knight of the Thistle Lord Thomson of Monifeith, a Lib Dem

9 <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2236793/Parade-BBC-chiefs-hit-pay-jackpot-MPs-fury-executive-gets-670-000--wanted-quit.html>

10 <www.taxpayersalliance.com/home/2011/05/>

spokesman in the Lords. Her brother-in-law is the Captain of the Yeoman of the Guard and Deputy Government Chief Whip in the Upper House, Lord [Richard] Newby of Rothwell, former chief executive of the Liberal-Democrat party. Oh, where is W. S. Gilbert when his country needs a new Iolanthe?

Transparency?

The spouse of another peer is Peter Kellner, who enjoyed a long relationship with the BBC long before he made lots of money from his polling organisation YouGov. Shouldn't Radio 4 Today programme listeners have been told at least two things when Kellner was interviewed last autumn about the fortunes of UKIP by John Humphrys? One is that YouGov president Kellner is married to Baroness Ashton of Upholland, the vice-president of the European Commission, an organisation with a close interest in the electoral success or failure of Nigel Farage's party. The other is that Humphrys helped Kellner found YouGov, writes for the YouGov website and is reportedly a company shareholder.¹¹

BAP

Unlike two of his regular co-presenters, Jim Naughtie and Evan Davis, Humphrys is not part of the British American Project (BAP) network whose members occupy a fair few Today programme slots most weeks – Damian Green, Douglas Alexander, Matthew Taylor, Bob Stewart, Lords Mandelson, Adebowale, and Turner, Baronesses Amos and Scotland, Charles Moore, Geoff Mulgan, Olly Grender, Margaret Hodge, Julia Hobsbawm and Ed Miliband, to name but fifteen.

Rarely in the public limelight during the Newsnight fun and games was the deputy chair of the BBC Trust, Diane Coyle, husband of BBC journalist Rory Cellan-Jones. Coyle – perhaps a future BBC chair? – was admitted to the BAP in the 'Class of 1995', along with the acting editor of *The Sunday Times*, Martin Ivens, son of Freedom Association and Aims of

¹¹ <www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/apr/06/yougov-denies-management-buyout-profits-crash>

Industry man Michael Ivens.¹²

The BAP fraternity does not guarantee all its 'fellows' total immunity from critical attention. In October, Ivens' paper exposed a fellow Project member, former head of the Army Lord Dannatt, as one of the retired military top brass 'willing to cash in on their contacts' for private companies bidding for Ministry of Defence contracts.¹³ Living just around the corner from Wapping and guarded by beefeaters, 'Lord Dannatt told reporters at his Tower of London home that a fee of £100,000 a year would be reasonable'. Didn't Gilbert and Sullivan once write something about this?

The BBC's woeful performance in recent months has made it hard to defend public service broadcasting, especially when its public face has been that of pukka establishment figure Lord Patten. *The Independent* has managed to offer a little of that by getting the occasional column from a former chairman of the corporation, Sir Christopher Bland.¹⁴ The chairman of London Weekend Television when Birt ran *Weekend World*, he was on the BBC board when the man who became Tony Blair's blue-skies thinker was director general. But why on earth should 76-year-old Sir Christopher, whose recreations according to *Who's Who* are vintage aircraft, vintage sports cars and 'tinkering with water mills', bother to write for the loss-making *Independent*? Could it be because his 28-year-old son, James Franklin Archibald Bland (Winchester, Cambridge and Fulbright scholar at Columbia) is deputy editor?

Did we need to know this?

Immediately after Labour MP Denis MacShane resigned from Parliament for being caught forging expense claims, in young Archie's paper appeared a rather bizarre piece from its veteran political commentator and former Jerusalem

12 <www.brandrepublic.com/news/469491/Radio-4s-John-Humphrys-set-money-YouGov-float/>

13 <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9607480/Cash-for-access-former-generals-broke-rules-says-Philip-Hammond.html>

14 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Bland>

correspondent Donald Macintyre.¹⁵ Headlined 'I was Denis MacShane's landlord', Macintyre described how he'd been friends with MacShane since Oxford days and described the former Foreign Office minister as 'a model tenant'.

He went on:

'The £1,450 a month (the same as for my previous tenant) rental agreement was fully approved by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, created in 2009 to make a "clean break" after Westminster was finally galvanised by the MPs' expenses scandal, and which I knew was reimbursing him for the rent. Nor was there any secret about the fact that for at least part of the period he was also renting out his London home — it is a published fact in the Declaration of MPs' Interests.

'But in the aftermath of public outrage over MPs' expenses I knew that it was impossible to defend the arrangement — however legal — by which MPs could not claim expenses for mortgage interest but could claim for renting a property while letting out their own. And to the extent that I was abetting such an arrangement I was open to justified criticism as well.

'Back in July, unaware that the Parliamentary Commissioner had decided to resume the investigation after the police decision not to proceed, I warned him [MacShane] that I would be returning in the autumn and needed the flat back.'¹⁶

Readers may ponder why Macintyre felt the need to volunteer all this. What might usefully be added by way of context is that Macintyre wrote a friendly biography of a close political associate of MacShane and himself an Oxford man, Peter Mandelson. Its first edition was pulped by Rupert Murdoch's Harper Collins imprint after a successful defamation action. Macintyre later had as editor at *The Independent* from 2008 to 2010 another Oxford friend of MacShane and Mandelson, Roger Alton, now a senior Murdoch executive on *The Times*. As

¹⁵ <www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/i-was-denis-macshanes-landlord-8277922.html>

¹⁶ <www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/i-was-denis-macshanes-landlord-8277922.html>

editor of *The Observer* in 2002, Alton vigorously supported the invasion of Iraq which was strongly backed by Mandelson and MacShane.

When Alastair met Lance

A Cambridge man himself, but grateful for their Iraq war support, was Alastair Campbell, who left his No 10 duties for Tony Blair and New Labour in 2003. One of his early freelance engagements – his first was to speak at a Friends of Israel gathering organised by Lord Levy – was to interview big sporting celebrities for Rupert Murdoch's *Times*. One of his most impressive interviewees, he told us on his blog later, was the 'open, funny and engaging' American cyclist Lance Armstrong.

Campbell's glowing account of the man who had fought his way back to Tour of France success from cancer appeared in June 2004, exactly when a book taking a rather different view of Armstrong's activities had been printed and distributed secretly in France because of the publisher's fear of the 'open, funny and engaging' cyclist's threat of an injunction.

The book's author, David Walsh,¹⁷ was a writer who knew just a tad more about cycling and Armstrong than the newly retired spin doctor. Walsh was able to prove then what was last year confirmed by the US authorities and more recently by the disgraced and now much-sued cyclist himself, namely that Armstrong was a regular drugs user who cheated his way to the seven Tour titles of which he has now been stripped.

According to Walsh, now chief sports writer at *The Sunday Times*, the 'open, funny and engaging' man was not above threatening anyone who blew the whistle on his drug-taking. That included Armstrong's British former physical therapist, Emma O'Reilly, who had provided damning evidence long before Campbell's 2004 admiring interview – and was rewarded by the 'open, funny and engaging' American by him

¹⁷ <www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/dec/05/david-walsh-british-journalist-awards>

calling her an alcoholic and a prostitute.

Since doing his best to polish the reputation of Armstrong after that of Blair and writing a few books, Campbell has moved into full-time commercial PR by joining his old No 10 spin doctor colleagues Tim Allan and David Bradshaw at Portland.¹⁸ A graphic accompanying *The Independent's* coverage of the BAE/EADS merger controversy in October¹⁹ showed Campbell among many New Labour pals. Those linked to bid backer Morgan Stanley included current Cabinet Secretary Sir Jeremy Heywood, ex-head of MI6 John Scarlett and ex-Blair chief of staff Jonathan Powell. Portland figures in addition to Campbell and Allan were Powell's brother Chris; Martin Sheehan, a Gordon Brown PR man and Steve Morris, a one-time Blair adviser. The third Powell, Baron Powell of Bayswater, who was special envoy to Blair after long service to Margaret Thatcher, was shown as a former adviser to BAE.

Exaro

One of the few journalistic thorns in the side of New Labour governments and those of Tory ones before it was *The Guardian's* veteran digger of dirt David Hencke. Squeezed out by unappreciative editor Alan Rusbridger in 2009, he has enjoyed a fresh lease of life working for Exaro News, the investigative online site,²⁰ scooping the *Press Gazette* Political Journalist of the Year award in December.²¹ Recent Exaro revelations have led the Metropolitan Police to set up Operation Fairbank into an alleged paedophile network of prominent political figures using a guest house in Barnes, south-west London. Hencke is the loss-making *Guardian's* loss – and that of its shrinking readership too.

18 <www.prweek.com/uk/news/1133230/alastair-campbell-returns-pr-tim-allans-portland/>

19 <www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/two-days-to-save-28bn-bae-and-eads-merger-8201367.html>

20 <www.exaronews.com/>

21 <www.exaronews.com/articles/4752/exaro-s-david-hencke-scoops-political-award>

Atlantic Bridge

The decision of the Crown Prosecution Service not to prosecute Adam Werritty,²² the one-time adviser to Liam Fox, not only afforded relief to the former Secretary of State for Defence and his long-time friend and flatmate, but also to No 10 – and not just because David Cameron seems to have plenty of other difficulties on his hands at the moment. The reason is that the Prime Minister's vivacious press secretary, Gabby Bertin – currently on maternity leave – used to work closely with Mr Werritty and Dr Fox as the researcher and sole employee of Atlantic Bridge. The controversial Atlanticist defence 'think tank' was shut down after the Charity Commissioners said in 2010 that its primary objective appeared to be 'promoting a political policy [that] is closely associated with the Conservative party'.

Ms Bertin, a former banker, had her £25,000 salary at Atlantic Bridge paid by Pfizer, the giant US pharmaceutical company.

Founded in 1997 by North Somerset MP Dr Fox with Margaret Thatcher as its president, Atlantic Bridge had current Cabinet ministers Michael Gove, George Osborne, William Hague and Chris Grayling on its advisory panel.

Dr Fox resigned in 2011 after being found guilty of breaching the ministerial code over his relationship with Mr Werritty, whom he met 40 times in the Ministry of Defence and on trips abroad. He left office prior to the publication of a report from the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell, which exposed his mistakes. The report revealed that Fox had blocked civil servants from attending key meetings alongside Werritty, had failed to tell his permanent secretary that he had solicited funds to bankroll Werritty, and had ignored private office requests to distance himself from him.

Speaking in an interview with BBC Radio Bristol after his resignation, Dr Fox said: 'My mistake there was to effectively

²² <www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/adam-werritty-wont-face-charges-8269993.html>

allow someone to function as an independent adviser and that is not allowed under the Ministerial Code. I should have kept a better separation there – with hindsight, it seems easy.'

Perhaps Ms Bertin, and even Mr Cameron, might have been called to offer their own view of Dr Fox's judgement had the CPS decided to prosecute Mr Werrity.

Alex and Rupert do a deal

There can be little surprise that the SNP, heavily reliant on the editorial support of Rupert Murdoch, has been steered by leader Alex Salmond through a U-turn over nuclear weapons and NATO membership.²³ The idea that News Corp would tolerate a governing party wobbling on close relations with the United States and its NATO establishment is about as remote as believing that even one of Murdoch's hundreds of titles and channels world-wide would fairly report opposition to the Iraq War.

Two MSPs resigned from the SNP after the policy change. One of them, John Finnie, who joined the party 40 years ago, said: 'I understand that there are those who wish to stay within the SNP and to continue to fight our corner in this essential debate, and I accept their reasons for doing so. However, I cannot continue to belong to a party that quite rightly does not wish to hold nuclear weapons on its soil, but wants to join a first strike nuclear alliance.'

His colleague, Jean Urquhart, added: 'The issue of nuclear disarmament and removing Trident from Scotland's waters is a red line issue for me. We believe in an independent Scotland, not a NATO-dependent Scotland.'

First Minister Alex Salmond was reported by STV as being 'saddened' by the announcement.

Former NATO general secretary, former UK defence secretary, and founder member of the British American Project, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, reacted by telling a special edition of *Scottish Review*: 'The SNP and its leadership are

²³ <<http://news.stv.tv/highlands-islands/196279-two-snp-msps-step-down-as-result-of-partys-u-turn-on-nato/>>

taking us for fools.'²⁴ So no surprises there then from the man who a year after the Iraq invasion received from George Bush at the White House the Presidential Medal of Freedom.²⁵

The then US ambassador to Nato, Nicholas Burns, said that his country's highest decoration was rarely bestowed on foreigners: 'In this case it's being given to Lord Robertson for his brilliant and very decisive leadership of Nato and for his great friendship with the United States.'

The same Nicholas Burns now works alongside Lord Robertson and former US Defence Secretary William Cohen for the Cohen Group 'strategic advice' company based in Washington DC.²⁶ Perhaps a future opening there for Mr Salmond if the referendum doesn't go well?

Nick Butler

Lord Robertson's very old friend and fellow founder of the British American Project way back in 1984 was Nick Butler, who, according to official BAP history, was the young Chatham House research fellow on secondment from BP who managed to find the \$425,000 launch money to get the BAP off the ground. He is still busy in retirement from his day job as right-hand man to Lord Browne, who resigned as chief executive of BP in 2007 after being found to have lied repeatedly to the High Court about his private life.²⁷ Browne, in a continuing influential public life, subsequently wrote the report ushering in higher student fees.²⁸

According to the 2013 *Who's Who*, Butler still retains the treasurership of the Fabian Society he has held for over 30 years, and serves as vice-president of the Hay Festival and is on Yale University's international advisory board. He is now

24 <www.scottishreview.net/GeorgeRobertson28.shtml>

25 <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1446366/Bush-freedom-medal-for-Lord-Robertson.html>

26 <<http://cohengroup.net/>>

27 <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1550172/Lord-Browne-resigns-after-revelations-he-lied-in-court-about-gay-lover.html>

28 <www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/7985953/Tuition-fees-to-rise-as-Lord-Browne-set-to-reject-graduate-tax.html>

recorded as being chairman of the policy institute of King's College London.²⁹ There is no reference in *Who's Who* to his first marriage – not unusual in its self-censoring entries – but more surprisingly, perhaps, no mention of his important role in helping set up the British American Project.

A BAP coda

Two small concluding footnotes on the BAP. The 1998 official history of the BAP, published soon after Lobster's disclosure of the Project's existence,³⁰ paid tribute to the important role of banker and former British Steel chairman Sir Charles Villiers³¹ in easing its birth. His daughter, Diana, has served on the BAP's US advisory board under her married name of Negrofonte. Husband John 'had a distinguished career in diplomacy and national security', according to Yale University,³² with which, like his wife's old BAP friend Butler, he has a continuing connection. In 2004 when he was appointed US ambassador to post-invasion Iraq, his role in Honduras at the time of the BAP's foundation was described by *Counterpunch* as that of 'ambassador to death squads'.³³

An early recruit to the BAP in 1991, Brendan Barber rose to be general secretary the TUC and talked a lot of Britain's 'stratospheric inequality'.³⁴ After 37 years as Congress House bureaucrat Barber retired on New Year's Eve with a £100,000 pay-off in addition to his pension.³⁵ This is not likely to match the earnings of two of Barber's other 1991 BAP 'fellows', Damon Buffini and Jonathan Powell. Multimillionaire Buffini, as chairman of Permira, became the apparently reluctant public

29 <www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/kpi/index.aspx>

30 <www.britishamericanproject.org/howwebegan.asp>

31 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Hyde_Villiers>

32 <<http://jackson.yale.edu/negrofonte>>

33 <www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/04/who-is-john-negrofonte/>
Noam Chomsky on the appointment of Villiers's son-in-law to Baghdad can be read at <www.democracynow.org/2004/6/24/noam_chomsky_on_john_negrofontes_career>.

34 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19584508>

35 <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2202367/Brendan-Barber-TUC-chief-receive-100-000-golden-goodbye-retires-later-year.html>

face of private equity.³⁶ Powell is now a senior managing director with Morgan Stanley³⁷ and one of the New Labour senior network doing quite nicely in Barber's Britain of 'stratospheric inequality'.³⁸

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36 <www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/12/columns-us-column-buffini-idUSTRE55B20820090612>

37 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Powell_%28Labour_adviser%29>

38 <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2002302/How-onetime-Labour-bigwigs-raking-private-sector.html>