

Judges mustn't let power**go to their heads****Michael Gove**

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Comment

There's only one way to defeat fake news

A raucous press that knows the difference between a lie and mere distortion is the best remedy against demagogues

**Philip Collins**

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One of the best lines attributed to J Edgar Hoover has turned out to be prophetic: "I don't even believe in the truth any more." The president of the United States might have said it at an astonishingly aggressive press conference yesterday as he greeted the resignation of his national security adviser, General Mike Flynn, with a series of scurrilous accusations about "the fake news media". Raw politics contains plenty of assaults on common sense and decency but President Trump's invention of alternative facts and his accusation of news fakery should really concern us. It is a bedrock issue when we find ourselves asking the question that a sneering Pontius Pilate asks in John's gospel: "What is truth?"

These accusations have not come from nowhere. Common cynicism has had it for some time that politicians are inveterate liars. Having worked with lots of politicians and known plenty more I can attest to how rarely the accusation is true. If by "a lie" we mean a statement that someone knows to be untrue but makes anyway with the explicit intention of deceiving, then political lying is rare to the point of extinction. Which is not to say that politicians such as Paul Nuttall, the Ukip leader, do not exaggerate half-truths, bend the truth or select and omit facts

ruthlessly to their own advantage. Politicians do all of these things and more, and always have done. What they rarely do is lie.

The accusation of deception goes back to Plato's denunciation of the sophists, and political history is littered with examples. It is now routine to say that Tony Blair lied over Iraq. Sometimes people pompously declare that Britain went to war on a false prospectus and then elide that accusation with the more offensive charge that the prime minister lied about intelligence reports of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Think about what that allegation commits you to. The prime minister knew that Saddam had no weapons yet said he did anyway. In the full knowledge that weapons inspectors would go into Iraq, discover no cache and therefore blow the case apart? Does anyone seriously think any senior politician would be so stupid, so self-harming, as to make a case

Trump and Putin don't want real news, they want silence

that he knows in advance to be untrue and which he can be certain will be disclosed?

Or take the claim, heard repeatedly during last year's referendum campaign, that leaving the EU would free up £350 million to spend on the National Health Service every week. Maybe this dividend will appear in the budget; if the government is cynical, it is the obvious thing to do. Even if it does not, it is patronising to say that the case for Britain to leave the EU was a pack of lies. I wouldn't exactly be proud of travelling on the bus with

£350 million for the NHS emblazoned on the side. I would hesitate before calling it a lie, though. It was an illustration that, if Britain left the EU, then, as long as you were happy with some heroic assumptions about future payments, a substantial sum would be available for something else. It was pretty low politics but I am inclined to be generous and say that the British public took it seriously but not literally. It wasn't quite a lie, just as George Osborne's prediction of instant economic calamity was not a lie but somewhere between a mistaken prediction and a stupid exaggeration.

Politicians do not often lie outright and the reason is obvious. They know, in a democracy vigilantly policed by a raucous press, that they will be found out. This is why the government's plan to enact Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act is such a rotten idea. Section 40 would make newspapers not under the aegis of the regulator Impress liable for litigants' costs irrespective of the outcome of the case. Investigations could therefore be prey to frivolous litigants who have a free shot. The only way to avoid this absurdity is to join Impress, the regulator funded by the likes of Max Mosley whose grievance against newspapers has been too well-aided. It's a sledgehammer and it's nuts.

Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic are not always good at distinguishing a fool from a knave and they can, often, be foolish themselves. The remark by a character in Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* that "I'm with you on a free press. It's the newspapers I can't stand" contains an important wisdom.

The free press does a lot of work merely by existing. The best fun is in

**Politicians such as Tony Blair may bend the truth but they very rarely lie**

uncovering scandals but the very existence of the free press makes those scandals less likely. Occasionally, though, there is a story such as the material handed to *The Washington Post* about General Flynn's discussions with Russia. Rather than accept that the general had indeed raised the question of sanctions, that knight-errant Donald Quixote started tilting at windmills, inventing imaginary enemies on whom he could pin the blame. He tried to change the subject by pretending that up to five million illegal votes had cost him victory in the popular ballot. He tilted at his own intelligence agencies and then, at a press conference, denounced unspecified news outlets with the prefix "fake".

We should not be complacent

that this is just America being exceptional. The idea of "fake news" could be potent in Britain if a sufficiently smart empty-head chose to lead it. Journalists already rank alongside politicians in the lower reaches of public esteem and "fake news" is an enticing and thoroughly dangerous idea. It begins as the cry of the little man and woman against the corporate behemoths of the mass media but, like all straightforward lies, it rapidly becomes a tool of the powerful. The three most prominent instances of people declaring the news to be fake last week were Donald Trump, Bashar Assad and Vladimir Putin. What they want is not "real" news, but silence.

I often find myself defending the honour of politicians to journalists who like to regard them as venal. By the same token, it is vital to defend the honour of journalists against politicians who believe they are corrupt. Whether Mr Trump, like J Edgar Hoover, actually believes what he says is a moot point but what he is saying is damaging, regardless. There is no discussion to be had without agreement on the basic truth of public utterance. The American republic, like all democracies, cannot function without the virtue of truth. The only option is to ignore the siren voices of Don's gospel and wait for them to pass. "The man who tells you truth does not exist is asking you not to believe him," said the philosopher Sir Roger Scruton. "So don't."

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