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Why we need to hold our politicians to account

There are moments in history that call for leadership, integrity and determination. Unfortunately, Brexit is not proving our politicians' finest hour. While ministers spar over the Conservative leadership succession and speculation about Theresa May's future reaches fever pitch, the cabinet has had only one perfunctory discussion about Britain's plans to leave the European Union since the referendum.

Nature abhors a vacuum but it is a nice little earner for politicians. Our Insight team, sparked by reports that Brexit had led to a lobbying frenzy, has spent months unravelling the web of access, intelligence and influence enabling senior politicians to exploit their connections for personal gain. Former cabinet ministers appear to have fallen short of the standards reflected in the Nolan principles governing conduct in public life.

Some readers will already be aware that we were preparing to publish these revelations last Sunday. There has been speculation about the causes of delay ranging from legal concerns on our part to the threat of intervention by the regulator Ofcom against our broadcasting partner, Channel 4's Dispatches programme.

None of this is true. The simple fact, which the public has a right to know, is that we withheld publication of our investigation on compassionate grounds as we were preparing to go to press. At the disruptive time of 4.30pm last Saturday a public relations spokesman for Lord Lansley delivered a "confidential" letter from his cancer specialist about his medical treatment. It included details of his condition that we will not be revealing here.

The Sunday Times felt it would be improper to rush ahead with publication in the circumstances. We concluded that the humane decision was to pause and consider the implications of the letter from Lord Lansley's doctor, in consultation with Channel 4. Our reporting was exclusive and on this occasion, as we have demonstrated today, it could wait.

Some of the politicians named in our investigation felt no such constraint, thereby reinforcing our decision to publish today. Making use of allegations that we had put to them so they could have a fair opportunity to reply, information was leaked about our inquiries to another Sunday newspaper in a bid to put the best possible gloss on their behaviour. As part of this attempt at spin, we understand that the "confidential" medical letter was also presented to other media in anticipation of criticising The Sunday Times as heartless and reckless had we ignored its contents and gone to press.

Because we behaved compassionately, the politicians' behaviour has been revealed in an even starker light. Lord Lansley, Andrew Mitchell and Peter Lilley pulled every lever at their disposal to present themselves favourably. Mr Mitchell hinted that he had called upon the services of MI5 to investigate what he had suspected was a "bogus" consultancy firm. Lord Lansley said that he had referred himself to the House of Lords commissioner for standards, the anti-sleaze watchdog, and expected his name to be cleared. Mr Lilley complained to Channel 4 executives and also contacted Ofcom.

Readers now have the chance to judge the politicians' behaviour for themselves. Does it conform to the standards the public expects as set out in the Nolan principles? Lord Lansley told our undercover reporters representing a fictional Chinese company that he knew the prime minister and international trade secretary

Liam Fox well and that he could guide the company's representatives and make introductions to the "right person". He also suggested that payment for his services could be made through his wife's company in a move to keep it off the parliamentary register.

Mr Lilley, a former trade and industry secretary, revealed that he belonged to a private group advising Dr Fox. Mr Mitchell, the MP for Sutton Coldfield, said he was already advising clients on Brexit but appeared interested in further work at a daily rate of £6,000. He claimed: "My constituents don't mind what I'm paid."

In 2015 the former Conservative MP Tim Yeo sued The Sunday Times over a previous Insight exposé. Not only did he lose his libel action but the High Court judge also made important observations about investigative journalism that are relevant today. Mr Justice Warby noted that stories of this kind are "peculiarly vulnerable to having [their] impact undermined by spoiling tactics. The subject of the story has a strong incentive to engage in tactics of that kind and so do competitors. The risks are exacerbated if the story is objectively sensational and the subject is someone, such as an experienced MP, well versed in the mechanisms for managing or influencing the news. If the impact of such a story is dissipated the public interest is harmed. It attracts less attention and there is some waste of the resources of the media organisation that has created it. That represents a disincentive to investigative journalism."

The politicians in our Cash for Brexit investigation attempted to scupper our reporting using remedies not available to the general public. They are not alone. Gavin Williamson, the recently appointed defence secretary, is under pressure over the tactics that he used to divert attention away from newspaper inquiries that he had an extramarital "flirtation" before entering politics. Those tactics – an interview about the affair with a friendly newspaper and a diversionary interview with another in which he is now accused of leaking classified information – appear to have backfired.

As you can see today, the Cash for Brexit politicians did not silence us. But MPs and peers have long engaged in attempts to suppress press revelations about their behaviour. This has led in recent weeks to the emergence of a new threat to the freedom of the press.

Earlier this month the House of Lords, where peers came under fire during the expenses scandal, voted by 238 to 209 to amend a data protection bill with the aim of opening a new public inquiry into the conduct of the media. The bill will soon be voted on by MPs who have a vested interest in suppressing the investigative journalism that is exemplified by the Insight team.

Politicians do not like scrutiny. Last week MPs voted against the appointment to the Electoral Commission board of Sir Ian Kennedy, a former Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority watchdog appointed to oversee them in the wake of the expenses scandal. No doubt many current and former politicians would love to see a relaxation of the Nolan principles, to which we would say: let them try that out on the public. As it is, all too often politicians who break their own rules get away with a slap on the wrist.

For our part, if there is a lesson from decades of Sunday Times investigations, it is that the political gravy train never runs out of steam. With your support, we will remain dedicated to shining a light into the murkiest corners of public life.

This could be hobbit forming

"Have you heard the news?" said Bilbo Baggins, standing in the garden of his beloved Bag End.

"What news?" asked his young cousin, Frodo. "Is Sauron once more gathering together the dark forces of Mordor?"

"It's worse," replied the old hobbit.

"Have the deadly Black Riders found a way to outwit Elrond, master of Rivendell?" asked Sam Gamgee, his gardener.

"Worse even than that," said Baggins. "According to the newspapers, the short

story format is popular once again. Nobody has time for long novels like The Lord of the Rings any more."

"We're done for," cried Frodo. "Lord of the Rings is nearly 1,200 pages long. It takes ages to get to the end. In a short story how are we to carry out our quest to get the One Ring across the realms of Middle-earth to the Cracks of Doom?"

"We could send it by registered post?" suggested Sam.

"Sorted," said Baggins.

Adam Boulton

Boris rides high but Gove is this race's dark horse



In a Tory leadership dash, the foreign secretary may be pipped at the post

They are not yet under starter's orders but the would-be runners in a Conservative leadership contest have left the paddock and are warming up. The contest looks imminent because, in the words of one habitual loyalist, "we can see she simply can't do it". This month Theresa May topped the disappointments of 2017 with a botched cabinet reshuffle, a humiliatingly insignificant appearance at Davos and by falling out with both her chancellor and her foreign secretary, the standard-bearers at either ends of Brexit.

When Boris Johnson makes the headlines, it is bad news for the prime minister. If he finds the courage to resign from the cabinet on the right issue, or if May sacks him, the resulting turmoil would almost certainly take her down with him. Which is not to say that Johnson will necessarily replace her.

Political assassins play a prominent part in Conservative Party history. Johnson lacks the authority of Sir Geoffrey Howe, whose resignation delivered the coup de grâce to Margaret Thatcher. But he can match the charisma of Michael Heseltine, the Iron Lady's other resolute nemesis. Meanwhile, Johnson's detractors hope he'll be another Enoch Powell and propel himself into the wilderness.

Johnson has been busy of late, using the tools of a professional journalist to restore his faded credentials as a contender for the top job. First, he stole the reflected glory of Emmanuel Macron's presidential visit with the idea of a cross-Channel road bridge.

Next, he inserted himself into the NHS's worst winter with the well-publicised claim that Brexit should mean £5bn a year extra for the health service. For disloyalty, May sentenced Johnson to a punishment beating from cabinet colleagues but despite his bruises he emerged triumphant. The public agrees with him on more money for the NHS and he enhanced the credibility of his dubious battle bus claim that there will be a Brexit dividend.

Now he is preparing to deliver a key speech on Britain's foreign policy centred on the optimistic and "liberal" case for Brexit. Many on both sides of the argument are thirsting to hear this message, whether it's true or not.

Johnson's planned speech threatened to clash with the prime minister's latest on the government's position. This weekend she seemed to be backing away from a set piece for fear of upsetting one or other side of her party by revealing too much where she stands. We can be sure, however, that the foreign

secretary's thoughts will see the light of day as did his 4,000-word red-line article last year.

Johnson is now only second favourite with the bookies to be next Tory leader, narrowly behind that other Old Etonian Jacob Rees-Mogg, who is making the best of his recent elevation to head the Eurosceptic backbench European Research Group (ERG). He has a taste for the media and is flaying the prime minister, David Davis and Philip Hammond for being insufficiently "vigorous" in securing Brexit "heart, soul and mind".

For the first time ERG MPs are planning rebel amendments to stiffen the spine of Brexit legislation over the transition period and the final deal. As Sir John Major learnt with the "whiplash wonders", a government is most vulnerable when its opponents on opposite sides of an argument unite to vote against it.

A meaningful defeat in the Commons could finish off the May government in the autumn. The prime minister could fall before then if 15% of the parliamentary party – 48 Tory MPs – write to the chairman of the 1922 committee asking for a vote of confidence in her. In a loud stage whisper Sir Graham Brady has bemoaned the growing pile of letters on his desk.

Word is there are more than 40 letters on file from a coalition opposed to the leader. Pro-Europeans have long blamed her for not trying to accommodate their views. Now those on the other side fear being let down. I asked one low-profile MP: "Would another leader better serve your views on Brexit?" He replied: "As a member of ERG, yes." Recent sackings and the reshuffle's pointless moves have embittered many, especially the pale and stale males who know their faces will never fit.

Tory MPs do not believe May can possibly lead them into the next election. The more compassionate of them claim she is visibly wilting, weary of a job she cannot relish. If the country could change the prime minister to Winston Churchill at the darkest hour in 1940,

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When Johnson makes the headlines, it is bad news for May

Sarah Baxter

Behind the liberal mask, Hollywood's a horror flick



Real debate is forced into hiding as Tinseltown's deadly conformity spreads

My favourite film on the Oscar shortlist is Get Out, the satirical horror flick starring Daniel Kaluuya, and not only because the 28-year-old actor grew up in north London. It is a glorious pastiche of everything Hollywood, home of liberal hypocrisy, stands for. When Kaluuya's character, Chris, dates a white girl, he is astonished she doesn't consider his colour worth mentioning to her parents before he first meets them. What begins as an update of the 1960s Oscar-winning film Guess Who's Coming to Dinner ends as a slasher movie with echoes of Black Lives Matter.

The giveaway that the demons of racism lurk within a wealthy suburban family is that the neurosurgeon father loves to riff, "I would have voted for Obama a third time if I could!" As Rod, Chris's best friend and comic foil, soon realises, the father's opinions are closeted behind a guff of patronising liberal nonsense. His disavowal of prejudice is about as sincere as the belief that Hollywood has changed its spots with this year's #OscarsNotSoWhite nomination list.

Moreover, despite the ostentatious adoption of the Time'sUp and #MeToo movements, Hollywood remains a glamorous meat factory serving up young women to older men. For evidence, look no further than the typically sumptuous Annie Leibovitz photograph of Hollywood royalty for Graydon Carter's last issue as the editor of Vanity Fair, published this week. Even with some fairly ripe peaches on display, such as Oprah Winfrey, 63, and Nicole Kidman, 50, the average age of the actresses, including Claire Foy of The Crown, is nearly 20 years lower than that of their male co-stars.

The grizzled lions in the shot, wearing "Presidents Club" black dinner jackets, tower over the women draped submissively beneath them. If Gal Gadot, the statuesque 32-year-old star of Wonder Woman, clad in a see-through chiffon skirt, hadn't been slouching on the arm of a chair, she would have overshadowed Harrison Ford, ever the action hero at 75. And

what are we to make of the photoshopping that appears to have left Oprah with three hands and Reese Witherspoon with a surplus leg? "I guess everybody knows now... I have 3 legs," the actress tweeted in good sport. "I hope you can still accept me for who I am." Chalk that one up for the disabled movement.

It is in this climate of cant that the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson is gaining such a cult following online. His stand-off with Cathy Newman of Channel 4 News has racked up more than 4m views on YouTube – merely for his stating the obvious, such as that freedom of speech means the right to cause offence; that "women deeply want men who are competent and powerful" (and, he qualifies, "I don't mean power in that they can exert tyrannical control over others"); and that "the typical woman has to have her career and family in order pretty much by the time she is 35".

These views stereotype the sexes far less than Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus, which has sold 50m copies, yet Peterson was chastised by Newman as if he were from another planet. His own book, 12 Rules for Life, which contains admonitions such as "Tell the truth – or at least don't lie", is storming the bestseller list as if he were saying the unsayable, when self-help manuals have been with us since the Ten Commandments. Newman herself, meanwhile, is being pelted with so much manure that Peterson has had to appeal to his hyperventilating fans for calm.

With mainstream thinkers shouted down or

they say to themselves, then surely a switch mid-EU negotiations without triggering an election would be a trivial matter.

Johnson has long modelled himself in Churchillian mould. He may have more in common with two other Tory mavericks and wrecking balls – Powell and Heseltine. Like Powell, Johnson parades his classical education. Both men controversially tested the boundaries of acceptable English by deploying the word "piccaninnies". But where Powell presented himself "like the Roman" as a man of unflinching logic and principle, Johnson has built a career out of apologies, U-turns and overstatement.

Heseltine is proud of being the first Tory MP to condemn Powell's "rivers of blood" speech in 1968. Like Powell he has clung to his political beliefs and put them ahead of loyalty to his party. His fellow touselled blond and former MP for Henley has no such record of adamant consistency.

Ambiguity could turn out to be Johnson's greatest asset in any leadership contest. The majority of Tory party members are Eurosceptic. They rejected Ken Clarke many times and in the present charged atmosphere are most unlikely to back Jeremy Hunt, Amber Rudd or Gavin Williamson, for all their ambition. The rump of pro-European Conservatives will oppose zealots such as Rees-Mogg just as fervently.

But Boris? His "rascally precariousness", as the author Howard Jacobson put it, permits onlookers to see in him what they want to find. "He's still there and he always is," one longstanding colleague pointed out. But then this old friend added: "If he really wants it." Johnson self-destructed in 2016 when he had the best chance of becoming prime minister. Even some of his family wonder if he'd do the same again deliberately.

Despite Michael Gove's betrayal in the last contest, Johnson and "the Gover" are back in harness as close allies. Gove is trying to rebuild his reputation as an enthusiastic and effective environment secretary. He has brains and subtlety but he is a true believer in the kind of Brexit which the hardliners fear is slipping from him as the likes of Hammond, Davis and Clark openly back the softest transition period and equivocate on the final settlement.

"I could be mad but I'd put my money on Gove," my informant predicted. Blond Boy may be a mere pace setter in the leadership stakes. @AdamBoultonSky
Dominic Lawson is away

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The place is a meat factory serving up women to older men

threatened with no-platforming, informed debate is shifting to the "intellectual dark web", allowing public thinkers to put forward ideas on YouTube and in podcasts without attracting charges of heresy. Despite the catchy new name, it is not "dark" as in the forbidden region of the internet inhabited by drug-dealers and paedophiles, but it is considered by its supporters to be excitingly scandalous.

By contrast, Hollywood has become a place of suffocating conformity behind which darkness lurks. Its liberal mask is slipping so fast that Casey Affleck, the star of Manchester by the Sea, was last week obliged hurriedly to decline the invitation to present the Oscar for best actress, given his record of settling sexual harassment lawsuits brought by women.

One of last year's most acclaimed films, Call Me by Your Name, is a gay romance featuring straight actors, for obvious box-office reasons, and the only safe love affair on the Oscar shortlist would appear to be between a mute cleaning lady played by Sally Hawkins and an alien fish-man, in The Shape of Water. Even Get Out comes with racial baggage and identity politics of its own. Daniel Kaluuya had to fend off accusations from a furious Samuel L Jackson that black British actors were snatching too many roles from African-Americans.

"Daniel grew up in a country where they've been inter-racial dating for a hundred years," Jackson said bizarrely. "What would a brother from America have made of that role?"

The baffled Kaluuya replied: "I'm dark-skinned, bro." Wherever he goes, he told American GQ magazine, he was expected to talk about his experience of racism and "show off my struggle so that people accept I'm black. I resent that."

For Kaluuya, the culture wars demand that "just because you're black, you get taken and used to represent something". The same thing is mirrored by his character in the film. I hope he wins the Oscar for best actor. Annoyingly, though, Hollywood liberals would congratulate themselves more than him. @sarahbaxterSTM