

Conservative candidate for London mayor resigns in disgrace

Julie Hyland, Chris Marsden**25 November 1999**

Lord Jeffrey Archer, the Conservative candidate for next year's London mayoral election, is out of the running and faces expulsion from the party. This follows revelations that Archer had asked a close friend, Ted Francis, to provide him with an alibi during his 1987 libel action against the *Daily Star* newspaper.

Archer, then deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, had been accused by the *Star* of paying for "kinky" sex with a prostitute, Monica Coghlan. He was forced to resign his party position because of the allegations, but took legal action against the newspaper and won damages of £500,000. He had believed that the date the assignation was supposed to have taken place was September 8, when he was having dinner with a female friend. Fearing that if this came out it would jeopardise his marriage, Archer asked Francis to provide an alibi for him. In the event, this alibi was not used in court because the *Star* changed the supposed date of his meeting with Ms. Coghlan to September 9.

Twelve years on, however, Francis related these events to top public relations agent Max Clifford, who then directed him to the *News of the World*. Though Archer cannot be accused of perjury, he could face charges of attempting to pervert the course of justice. The Tory leadership have withdrawn the Conservative whip from Archer in the House of Lords, and party leader William Hague said his political career is over. The *Star* is demanding repayment of the damages and the court costs it was ordered to pay, with interest on top—an estimated £3 million.

The affair has all the hallmarks of a political sting operation, engineered by Labour to eliminate Archer from the mayoral race. Though few will shed a tear over multimillionaire novelist Archer's fate, the scandal demonstrates the extent to which media witch-hunts have replaced genuine political struggle over policies.

Accusations of lying and corruption—of both a major and minor character—have dogged Archer's career. The most serious charge against him was that of insider share trading during the sale of Anglia Television in 1994 (where his wife Mary was a board member). This was said to have netted him a £77,219 profit. Two earlier investigations cleared him of this charge. Nevertheless, Archer was a popular figure within the Tory Party, and seen as a vote winner due to his position as a best-selling author and TV personality. He won his nomination by a landslide, after a ballot of Conservative members in London. He had made efforts to re-brand himself as a representative of a new "caring Conservatism" and was on record as opposing the Labour government's planned privatisation of the London Underground.

Recent polls indicated that Archer was more popular than Labour's preferred candidate, former Health Secretary Frank Dobson. What made the situation even worse for Labour was that the party has been embroiled in a row over Blair's efforts to prevent the clear favourite in the election—Ken Livingstone—being accepted onto Labour's shortlist of candidates. The efforts to exclude former Greater London Council leader Livingstone, who is considered too left-wing, have alienated many party members and increased his public support.

Blair faced the frightening prospect that even if he successfully excluded Livingstone, this might only pave the way for an Archer victory. Last month, Archer complained that Labour was involved in a smear campaign against him, following Trade and Industry Secretary Stephen Byers' decision to again refer his role in the Anglia Television sale to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for investigation. He said that this was part of a plot against Frank Dobson's rivals.

"They worked out that Ken [Livingstone] can beat Mr. Dobson and they worked out that I can beat Mr. Dobson and so they smear us. Isn't it strange that none of this happened until the polls showed I could beat him," he said.

In the event, the DTI found that the evidence for reopening an investigation into Anglia was too insubstantial. But another angle was already being explored. The revelations concerning Archer's request for Francis to provide him with an alibi were made the very same day that he was informed of the DTI's decision.

Francis, a Blair supporter, was accused in the press of being motivated by petty jealousy, but his response makes clear the political aim behind his exposure of a supposed friend and financial backer of 30 years. In a radio interview he said that he had decided to tell all "because Archer became more and more of a possible candidate ... because Dobson and Livingstone were clashing, you could see him getting in the back door."

The Clifford- *News of the World* connection also argues strongly for Labour involvement in the campaign against Archer. The *News of the World* is a Sunday scandal sheet published by Blair's major media backer, Rupert Murdoch. Clifford played a key role in the crusade to discredit the Tory Party with "sleaze" scandals in the run-up to the 1997 general election. He was directly responsible for the resignation of Conservative Minister David Mellor. At the time, he described this as a campaign against "the Establishment" and said, "I am very much a Labour voter." At the height of internal dissent over Livingstone's nomination one week prior to the Archer revelations, it was Clifford who leaked the story that Blair's wife Cherie was two months pregnant, knocking news of Labour's internecine warfare off the front-pages.

With virtually every newspaper in the country now filled with salacious details of Archer's past, Tory leader William Hague's efforts to distance his party from the so-called sleaze factor lies in ruins. His own leadership has been further undermined by his earlier endorsement of Archer and there is little or no chance of any Tory candidate winning the mayoral election.

The affair has also been used to justify Blair's intervention to try and prevent Livingstone from standing. Hague's decision to let Archer's name go

through in the membership ballot was at least partly motivated by a desire to prove that the Tories were more internally democratic than Labour. By Tuesday, the London *Times* newspaper pronounced that this was his big mistake. "The Tories require an internal commission that is clearly capable of removing individuals whose public proclamations, past record or present actions are likely to cost it support at the polls.... The Labour Party has similar rules and they have allowed Tony Blair to remodel it ruthlessly."

Once again sex and corruption scandals have been used by Labour to surreptitiously fight out an unprincipled power struggle. Incapable of distinguishing themselves politically from the Tories, or of mobilising popular support for their pro-business policies, they rely on a compliant and supportive media to carry out their dirty work. In the process, official politics has become divorced from any measure of genuine democratic accountability. Which candidates stand and what policies they pursue is the sole concern of a wealthy elite and their flunkies in the media.



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