

Claims by Cambridge Analytica whistleblower used for new electoral investigation into Brexit

Julie Hyland
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Lawyers acting on behalf of whistleblowers have called for the Electoral Commission to investigate if Vote Leave broke spending rules in the 2016 referendum on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU).

Vote Leave was the official representative of those advocating withdrawal. Its leading members included Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. Now foreign secretary and environment minister, respectively, they are the lead proponents of a "hard-Brexit" policy in Theresa May's Conservative government.

The Electoral Commission has already conducted two investigations into claims of Vote Leave wrongdoing and cleared the group. Under pressure from anti-Brexit groups, including the Good Law Project, it has opened a third investigation.

The latest accusations are based on statements by former Cambridge Analytica employee Chris Wylie and Shahmir Sanni, a volunteer with the pro-Brexit student group BeLeave.

Tamsin Allen, from legal firm Bindmans, said, "[T]here is a strong suspicion that the campaigns were very closely linked and coordinated, in which case it may be that Vote Leave spent huge sums unlawfully and its declaration of expenses is incorrect."

The allegation is that Vote Leave circumvented electoral spending limits by donating £625,000 to BeLeave, which is said to be essentially part of the same campaign group. If this can be established, it would take Vote Leave spending over the £7 million legal limit.

Allen said there was ground to accuse Vote Leave's campaign director, Dominic Cummings, "of having conspired to break the law," due to discussions he had with BeLeave about its activities. It is also argued that Vote Leave and BeLeave shared the same office and retained the services of Canadian-based Aggregate IQ

(AIQ).

AIQ is accused of being part of efforts by Cambridge Analytica to harvest Facebook profiles with the aim of influencing both the 2016 US Presidential election and the Brexit referendum the same year.

Allen said there are also "grounds to investigate" Vote Leave's national organiser, Stephen Parkinson, and Vote Leave's head of outreach, Cleo Watson, who are both now advisers to the government.

Vote Leave has rejected any wrongdoing, with Cummings stating that he will file formal complaints to the Electoral Commission and the Information Commissioner's Office against spending by the Remain campaign.

The Electoral Commission's latest investigation testifies to the deep tensions within the British bourgeoisie over Brexit. The referendum itself was conceived by then-Prime Minister David Cameron as a means of settling the faction fight within the Tory Party over UK relations with the EU, which, in turn, are bound up with broader foreign policy considerations.

The majority of the British bourgeoisie—including its financial and military/intelligence sectors—were in favour of a Remain vote. However, the Leave campaign—led by the Tory right and the UK Independence Party—was able to successfully exploit hostility to the EU, and the British establishment, to secure 51 percent in favour of Leave.

Last week Wylie, a Canadian citizen, gave evidence before Parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. Ostensibly set up in January 2017 to investigate "fake news," its real purpose is to manufacture a pretext for British and US imperialism's provocations against Russia, while censoring and closing down alternative media sources that would expose its plans.

Wylie began work for SCL Group 2013—the parent

company of Cambridge Analytica—in London. He says that as research director he helped establish Cambridge Analytica, with funds from Robert Mercer, the billionaire hedge fund manager and Donald Trump supporter. He left Cambridge Analytica in 2014 and told the select committee he felt “shock” and “horror” at Trump’s win in 2016.

Soon after Trump’s inauguration, he began working with the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers on exposures of Cambridge Analytica’s data-gathering programme that included harvesting the Facebook profiles of 50 million people.

Wylie told the select committee that such activities may have altered the outcome of both the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

Claims by AIQ that it is a separate entity from SCL and Cambridge Analytica are “weasel words,” he said. There was a “common plan and common purpose” between AIQ and the Leave campaigns, said Wylie.

Describing AIQ as a “proxy money-laundering vehicle,” Wylie said that “Cummings...just went round and found places he could launder money through to give it to AIQ so they could overspend. And that is my genuinely held belief.”

An AIQ employee had told him that the relationship between Vote Leave and BeLeave was “totally illegal” because “you are not allowed to coordinate between different campaigns and not declare it.” He said, “I don’t feel confident in the result [of the referendum]” as a result.

Wylie presented no evidence to back up his claims. Asked directly if he could supply any, he replied, “[N]ot in the form of documentation.”

Challenged as to whether £625,000 could really have decided the outcome of the referendum, Wylie argued that just 600,000 people decided the referendum between Leave and Remain, and it was “incredibly reasonable” to say it had.

Wylie has been denounced as a charlatan and a liar. Cambridge Analytica denied the allegations and said that Wylie had been a “part-time contractor” who left the organisation in 2014 and would not have knowledge of the company’s workings beyond that date. It was also pointed out that, while Wylie says his accusations are motivated by objections to data harvesting techniques, the whistleblower had offered to supply his own services to Vote Leave in January 2016 for the referendum but was turned down.

Simultaneous with Wylie’s statements, BeLeave

whistleblower Shahmir Sanni told the *Observer* that he had passed information to the Electoral Commission that lead figures in the Vote Leave campaign violated referendum spending rules and attempted to destroy the evidence.

Sanni, formerly secretary of BeLeave and now employed by the right-wing TaxPayers’ Alliance campaign group, alleges that the £625,000 donation Vote Leave made to BeLeave was not a genuine donation and that it was channelled to AIQ as part of a coordinated operation. He also alleges leading Vote Leave personnel—including Cummings—tried to destroy evidence of this coordination by removing themselves from the Google Drive both campaign groups shared. Cummings said this was “factually wrong and libellous.”

Wylie also claimed that Facebook was aware of the large-scale harvesting of users’ data. His allegations were used by the select committee to repeat its demand that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg answer the charges in person.

The serious questions raised about the vast amounts of data at the unchecked disposal of Google, Facebook and Twitter are being used to bring the corporate giants into even closer alignment with the demands of the US and British intelligence agencies for sweeping Internet censorship measures.

At the forefront of this campaign are the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *New York Times* in alignment with the Democratic Party in the US and the Blairite Labour right in Britain.

As Wylie finished his testimony, it was reported that Zuckerberg had finally agreed to demands by leading Democrats to testify before Congress.



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