

Delay in publication of UK security report used to feed anti-Russian campaign

Paul Bond**29 November 2019**

The controversy around delayed publication of a parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) report on alleged Russian attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum and 2017 UK general election reveals more about the sharp factional disputes within the British bourgeoisie than it does about the report's supposed contents.

Following the announcement by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office that the report would not be published ahead of the December 12 general election, the *Sunday Times* concluded from leaked sections of the 50-page document that Russian interference may have had an "unquantifiable" impact on the Brexit referendum.

The report was launched last year following then Prime Minister Theresa May's claim that Russia was "weaponizing information" in Britain. The cross-party committee, under the chairmanship of former Attorney General Dominic Grieve, heard evidence from the British security services and private intelligence firms.

The tendentious character of the report can be gauged by the fact that one of its expert witnesses was Christopher Steele of private intelligence firm Orbis Business Intelligence.

As an MI6 officer, Steele had led the investigation into the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. After leaving MI6 he founded Orbis Business Intelligence, which in 2016 was responsible for the Trump-Russia dossier financed by the Democratic Party—17 memos alleging misconduct and conspiracy between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the administration of Vladimir Putin. One of Steele's long-time associates is Pablo Miller, the MI6 handler of Russian/UK double agent Sergei Skripal. The Tory government and Blairites in the Labour Party allege, without offering any concrete proof, that Skripal and his daughter were poisoned by the Putin regime on British soil last year.

The ISC report was completed in March, finalised and signed off by the intelligence services before being passed to Downing Street on October 17 for final clearance ahead of publication. On October 30, the expert witnesses were advised that publication was imminent, but Downing Street announced that clearance was unlikely to be given on November 1 as expected. Parliament was dissolved on November 6 for the general election. As ISC reports can only be published when parliament

is sitting, it was announced on November 4 that publication was being withheld until after the election.

On October 31, Grieve—a pro-Remain MP who had the Tory whip withdrawn when he voted against the government's "no deal" Brexit—accused Johnson of sitting on the report, telling the House of Commons that Downing Street had given no explanation of the "apparent delay" in publication.

Tensions rapidly escalated as ISC sources told the press that Downing Street is normally given 10 days to clear a report, and Johnson's office said the process usually takes six weeks. Opposition politicians spoke of a cover-up.

Grieve ramped up the attack in a co-ordination with Labour's Blairites. He called the six-week claim "completely and totally untrue... a lie," and accused Downing Street of telling "whopping untruths" about the reasons for the delay.

Labour's shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry wrote to her counterpart, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, after a whistleblower raised "serious concerns" about the security clearance given to Johnson's senior adviser Dominic Cummings. Thornberry's letter, copied to the head of the civil service and members of the security services, was published in the *Sunday Times*.

Thornberry mentioned a new category of informant, an "official-level whistleblower," who had raised "serious concerns" with members of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's front bench about Cummings's time in Russia in the early 1990s. Thornberry said Labour did not "know the veracity of their claims" but felt "duty-bound" to raise them.

By the time Labour issued its election manifesto last week, the withheld report formed a critical part of the party's militarist agenda. Implying that the Johnson government is in the pocket of Putin, the manifesto attacked him for refusing to "publish the report into possible foreign interference by Russia in UK democracy."

Reports of the leaks conclude that the ISC could not determine whether Russian interference had any impact on the 2016 referendum. Its political purpose, however, emerged clearly, in right-wing press comments. The *Daily Mail* wrote that the report "is understood to criticise the British intelligence services for not devoting enough resources to tackle the danger posed by Vladimir Putin's Russia."

One focus, as the *Mail* understood it, was “anti-Ebhnservative and Russian oligarchs. There have undeniably disseminated by [Russian state media outlets] RT and Sputnik.” In other words, it was not intelligence activity, but “more than 260 articles” tweeted by two media agencies.

Even this was not of overwhelming financial weight. According to social media research group 89up’s evidence to parliament’s Digital, Culture Media and Sport select committee, pro-Leave material from these two channels was worth between £1.4 million and £4.1 million commercially during the 2016 campaign. Further, despite the Leave dominance, 89up’s Mike Harris spoke of ‘Russian attempts to boost the extremities of the Brexit debate’ [emphasis added].

The “Russians ate my homework” playbook is all too familiar. It was no surprise that the US Democratic Party’s Hillary Clinton joined the chorus denouncing delays to publication, expressing herself “dumbfounded that this [Johnson] Government won’t release the report about Russian influence.”

As Thornberry’s press comments make clear, blaming everything on the Russians can conveniently be applied in every eventuality. She said, “If it is correct that our security services have been unable to reach a conclusion about the extent or impact of Russian interference in the 2016 referendum, then it raises serious questions which require serious answers.” The logic is that any absence of evidence of interference will itself be attributable to Russian interference!

This assumption of Russian guilt is a useful tool for attacking Johnson and Cummings on a hardline security basis and compromising “national security.” Positioning Johnson and Cummings as weak on Russia enables pro-Remain representatives of the ruling class to advance their right-wing Atlanticist position. Lined up alongside Grieve and Thornberry have been the Scottish National Party, whose defence spokesman Stewart McDonald said, “Parliament is about to be sent packing into a general election without fully understanding the extent to which Russia has meddled in our most recent electoral events.”

Alexander Litvinenko’s widow, Marina, announced plans to mount a legal challenge to the delay in publication. Any such delay would only aid Putin, she said. She compared the decision to delay to Theresa May’s “mistake” as home secretary in not calling a public inquiry into Litvinenko’s death. The eventual public inquiry, relying largely on the “evidence” of discredited historian Robert Service for its inferences and speculation, concluded that Litvinenko’s murder was “probably approved” by Putin.

Pressure by the anti-Russian media to have the report published has been led by the *Guardian*, which has cited Steele and Orbis as authoritative witnesses.

Tory MP Tom Tugendhat, a former army officer, called on the government to publish the report “so that people can see the fantasy that some are claiming, and this can all go away.”

The line of attack has centred on the real links between the

“anti-Ebhnservative and Russian oligarchs. There have undeniably been close financial links. This is hardly surprising given the financial interests driving both.”

In March 2018, Marina Litvinenko called on the Tories to return money from Russian donors. Electoral Commission findings showed that guests at a secret Tory fundraising ball in 2013 donated around £5 million to the party. The ball attracted press attention because of the presence of Putin’s aide Vasily Shestakov. Shestakov said his handshake with then Prime Minister David Cameron was “to make the wheels go round.” He was made an honorary freeman of the City of London that same year.

Johnson, at that time Mayor of London, sat with Andrei Borodin, the former President of Bank of Moscow, who was facing charges of “aggravated swindling” over an alleged £220 million bank fraud. Borodin was subsequently granted political asylum in Britain.

The anti-Russian faction disingenuously targets the Tories alone for such connections. Blairite Lord Mandelson (“I’m intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich”) cultivated close links with Oleg Deripaska, whose En+, one of the world’s largest aluminium producers, was sanctioned by the White House in 2018 for its Kremlin links.

The sixth richest man in Britain in 2005, Deripaska was hardly the only Russian oligarch who moved to London with their plunder from the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union before the Tories came to power. In 2009, Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich reportedly paid £97 million for his Chelsea mansion. According to *Forbes* magazine, more than £57 billion (\$100 billion) left Russia between 1998 and 2004, much of it to London. By 2005, estate agents estimated that Russians made up a third of the buyers of multimillion-pound London properties. All of this occurred during the 1997-2010 Labour government.



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