

# UK's Johnson government looking to appoint cronies to BBC and press regulator

**Paul Bond**  
18 October 2020

Boris Johnson's Conservative government is pressing ahead with plans to appoint Thatcherite journalists to leading roles in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and press regulator Ofcom (the Office of Communications). A source close to Johnson said, "the prime minister [is] putting allies in key positions."

The moves highlight the continued lurch to the right by the British ruling class and reveal the class interests represented by the British media. The British bourgeoisie can no longer tolerate even the illusion of impartial state broadcasting it has historically cultivated at the BBC.

Next February, Sir David Clementi steps down as chairman of the BBC Board. Although the post is supposed to be advertised and open to applicants, Johnson's "preferred candidate" was announced as Charles Moore, former editor of the right-wing broadsheet the *Daily Telegraph* and a biographer of Margaret Thatcher.

When Moore withdrew from consideration, the government was reported to be looking to Robbie Gibb, a former Downing Street communications director and the brother of schools minister Nick Gibb.

Since February, the government has also reportedly been in discussion with Paul Dacre about becoming the next chairman of Ofcom. Dacre, the former editor of the *Daily Mail*, is currently on the board of *Mail* publisher Associated Newspapers.

The BBC Board was created in 2017, with Clementi as its first chair. It took over from the BBC Trust, created in 2007 by Tony Blair's Labour government to replace the Corporation's Board of Governors. The Trust was developed in response to the Hutton Inquiry into the death of United Nations weapons inspector and whistleblower, Dr David Kelly.

In 2003, Kelly was named as the source for then BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan's assertion that the government had "sexed up" its Iraq dossier to legitimise a pre-emptive war of aggression against Iraq. The furore threatened to confirm that Blair and his government were guilty of war crimes, and Kelly was found dead near his home.

The Hutton inquiry was strictly limited to the circumstances of Kelly's death to prevent any examination of the spurious case made for war. Hutton's final report exonerated the government of responsibility for Kelly's death and made the BBC responsible for disclosing the information in the first place. Establishing the Trust was part of an implementation of cuts and an overhaul of public broadcasting.

There is growing hostility within ruling circles to the BBC, the official voice of the British bourgeoisie at home and abroad. This role has required a semblance of political neutrality while always circulating the views of British capital. It was given the role in 1927, in recognition of its services to the state during the 1926 General Strike. While some Tories wanted it commandeered, General Manager John Reith (later Lord Reith) sought to use the illusion of impartiality to the same ends, writing that the government "know that they can trust us not to be really impartial."

The BBC's carefully constructed fiction of impartiality has been described by its own official historian as the invention of "modern propaganda in its British form."

Even given these restrictions, the broadcaster has been popularly seen as having a mission to be impartial, as could be seen recently from the denunciations of pro-Tory bias during the 2019 general election. Clementi has played on that. Speaking of Moore, he cautioned, "Impartiality starts at the top of the organisation... If the candidate comes from that sort of background, he or she will have to demonstrate to you that they have left those strong political views at the door."

This is no longer accepted, however. Conservative governments of the 1980s/90s, and their Thatcherite heirs in Blair's New Labour, wanted more open support for their anti-democratic and repressive measures from the BBC and less airing of dissent and criticism. Tory backbenchers called it the "Bolshevik Broadcasting Corporation," and Norman Tebbit's pursuit of the BBC over its coverage of the 1986 US bombing of Libya was so "obsessive" that Thatcher had to be advised to rein him in.

The BBC's survival as a "nationalised" state broadcaster was also unsatisfactory for free marketeers courting the private media, above all in Rupert Murdoch's global broadcasting empire. In 1982, the government even established Channel 4 as a state-owned, quasi-independent commercial rival. But this arrangement is also running its course. Channel 4 journalists have been denied interview access, as part of the government's adoption of the Trump playbook on press restriction. Culture Minister John Whittingdale recently suggested Channel 4 might be sold.

In a 2007 lecture, Dacre spoke of a "subsidiariat" of parts of the media which would not survive in the open market. He insisted that the BBC was distorting the media marketplace.

The BBC is currently funded by a licence fee, with Johnson keen to decriminalise its non-payment. In a move towards privatisation, there have been repeated calls for moving to a subscription model when the current funding arrangement expires in 2027.

Appointing reliable cronies to govern and monitor the BBC will discredit the broadcaster further. Tim Davie, recently appointed as the BBC's Director-General (DG) from a career in marketing, stood as a Conservative council candidate in Hammersmith in 1993 and 1994, and was deputy chairman of his local Conservative Party. Taking over, Davie said the BBC had "no inalienable right to exist." He opposes the subscription model but suggested axing output by up to one-fifth, cutting channels and slashing the BBC's budget.

Moore's refusing the offered position will be a disappointment to Johnson, but the fact that he was proposed is telling as to the government's general direction of travel as it seeks to "complete the Thatcher revolution." In August, when he was being approached about the BBC post, Moore was part of an orchestrated press attack on Public Health England (PHE) to blame it exclusively for the government's murderous policies during the pandemic. Its main objective was accelerating the privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS). In April he wrote a *Telegraph* op ed claiming, "The inflexibility of our lumbering NHS is why the country has had to shut down." Complaining that the NHS and PHE were reluctant "to look outside their own spheres for help," he denounced the NHS for "a culture almost proudly hostile to the private sector and mistrustful of independent academic work."

Moore has also repeatedly attacked the BBC. An opponent of the licence fee, he was fined £262 in 2010 for not having one.

The Blairite BBC Trust came under immediate attack from David Cameron's Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010, which wanted to impose management changes when the

Trust's charter ended in 2017. A 2016 review—led by Clementi—called for its replacement in order to give the BBC "no hiding place." Clementi advised that regulatory oversight be transferred to another creation of the Blair government, Ofcom.

Ofcom was formed in 2001 as a merger of regulatory bodies, primarily for the commercial regulation of newly emerging digital channels. Dacre said it represented "everything that was so sickening about the abuse of patronage" under Blair. Following the tabloid phone-hacking scandal, wider press regulation was brought under Ofcom's remit. What this meant in practice can be seen by the rapid rehabilitation of Murdoch and his empire following their whitewashing at the Leveson inquiry into phone-hacking. Companies responsible for hacking the phones of celebrities and of murder victims were given carte blanche to carry on spewing out filth.

Ofcom is now seen as a way of controlling the BBC. As Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Oliver Dowden explained, the government was looking for "a strong, big person" to hold the BBC to account.

Dacre has described the BBC as being "in every corpuscle of its corporate body, against the values of conservatism, with a small 'c,' which, I would argue, just happens to be the values held by millions of Britons." He accused it of "a kind of 'cultural Marxism' in which it tries to undermine that conservative society by turning all its values on their heads."

In 2007, he denounced Cameron's "sidelining of Thatcherism" and "banishing... all talk of lower taxes, lower immigration and Euro-scepticism" as "part of the Tories' blood sacrifice to the BBC god."

It is striking that the crisis for the BBC has coincided with the relaunch of the World Socialist Web Site. That the ruling class is now determined to destroy even the pretence of impartiality in its media confirms the real significance of the WSWs as the necessary political voice of the international working class, reporting daily on the criminal actions of British and world imperialism and the struggles of the working class, and acting as the global champion of socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**