

The *Panorama* Princess Diana interview scandal: BBC savaged as monarchy tries to put its house in order

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Revelations of malpractice by the journalist Martin Bashir to obtain a pivotal 1995 interview with Princess Diana for the BBC's flagship *Panorama* have led to outraged newspaper columns, and statements from Boris Johnson's Conservative government, Diana's sons princes William and Harry, and her brother Earl (Charles) Spencer.

The purpose of this torrent of hypocrisy is clear. For the government and the major media outlets, the BBC's embarrassment is a golden opportunity to undermine or hopefully eliminate a major commercial rival and to further consolidate the overtly right-wing, pro-Tory agenda dominating press and TV news coverage.

Of greater significance still, the Houses of Windsor and Spencer have united to try and finally extricate themselves from a crisis of Britain's monarchy that first became public with the breakdown of the marriage of Prince Charles and Diana and her tragic death in the 1990s. It has rumbled on ever since, erupting with full force once again when Prince Harry and his wife Meghan quit their royal duties in 2020 to better capitalise on their fame, then dropped a bomb on "The Firm" with March's interview with Oprah Winfrey.

The efforts to undermine the BBC are the most transparent element of this sub-Machiavellian scheme.

On May 20, the findings of an inquiry by former supreme court judge John Dyson were published, concluding that Bashir had engaged in "deceitful behaviour" to secure the 1995 interview with Diana and calling his behaviour a "serious breach" of BBC guidelines. Bashir had commissioned graphic designer Matt Wiessler, then working for the BBC, to produce fake bank statements showing payments from Rupert Murdoch's News International to a former security guard for Diana's brother, Earl Spencer. They were used to convince Earl Spencer to arrange a speedy meeting with Diana and place himself in pole position to secure the "interview of the century."

Dyson concluded that an internal investigation at the time was "flawed and woefully ineffective." He accused the BBC of having "covered up" in its press logs what it knew about how Bashir had secured the interview, and of offering "evasive responses" about it. Wiessler was made the scapegoat and was effectively blacklisted. Bashir went on to have a lucrative career, reportedly also using underhand methods while working for ITV and other

outlets in his dealings with Michael Jackson and others.

But it is the Diana interview that takes centre stage. Her bitter takedown of Charles and his mistress Camilla ("There were three of us in this marriage"), forced the queen to instruct Charles to grant her a divorce, while her appeal to be recognised as "the queen of hearts" and declaration against "The Establishment that I married into" secured a domestic audience of 23 million and won her overwhelming public support.

The interview was understood to be a serious challenge to the monarchy's authority. Diana had been adopted within ruling circles, including by the Palace, as a means of presenting royalty in a more modern garb—both glamorous and media friendly. However, this proved to be a double-edged sword with the breakdown of her marriage.

Unlike her predecessors, Diana concluded that she did not have to accept her lot and could fight back thanks to her global celebrity profile and particularly her support within the newly emerged global financial oligarchy, who viewed "The Firm" with a toxic mixture of envy for its social standing and contempt for its relative poverty compared to the nouveau-riche.

The efforts of the BBC to hide its embarrassment over Bashir during an internal investigation in 1996 have now supposedly pricked the conscience of editors, journalists and politicians whose own relationship with truth and integrity is as broken as the marriage of Charles and Diana ever was. It is a matter of record that newspapers in the UK and internationally gleefully reported every salacious detail of the sordid factional warfare that erupted between the Windsors and Diana Spencer. Yet now, the Murdoch-owned *Sun*, the most discredited of all news outlets, editorialised, "The BBC's entire editorial culture is in dire need of reform." It also commissioned the biographer of Diana and other royals, Andrew Morton, to write of how Bashir "scared [Diana] half to death" with talk of the security forces monitoring her, so she did the interview as "a deliberate act of self-preservation."

It is not hard to see why these figures are so incensed about the BBC. Politically, the *Telegraph's* Allister Heath gives the game away when he denounces the BBC's "soft-Left, technocratic bias," expressing concerns that "Left-wing audiences... have become so extreme that they somehow believe that the BBC is Tory." Putting this statement on its feet, Heath et al are so right-wing that they view the BBC's increasingly feeble attempt to

portray itself as “impartial”, a pose that has served Britain’s ruling class for decades in disseminating its propaganda, as impermissible, to the point they regularly denounce it as the “British Bolshevik Corporation”.

In addition, the BBC is denying them valuable income. On terrestrial TV, the state broadcaster easily outstrips its commercial rivals, with an audience share of 31 percent compared with 23.4 percent for ITV and 10 percent for Channel 4. Even in the world of online streaming the BBC is a force to be reckoned with. It has a global audience of 426 million a week, made up of 394 million for BBC News, plus 319 million for the BBC World Service. Its commercial arm, BBC Global News, has a 121 million-strong audience, compared with sector leader Netflix’s subscriber base of 207.64 million. The BBC recorded 5.8 billion streams throughout 2020, an increase of 31 percent.

The various right-wing pundits cannot stop themselves from making their real agenda public. The *Mail on Sunday* boasts that it first broke the Bashir story in April 1996, before insisting, “The BBC, like the medieval Church it so closely resembles, is too big, too rich and too powerful for its own good... It is free from the discipline of real business... And it is living on a licence fee designed for a vanished age when many millions of all ages and classes watched its programmes every night... We have a strong Government born out of a huge shift in public opinion, and a weak, discredited BBC rooted in the ideas of the past and in the beliefs of metropolitan liberals. There was never a better time for deep, lasting and intelligent reform.”

To this end we are being asked to accept a scenario in which Bashir is cast as a Rasputin figure, manipulating Tsarina Diana into granting an interview, poisoning her against Charles and the Windsors, and even convincing her that they were out to get her.

Of particular importance in these efforts are the statements of Diana’s family. Earl Spencer said that he “draws a line” between the interview and his older sister’s death, claiming that Bashir’s actions led her to give up her royal security detail. Prince Harry echoed this claim, stating that “Our mother lost her life because of this.”

As heir to the throne after Charles, it is Prince William who made by far the most significant statement. The BBC, he said, “made lurid and false claims about the Royal Family which played on her fear, paranoia and isolation that I remember from those final years with her.” The interview “established a false narrative” and “was a major contribution to making my parents’ relationship worse,” with Bashir’s lies in securing the interview having supposedly “substantially influenced what my mother said.”

None of this stands up to the slightest scrutiny. The security detail claim is a lie, as she had rejected police protection as early as December 1993. Moreover, Charles and Diana’s marriage and her relations with his family had irrevocably broken down long before Bashir entered the picture. She no longer trusted them, believed they were seeking to discredit her and was anxious to mount a counterattack.

Diana had worked with Morton on his 1992 biography, *Diana: Her True Story*, to rubbish Charles et al, so that two years later Charles beat Diana to the punch, telling the BBC’s Jonathan Dimbleby of his affair with Camilla. She desperately wanted a

media platform from which to strike back. Sir Max Hastings, the former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Evening Standard*, last year reported that she had approached him to write several articles during a nearly two-hour long meeting three months before Bashir’s interview. She had asked him if he had heard anything about a “conspiracy” to have her “put down”, said she “hated” Charles, who was not fit to be king, and was “terribly anxious for my side of this to come out”. She was particularly concerned about Prince William’s succession to the throne, with Hastings admitting, “She said to me quite explicitly, ‘I don’t think Charles can do it.’ The outcome she wanted to see was for Charles to stand aside as heir to the throne and for William to occupy the throne.”

That was the conflict that continued and made Diana a subject of intense media interest until the very moment of her death on August 31, 1997, when her car crashed in Paris as her driver tried to evade the paparazzi in hot pursuit. And no one was more invested in this factional brouhaha than Earl Spencer, who used his funeral oration to declare Diane to be “the most hunted person of the modern age”, and pledged to protect “her beloved boys William and Harry from a similar fate” on behalf of Diana’s “blood family” and to “do all we can to continue the imaginative way in which you were steering these two exceptional young men so that their souls are not simply immersed by duty and tradition...”

Today, it is no longer a question of protecting the “two exceptional young men” from the heartless representatives of “duty and tradition,” but of making sure that William has something to inherit after the death of the queen and whatever short rein is afforded to Charles. Hence, we have Earl Spencer fully on board with the demonisation of Bashir, and William publicly and unreservedly siding with his father and the Windsors.

Harry is still bitterly emphasising the mistreatment of his mother and declaring that both his family and the media did the same hatchet job on his wife, Meghan. William in contrast now makes the extraordinary statement that his mother was paranoid and that this was the reason she believed the “false narrative” that drove a wedge between her, Charles and the Palace. His was the statement of a king-in-waiting, someone who knows which side their bread is buttered and has already publicly broken with Harry to the same end.

The monarchy is an institution so rotten that it devours its own representatives, killing them spiritually and morally even if their lives are lived long in comfort and splendour. The latest episode in the Windsor saga is far filthier than anything that can be expected from the next series of Netflix’s *The Crown*. It is further proof of the need to put an end to this archaic institutional embodiment of hereditary privilege and imperialist plunder once and for all.



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