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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Robert Stevens
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UK: Johnson uses Trump's playbook in attack on media

Boris Johnson's government is moving to clamp down on any independent scrutiny by the media, in moves that deliberately ape the administration of US President Donald Trump. On Monday, Johnson's chief spin doctor, senior "communications adviser" Lee Cain, excluded political reporters from the *Daily Mirror*, the *Independent*, the *i*, *HuffPost*, *PoliticsHome*, and others from an official government briefing at 10 Downing Street. In response, journalists from those outlets who were to be permitted to attend the briefing—the BBC, ITV, Sky News, *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian*—walked out in protest.

The events on Monday were more reminiscent of a tin pot dictatorship than that of an elected government.

The government had issued an invitation to a small number of invite only journalists for a "No10 technical background briefing" on the UK's "future relationship" with the European Union. This was to be given by Johnson's Brexit adviser David Frost to update the media on the government's stance regarding the EU and its negotiating position. Frost's position as an adviser, according to a report on *PoliticsHome*, is "supposed to be neutral, not political."

Several journalists from other media organisations previously invited to such briefings also showed up. According to various reports, after entering Downing Street the invited journalists were told to line up in the foyer on one side of a rug. Those not being allowed in were asked to stand on the other side. The barred journalists were then told by Cain to leave.

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Daily Mirror political editor Pippa Crerar said, “It was deeply uncomfortable being on one side of the room ... they were the group who were deemed ‘acceptable’ by Number 10. It was sinister and sad.”

The government claimed later that all accredited journalists had attended a normal briefing after Johnson’s speech on Brexit earlier that day and that the briefing with Frost was to be a “smaller, selected briefing for specialist senior journalists.”

The *Guardian* cited a “senior Number 10 source” who said, “a number of uninvited journalists barged into No 10 and demanded to be part of it,” but were told they could not attend.

This is a falsification. No one can “barge into” 10 Downing Street as it is guarded by gates from Whitehall and all entering must be strictly vetted and have security clearance.

Describing the events, senior political reporter Paul Waugh from the *Huffington Post* wrote, “The briefing was set to be conducted by the PM’s lead Brexit negotiator David Frost in Downing Street itself. Paid for by the taxpayer, he is obliged to behave in a neutral manner.

“But when political editors from other newspapers and websites arrived with their colleagues, they were split up by a security guard into two groups in the foyer of No.10, directly behind its famous black door.”

When Cain was asked directly “what grounds he had for selectively briefing to some political editors and not others,” he replied, “We’re welcome to brief whoever we like, whenever we like.”

“After he was challenged again to give reasons, Cain lost his temper as the entire group said that they were walking out as one and would not agree to a briefing on such divisive terms.”

Waugh noted that “The incident was the second within a week when Cain had decided to hold a special briefing for selected political editors, while excluding key media such as the *i* newspaper, the *Mirror*, the *Independent*, *PA Media*, *HuffPost UK* and *PoliticsHome*. Last week, he organised a similar ‘technical briefing’ with senior intelligence chiefs and FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and DCMS [Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport] civil servants on the Huawei decision being made by the government.”

The Johnson government is no longer cooperating with a substantial section of the media. Ministers are banned from appearing on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme and are also

boycotting ITV's *Good Morning Britain*. Since the election ministers have refused to appear on the *Channel 4* network.

Instead, a select number of politically vetted “journalists” are to be welcomed on the proviso that they dutifully disseminate the government’s propaganda. Among these are representatives of pro-Tory organisations such as Buzzfeed and Guido Fawkes. Buzzfeed reporter Alex Wickham wrote that it was common knowledge that there was an “inner” and “outer” lobby regarding government briefings.

Wickham played a critical role in publishing claims, as Forbes reported, that “ignited the Labour party’s ongoing anti-Semitism crisis.”

As soon as Johnson won his landslide election victory, he and his chief adviser Dominic Cummings moved to clamp down on media scrutiny. Instead of press briefings being held twice daily in the House of Commons, they were moved to 9 Downing Street. *Independent* newspaper journalist of 21 years Andrew Grice noted, “This makes it hard for media organisations with small staffs to attend and led to protests from the Society of Editors. ... As well as making it harder for the media to question the government, the move raised fears that No 10 would soon herd the journalists into sheep and goats, excluding those who do not toe the line from briefings on its home ground.”

Reports reveal that Cummings has even set up a “network of spies” around Westminster to find out whether government special advisers were discussing the media.

The Johnson government is genuinely fearful of even the mildest critical reporting, at a time when it is intent on boasting of how it is “getting Brexit done.” There is, in addition, the political calculation on Johnson’s part that an open attack on the “left press” plays very well politically in his right-wing support base, just as do his latest attacks on the UK’s state broadcaster, the BBC, including threats to make paying the licence fee voluntary. It has the same character as Trump’s set-piece “fake news” confrontations with sections of the US media.

But it is also a measure of the rottenness of the media that even his designated enemies are so devoid of a genuinely oppositional approach—the *Mirror* was chosen as the only tabloid that backs Labour, the *Independent* and the *i* for being pro-Remain, for example. The *Guardian*, the toothless voice of English liberalism, was considered safe to include as proof of a lack of political bias on Johnson’s part.

As for those who were forced to protest the exclusion of their colleagues, those deemed fit to attend the technical briefing included the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg (a hate-figure for

many due to her obvious Tory bias), ITV's Robert Peston and the pro-Brexit *Daily Mail*. Also invited were representatives from Sky, the *Times* and *Sun*—owned by billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Having been forced to “take a stand” against Johnson on Monday, they all returned to their usual role of pliant mouthpieces for the ruling class as soon as they left Downing Street.

It must be added that their outrage at the infringing of press freedoms by Johnson does not extend to any expression of outrage at the treatment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, imprisoned just an hour away in Belmarsh maximum security prison.

Assange faces extradition to the United States on espionage charges carrying a life sentence and a possible death penalty. But unlike the indignity of being asked to stand on the wrong side of a rug, the brutal treatment of a heroic journalist and frontal assault on press freedoms with chilling implications for the world's media have prompted no individual protest, let alone collective opposition, from those excluded by Johnson on Monday or their stalwart defenders.

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