

Grassroots for Europe Round Table #17 – 20 July 2021

Summary Report

Topic: The Assault on Truth, Checks and Balances - How to Fight Back

Peter Osborne, Author, *“Assault on Truth - Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the emergence of a new moral barbarism”* and *“The Rise of Political Lying - The Triumph of the Political Class”*

- Looked at historically there was very little verifiable lying by PMs: Thatcher twice (Belgrano definitely and Westland probably). Under Blair’s premiership the Iraq War started serious political lying, but after that there was a lull until Brexit.
- Johnson’s epic scale of lying is at a ‘new’ level (300-400 verifiable lies already). (Trumpist dislocation between statement and reality). Osborne is creating a website to document them and is crowdfunding to support this initiative.
- Our political system has no mechanism for controlling lies with an unwritten constitution. Parliamentary Standards watchdogs are ineffectual because they are currently controlled by Downing St. BBC protects PM and the cabinet and is incapable of using the word “lie”.
- It is assumed that mainstream politicians act in good faith. Downing St. power is protected by majority of the press, which is part of the machinery of deception. So, Johnson’s lying cannot become a mainstream issue.
- Peter liked the term 'democratic crisis' – thinks the answer is that unfortunately the circumstances needed to crack open Brexiters' false versions of reality might have to be so catastrophic that one would wish to avoid them.
- **How to fight back against this collapse of morality at the highest levels?**
 - Embarrass MPs, write to them when they or ministers in their parties tell lies, hold them to account.
 - Use local press if MPs do not respond.
 - Challenge and pressurise the Speaker: letter writing campaigns do work.
 - Challenge and shame the Leader of the Opposition, who wants to be part of the Establishment but in doing so protects the PM. Compare with Peter Stefanovic, of Communications Workers Union – he is an excellent voice that aims to challenge.
 - Write to Labour MPs and ask why Starmer is not joining with Caroline Lucas and Ed Davey and others to criticise government’s lies?

Hardeep Matharu, Journalist and Editor, *The Byline Times*

- Public lying requires local activists, campaigners, politicians, and journalists to work together to compile evidence and challenge government on its behaviour.

- Hardeep has contributed to the understanding of the concept of ‘hyper normalisation’ of lying. The idea is from Soviet Russia and is briefly described as a politician telling a lie, the audience knowing it’s a lie, and the politician knowing that the audience know that he is lying.
- It is very important to challenge these lies by politicians. Otherwise, the public becomes disempowered and disengaged. One of the difficulties in upholding standards arises from a British constitution which is both uncoded and unwritten. It works on the assumption that only “good chaps” will be in power. Johnson has long since undermined the basis of the rules and caused an affront to decency.
- To challenge the assault on truth, there has to be a rigorous focus on facts and evidence. Byline Times’ focus is on research, evidence gathering and reporting. This approach means not always following the media news cycles. And being able to use freedom of information requests and analysis statistics are important tools. Its approach is to give people agency, not to tell people what to think or believe, but to provide them with facts and evidence, allowing them to draw their own conclusions.
- The relationship that matters is the one between the big newspapers and the people in positions of power, particularly in this current government. There is a symbiotic relationship which is extremely unhealthy. It's an establishment media. It's part of the establishment, which is the irony because journalism at its best is supposed to sit outside of the political system, scrutinise it and hold it to account. But that doesn't happen at all. So, I think that it is really fantastic to see a burgeoning independent sector. But until the structural issues around the hold the press have in this country, on people in positions of power (not just politicians) until these things are really understood and looked at (Levison 2 was going to do) that position of power is not going to diminish, it will always be up there for taking.
- Social media is a key tool of dissemination. In addition, enabling mainstream news outlets to pick up stories from Byline Times to give them a wider audience.
- Collaboration is important. Through collaboration with the Good Law Project and others, it was possible to bring the scandal on PPE procurement to public attention. Pooling of expertise and different skills was helpful in raising the subject up the political agenda. Similar collaborations may be possible on other significant topics. Open Democracy has already completed a lot of good work including on Tory Party funding.
- Byline Times is currently running a Crowdfunding initiative to raise monies to support the creation of a new “research team”. There are further areas that require more research and campaigning.