

The Fifth George Lansbury

Memorial Lecture

THE MEDIA AND POLITICS

Thursday 23 November 2017

DAILY HERALD, NOVEMBER 16, 1935
DON'T FORGET TO ASK FOR
CHEDLET
CHEESE & CELERY
TASTY ON TOAST
SOLD IN JARS 3^d. & UPWARDS
Wholesale by Anglo-Siam, Ltd., Westbury, Wilt.

Daily Herald

No. 6164

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1935

**LABOUR GAINS NEARLY
100 SEATS: NOW HAS 152 M.P.**

**Poll Up 1,782,297: Highest
In History: Tory Vote
Down 1,559,521**

**BIG ARRAY OF FRONT
BENCH MEN RETURN**



Kevin Maguire

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THE MEDIA AND POLITICS

The People's Palace, Queen Mary University

23 November 2017

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The Media and Politics

Good evening. It's a pleasure and tremendous honour to be here with you tonight and to follow in the footsteps of Jon Cruddas, Ken Loach, Rowan Williams and Janine Booth by giving the George Lansbury Memorial Lecture in the legend's East London stamping ground.

Lansbury was a truly remarkable man, flawed like us all, but remarkable. A Labour leader of such heroic commitment and unbending beliefs that – fast forward to today – and it could be argued, he leaves Jeremy Corbyn appearing a bit of a sail-trimming, compromising Blairite. I jest, of course, before anybody walks out in protest.

But oh for a Tardis to fly back to Lansbury or to retrieve him and bring Lansbury to our 2017 for a chat. It would be fascinating to listen to Corbyn and Lansbury discuss enduring causes such as fighting poverty, insecurity and inequality as well as modern challenges, including Brexit with all its baggage.

Who knows – stick in a room two of the most Left-wing leaders in Labour's 117-year history and there's a possibility they'd emerge largely in agreement as George Corbyn and Jeremy Lansbury though most intriguing would be the issues over which they disagreed.

Comparing political figures from very different eras may be fun for anoraks like me but the blunt judgements required automatically render it a highly subjective game of frequently dubious value – not that that stops some of us playing the game, for good or ill.

In delivering the 2017 memorial lecture I intend to be unashamedly conversational, and I'm looking forward to tonight's Q&A when we share the collective wisdom in the room. I seek to treat Lansbury not merely as a dusty socialist to be revered for his life and work at the back end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century but as a figure whose echo from history retains a relevance in the 21st – via his rare ability to inspire both by word and deed.

As a politician and social reformer, Lansbury had an extraordinary number of public lives and at moments it's difficult to believe he was a single individual.

I encountered one of his lives only the other week in Parliament. On the hunt for informed, loquacious Labour and Conservative MPs to

spill the beans I strode into Portcullis House, a modern glass atrium with its exorbitantly expensive Private Finance Initiative fig trees and subsidised coffee, to be met by a photograph of Lansbury. He was in an exhibition celebrating the 1912 by-election he triggered in the Bow and Bromley seat in Parliament he'd won two years earlier.

Hailed as a 'suffragette in trousers' for unstinting faith in the righteousness of votes for women as well as every man – about half the British Tommys mown down or blown to pieces fighting for King and Country in the First World War were voteless too. All the German soldiers, incidentally, were enfranchised – the exhibition in Portcullis House recorded how Lansbury, frustrated at the Labour Party's failure to share his enthusiasm for votes-for-all, quit to seek re-election as a women's suffrage candidate. He lost, alas, in a heroic defeat and wasn't to find his way back to Parliament until 1922.

Lansbury's probably and legitimately most famous for the stirring Poplar rates revolt of 1921 but as a journalist on the Left of British politics I'm particularly drawn to Lansbury as a socialist press baron, a newspaper founder and editor, so it is in that guise I resurrect him tonight to discuss the media and politics, two combustible subjects which when mixed are as unstable and explosive as nitroglycerine. With occasionally similarly destructive results.

The *Daily Herald's* now dimly remembered if it is remembered at all, asserted the late Ken Coates, as a forerunner of a disgraceful *Sun*. The Labour MEP and campaigner for peace and workers' control didn't intend his statement to be condemnatory and was actually attempting to rescue the paper from what he considered an unfair, dishonoured obscurity. I did and do consider his judgement unduly harsh and unfair, indeed inaccurate, when so many recall or learn of its existence with a touch of envy, though the sale of the paper to Rupert Murdoch in 1969 by the suits who owned the *Daily Mirror*, having taken possession of the *Herald* from the labour movement and changed its name to *The Sun*, was indeed grotesque – a grotesque error.

Lansbury's *Herald* was born in 1911 as a daily strike bulletin when the London Society of Compositors – printers – embarked on industrial action in search of a 48 hours working week. Within a couple of years Lansbury, powered by his trademark energy and drive, was its editor – sitting in the hot seat from October 1913 until September 1922 – and

fought an unceasing battle to keep alive a publication never far from insolvency – going weekly during the First World War then resuming daily publication – before he was instrumental in passing it on to become, as Lansbury described it himself, the property of the labour and socialist movement in September 1922 by transferring all of the shares, including the stakes of his middle-class friends, in the Victoria House Printing Company which owned paper to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party.

In *The Miracle of Fleet Street*, his pacy account of the *Herald* written and published in 1925, the politician editor recounts early examples to keep it going of what we'd now label crowd funding.

- One woman reader sent it her jewels: 'Sell them or pawn them, but do not let the *Herald* die,' she said.
- Her sacrifice was perhaps exceeded by the man who exclaimed: 'Let the landlord go hang for his rent. I am sending it to you.'
- The grafter risking homelessness was restrained compared with another donor: 'I have 10 bairns,' he said, 'but I would almost sooner lose one than lose the *Daily Herald*.' Note the qualifying 'almost' in that father's sacrificial declaration.

An editorial in the *Herald* itself asked: 'Men and women who can ill afford it send £5 notes, and then a host of enthusiasts send shillings and half-crowns and half-sovereigns. They say with one voice, '*The Herald* shall never die'. Would this be done for a Liberal newspaper? Would it be done for a Tory newspaper? Not likely.'

Not likely indeed but there was no need when in recent centuries there has been no shortage of the super-rich prepared to make often fat profits while pushing a neoliberal agenda which fits very nicely into their bulging pockets. I suspect it was no coincidence a *Daily Telegraph* owned by tax haven twins, David and Frederick Barclay, devoted relatively few column inches to the murky goings-on exposed in the recent leak of the Parasite Papers except when contorted editorial gymnastics allowed the *Torygraph* to twist the files against Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party.

Lansbury attracted a library of fine writers onto his pages with H G Wells, GK Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw and Hilaire Belloc appearing

alongside the reports of jobbing hacks. The politician editor championed with gusto strikers, socialists, rebels, militant suffragettes and Bolsheviks – although the mercurial Lansbury subsequently admitted in what sounded like a boast: ‘I told Lenin,’ wrote Lansbury, ‘that the Bolshevik doctrine of discipline was abhorrent to me!’ History shows Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov didn’t take it to heart.

In every confrontation he knew whose side he and the paper was on. Unstintingly it was with the workers in any dispute. Lansbury wasn’t afraid to be provocative. Urging British transport workers not to handle goods shipped from a strike-hit Dublin in what became a campaign to free the jailed union leader Jim Larkin, the *Herald* headline ‘You can do without beer and biscuits.’ didn’t mince instructions. Lansbury had to do without himself, an unfortunate libel in the reports costing the paper several hundred pounds it couldn’t afford.

I love his and the paper’s commitment and ingenuity. The paper organised mass rallies of readers in London’s Albert Hall. As many as 30,000, yes 30,000, applied for tickets to a November 1918 gathering in a venue said to hold ‘10,000 at a sardine pinch’. Four days before the management, with the suspected connivance of Lloyd George, a Prime Minister spooked by a labour movement growing in strength, cancelled the booking.

Lansbury recounted with glee how when the management refused to budge, the Electrical Trades Union persuaded the manager of the local power station to let them remove the fuses lighting the Albert Hall or they’d black out the whole of Kensington. After a concert of the Royal Choral Society took place in virtual darkness, the Albert Hall backed down and fulfilled its obligation.

The ‘suffragette in trousers’ used the *Herald* to promote what he and it believed to be just causes. The paper faced heavy flak for resisting the crude nationalism and jingoism of the Great War, Lansbury’s pacifism as you know failing to halt a bloody imperial conflict. And the *Herald* backed the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, despite his misgivings about Leninism and democratic centralism.

I revisit some of Lansbury’s greatest hits to illustrate how politics and the media have always been bedfellows. Not always as overlapping as Lansbury, never confined merely to a single wing of politics and sometimes uncomfortable bedmates.

An architect of the growth and income-sapping austerity of recent years, George Osborne, is a wayward child of the Lansbury politician editor school in the discarded Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer's reincarnation as editor of *London's Evening Standard*. Ordering critical front page headlines to settle scores with his nemesis Theresa May, the psycho vowing not to stop until she's cut up into little pieces and bagged in his freezer which, I confess, I, as no natural May fan, believe Osborne is deranged, would've turned on a sixpence had May given him a post before he quit Parliament.

Most national newspapers represent, or believe they represent, a constituency of their own. Let me recall an episode first broadcast in December 1987 of *Yes, Prime Minister* – a compelling political satire written by Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn which survives the ravages of time and remains relevant.

From memory the episode, called 'A Conflict of Interest', is essentially Paul Eddington's Prime Minister, Jim Hacker, moaning about his unpopularity in the national prints as his permanent secretary, Nigel Hawthorne's conniving permanent secretary Sir Humphrey Appleby, plots against appointing a Mr Clean as governor of the Bank of England in the hope damaging scandals will remain uncovered.

The scene I quote touches on the perceived objectivity, morality and fairness – or lack of it – of newspapers.

Sir Humphrey loftily informs the Prime Minister: 'The only way to understand the Press is to remember that they pander to their readers' prejudices.'

Jim Hacker's instant response is worth watching online – it's there, lurking somewhere. Or you can always wait for the 257th repeat on Gold or another of the channels showing old favourites. *The Likely Lads* will return, if they ever went away, now Bob, Rodney Bewes, is dead. But I digress.

Jim Hacker exclaims:

'Don't tell me about the Press. I know EXACTLY who reads the papers. The *Daily Mirror* is read by the people who think they run the country. The *Guardian* is read by people who think they OUGHT to run the country. The *Times* is read by the people who actually DO run the country. The *Daily Mail* is read by the wives

of the people who run the country. The *Financial Times* is read by people who OWN the country. The *Morning Star* is read by people who think the country ought to be run by ANOTHER country. The *Daily Telegraph* is read by the people who think IT IS.'

'Prime Minister,' [interrupts Sir Humphrey,] 'what about the people who read *The Sun*?'

'*Sun* readers,' [jumps in Derek Fowlds' Bernard Woolley,] the private secretary, '*Sun* readers don't care WHO runs the country – as long as she's got big !!!'

That's a tad unfair on *Sun* readers, particularly since Page 3 topless models were consigned to the dustbin of Rupert Murdoch's history.

The skit was a sweeping generalisation of the sort that frequently appears in the columns of, err, newspapers.

Yet every successful newspaper, plus every successful news magazine, every successful TV news or politics show, every successful Radio programme whether *Today* on Radio 4 or Jon Pienaar's engaging Radio 5 listen on Sunday mornings, and I'd suggest every successful news website from BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post to Guido Fawkes and Skwarkbox, projects its own distinctive world view and voice.

In my view the problem in Britain isn't that papers are politically committed but that the bias of ownership tilts the balance too far to the Right.

I'm still mourning the loss of the print editions of *The Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, two papers which took their places in the newsroom museum. I miss the gutsy journalism of that pair of liberal voices in what is predominantly a – in the words of Ken Clarke, a Minister in the Conservative Governments of Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major and David Cameron – a 'Tory press'

In a Hugh Cudlipp lecture a few years ago I lamented how the ultimate fate of the *Independent* titles was sealed when hereditary press baron Evgeny Lebedev agreed to sell their money-making mini-me, *The I*, to Johnson Press which has a faith in print

The younger Lebedev prefers socialising to the journalism I adore. The *Daily Mail* carried a compelling account by columnist Sarah Vine, significant other of Michael Gove who gave up the noble trade of hackery for politics, in which Vine recounted an evening when Gove and Boris

Johnson debated quitting Europe with a third Tory Cabinet Minister, Oliver Letwin who put across – unsuccessfully, as it transpired – the counter argument over a speaker phone.

Lebedev, who was present, appeared far more interested in the aroma of a slow-roasted shoulder of lamb for dinner. Perhaps, had Liz Hurley turned up as planned, Lebedev would've paid more attention to who said what and informed readers who as voters had a right to know.

The BBC and broadcasters operate under an impartiality regime intended to create balance but do not tell me that a Beeb I regard as a jewel not just in Britain's journalism crown but also in our public life, do not tell me that the BBC doesn't have its own political leanings towards conformity and orthodoxy. The Centre is as much a political position as the Left or the Right. Automatically justifying and defending a policy or institution is a political act. Away from political parties and competing ideologies, for the BBC to tug one's forelock to the Royal Family as it often does may be viewed by some – I accept probably the majority – of viewers as acceptable respect but for others – I accept almost certainly a minority, myself included – it is to give unearned wealth and power a varnish of legitimacy.

This isn't about individuals, and as we discuss politics and the media I here and now deplore the stalking of the BBC's excellent political editor Laura Kuenssberg by malcontents and click-bait websites unfit to clean her microphone.

But I was struck by a candid admission from Nick Robinson, Kuenssberg's predecessor and now a presenter on Radio 4's *Today* programme, in an inaugural Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture earlier this year to celebrate a broadcaster who moved many of us to tears as he lived out his cancer on the airways in a matter-of-fact, if heartbreaking, series of two-ways with Eddie Mair.

I'll let the thoughtful Robinson, who beat his cancer, explain in his own words how broadcasters risk being trapped in conformity and therefore run the danger of missing the development of political movements as he answered criticism that the BBC was, or is, anti-Jeremy Corbyn.

I was interviewed by Lyn Barber soon after he,' – that's Corbyn – 'after he became leader and whilst I was unwell and off work. She wrote in the *Sunday Times*:

'Was Robinson as shocked as I was by the way the BBC (and other media) rubbished Jeremy Corbyn?'

'Yes' I apparently replied – though I blame the chemotherapy I was then taking for my lack of normal caution – before adding 'Although I was off work, I did drop a note to a few people after his first weekend saying this is really interesting and we owe it to the audience to sound as if we're interested',

As Nick Robinson would tell you, they're certainly interested now.

Robinson continued in his account of the interview:

My point then was not that my colleagues weren't treating him fairly. They were quite properly reporting on the widespread opposition he faced in his own shadow Cabinet and the Parliamentary Labour Party. My point was that the ideas that made Corbyn popular – whether scrapping Trident or renationalisation – should be examined and interrogated in their own right and not simply as a cause of rows or splits.

Corbyn was wrongly dismissed as soon as he was elected leader in 2015. Ken Clarke's Tory press was the worst offender, as you might expect, with several corrections secured after the damage was done by disingenuous assertions he is unpatriotic, wants to abolish the Army and supports terrorism. The misrepresentations were shameful. Corrections secured after the damage was done, among them a false statement on a front page that he would bow to the Queen to secure opposition Short money for Labour, were poor compensation.

Yet the last election was evidence of a decisive shift in the influence of traditional journalism on politics and voters, a move in the balance of power which is both good and bad.

The European Union referendum with its narrow, in my view calamitous, 52-48 result in favour of Brexit may prove to have been the last hurrah of Tony Blair's 'feral beasts'.

The barrage of abuse fired at Ed Miliband by the *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph* outgunned the *Mirror* and more cautious *Guardian*. It wasn't

just bacon sandwiches and 'Odd Ed' smiles at the election. It was day in, day out for years. And sensible, common sense policies he espoused – fuel bills and land banking spring to mind – were ridiculed as Marxist and Communist before the same papers decided they were a jolly good thing when adopted by the Conservative Party.

And the political poison isn't restricted to the newspapers involved when TV and Radio follows a print agenda, heavily influenced by what is read. As every spin doctor knows, if you want to get a story on that morning's TV and radio shows then get it on the front of a newspaper.

The Tory press helped deliver a surprise Tory majority for David Cameron in 2015 then cost him his Premiership by turning on their puppet like a pack of wild dogs during the EU referendum. Hunted by his hunters, Cameron was ripped shreds and his case shredded by the same *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph* that a year earlier had returned him to Downing Street with a narrow Conservative majority.

Immigration was the motor behind Brexit. For years, decades, the Tory papers ran scare stories and demonised newcomers. They'd claim there was a conspiracy against talking about migration, missing the irony that they – the biggest selling newspapers in the land – talked about little else. Almost always negatively, frequently inaccurately. Islamophobia is merely the latest face of prolonged prejudice.

Chuck in the hostile caricaturing of the European Union for what feels like a lifetime, Boris Johnson often a casual stranger to the truth, devoting to the duties of Foreign Secretary the commitment he gave in his marriage vows, an early source of Fake News as the *Daily Telegraph's* Brussels correspondent.

Broadcasters acknowledge their prized commitment to impartiality didn't well serve the truth in a two-horse race. The debate on climate change is skewed towards the tiny minority of scientists who refuse to accept it is people-made by giving them equalling billing with the overwhelming majority who demonstrate 7.6-billion humans make a difference, so too it often was on Brexit.

No wonder Michael Gove is dismissive of experts when he needed to scrape the bottom of a very deep barrel to find any in agreement. Impartiality and balance were not well served when, as I heard one morning on waking up, a radio report of scores of acclaimed economists warning – as is coming to pass – that Brexit would damage the economy

to be immediately followed by a spokesman by the Leave camp dismissing it with a Project Fear reflex.

I'll wring my hands and admit I possess no easy answer to the balance question just raised. Maybe there isn't one. But I throw it out there. Hurl back your ideas. Or abuse.

The election in June mapped the new limits of the Tory press and perhaps broadcasters also in what may be, when we peer back with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, the first digital election.

That Corbyn had the confidence at Labour's Brighton conference in September to call out Paul Dacre, editor of a *Daily Mail* that remains the country's most feared newspaper and arguably the most influential, had the feel of a significant political moment.

To the end of his days, Michael Foot referred to the *Mail* as the 'Forgers' Gazette'. Blair, Brown and Miliband – even after it dared challenge the patriotism of his refugee father who fought in the Royal Navy against Nazis the paper had lauded before the war – reached out in a desperate bid for compromise, hoping to rub a few rough edges off hostile coverage.

Corbyn's having none of that and the reason isn't just his personality and politics. It's because he defied them at the election and didn't suffer, or suffered minimally. And the main reason is he's bypassed them with the rise of social media.

ITV political editor Robert Peston regurgitated the phenomenal figures in a recent edition of *The Spectator* magazine in a piece headlined 'Corbyn 2.0'.

Corbyn has 1.4m Facebook and 1.6m Twitter followers. He is able to communicate with directly, any time he wants and never through the prism of hostile media. The comparative stats for Theresa May, by the way, are 540,000 and 411,000.

During the first week of June alone the party's Corbyn videos were watched 24m times on the web.

As the ITV political editor put it: 'What matters perhaps most is that a majority of us mistrust the established media, and instinctively place greater trust in what friends or contacts share with us on Facebook and Twitter. The act of sharing is a personal endorsement, which lends an

article or video greater credibility. Throughout this year's election, this massively helped Labour.'

As it did on the opposite end of the political spectrum the year before in the US where Donald Trump exploited Silicon Valley's thirst for a fast buck to trounce Hillary Clinton in a cyberwar – with a little help from his Russian friends – while she was still pouring money into TV ads few were impressed by.

I console myself that Clinton beat Trump by nearly 3m votes and the electoral college he'd denounced as a danger to democracy duly confirmed that warning by giving him the keys to the White House and the codes to nuclear weapons.

Trump rising on social media is a challenge to new and old media alike in how politics is covered. Replacing editors with algorithms designed, let's be honest, to maximise the profits of the speculators investing in the Facebooks and Googles of this world. isn't an improvement on what went before.

WTF, OMG and LOL or an emoji isn't an advancement in the quality of our discourse.

Nor is Trump dismissing verifiable truth with a 'Fake News', contempt for evidence: this is the hallmark of dictators down the ages.

Thankfully *The New York Times* is doing fabulously on the back of his hysterical denunciations, in terms of subscriptions too. He's also unwittingly good for CNN.

I read many of the alternative media sites, including The Canary – imperfect and a work in progress which shouldn't be banned from Westminster, as Damian Collins the chair of the Culture Committee advocates – and the likes of the Scot Nat-tastic Wings over Scotland but you'll need to work hard to convince me it is positive that a sizable audience receives its political news only from partisan sites affirming rather than informing.

Replacing the old Fake News with new Fake News is another problem, not an answer.

To that end I'm relieved we have Sky not Fox News in Britain.

Reporting verifiable political truth must be the goal. In politics there are many versions of the truth, facts capable of interpretation and I'll return to that in a moment.

I accept my experience is generationally different to the 16-to-24 year

olds who watch less than 30 minutes TV news a week, according to Ofcom, or the third who look at their smart phones on the toilet rather than reading a newspaper.

I grew up reading the *Daily Mirror*, on and off the toilet.

I'm proud to have worked as a journalist on the *Western Morning News*, *New Civil Engineer*, Press Association news agency, *Daily Telegraph* – it wouldn't hire me now, different paper then – *Guardian* and the *Mirror*.

Political journalists require a nose for news. The ability to speak and listen to people. A flair for getting to the nub of any issue. Composure under pressure. Accuracy. Sensitivity and a thick skin. Dedication. Determination. Hard work. And a sense of humour comes in handy, especially when it all goes pear shaped.

In my view it's hard to better the judgement of *Sunday Times* correspondent Nicholas Tomalin, killed on an assignment in the Golan Heights in 1973. He'd written in that paper's magazine:

The only qualities essential for real success in journalism are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner, and a little literary ability.

Professor Emily Bell at the Columbia Journalism School notes the unpredictability of the age:

Never before in the history of journalism has the power and reach of a small number of players had such a decisive effect on a market, and never before have we known so little about its operation.

I endorse Emily's call for what she hopes will be 'an open and collaborative dialogue' between journalists – us – and the social media companies or, as she probably correctly described them, 'the new masters of the information universe'.

Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and the rest redirected how tens of millions of people in Britain get their news. I watch readers on buses and trains and in pubs and cafes or at football matches – all hypnotised by their mobile phones. I do it myself. I'm one of them! The period most people switched on a desktop computer or laptop to read the headlines, or find the sports results, was short and sweet. Mobiles, hand-held computers packed with technology vastly

superior to that used by NASA to put men on the moon, shot from almost nowhere at breakneck speed to be one of our most important windows into the world.

If people want their news on phones, as journalists it would be smart to provide it. In the social media jungle, I firmly believe journalism retains a unique capacity to help readers, listeners and viewers make sense of the cacophony in the modern Tower of Babel – when we win and retain people's trust.

Newspapers, TV, Radio, Web journalists are all in this together. Never in the history of journalism have so many of us produced so many stories with so few people paying for them. With many newspapers, you either buy a copy or are able to access most, or the entire content, online. For free. If only supermarkets and electricity companies would deliver groceries and power to our homes at the same zero price.

I yearn for papers to be nurtured and nourished. Print has a future. Not just in papers. Look at the success of magazines. *Private Eye*, responding to the rise of the web by largely staying off it, thrives. *The Economist*, *The Spectator* and a *New Statesman* I write for – all prominent on the web – prosper too.

The Leveson inquiry was David Cameron's answer to a newspaper telephone hacking scandal which led directly into his Downing Street in the shape of Andy Coulson, the former *News of the World* editor employed to be the Bullingdon Boy's bit of rough, a spokesman with one foot in the real world, who spent a stretch inside Belmarsh at Her Majesty's Displeasure.

The inquiry was painful for many journalists and expensive. It was also, I'd argue, cathartic. Many of us discovered a seedy past we were ignorant of, outed as innocents. It also confirmed what those of us who write about politics knew, or thought we knew. And that was the unhealthy relationship between in particular Rupert Murdoch and his editors...and No 10.

I popped along to the Royal Courts of Justice to watch sessions. For Murdoch it was about power. For David Cameron, and Prime Ministers before him, it was about power. Neil Kinnock was destroyed by *The Sun* and Kelvin Mackenzie in the days that paper sold 4m+ copies a day and was formidably influential. Tony Blair made a pact with devil and trimmed policies to curry favour. Gordon Brown to an extent too.

The pally country suppers between Cameron and Rebekah Brooks in the Chipping Norton Set were the erasure of a line between the media and politics that operated against the public interest if in favour of News Corp commercial interests and the electoral interests of the Tory Party.

Ken Clarke tells an incredible story of how when he was Justice Secretary he believed Cameron had done a deal of sorts with Brooks to introduce prison ships so she could claim victory for a Sun campaign in return for Murdoch giving Cameron his blessing.

Many print journalists resented the Leveson inquiry. I found it riveting. My quibble, for the record, is where are the public cross-examinations in a special inquiry at the Royal Courts of Justice of the banksters who'd collapsed the economy with their reckless greed, destroying jobs and livelihoods, bankrupting City institutions, bailed out with tens of billions of pounds, hundreds of billions of public funds, sending the national debt spiralling and economic growth plummeting?

Or the public inquiry into blacklisters who secretly refused jobs to construction workers raising fears about health and safety, denying them livelihoods?

In the media we cannot complain when we're put under the spotlight by politicians we seek to hold to account. It is a badge of honour that if we expose their wrong-doing they will strive to settle scores or blame us when in a tight corner as Cameron undoubtedly was.

Great journalism remains a tremendous force for good. We may be unable to predict with any accuracy or certainty what the shape of this rapidly shifting landscape will look like 30 years hence any more than I could when I started out 30 years back – and some of you a bit before that.

I've ink in my veins so I've a vested interest in newspapers surviving, as I believe they will, but I'm not complacent and realise we must adapt to survive never mind thrive.

I'm heartened by the *Financial Times* bragging its achieved the Pink 'Un's highest readership in the paper's 130-year history – exceeding 900,000 'paying readers' who hand over hard cash at a counter or subscribe digitally. Subscriptions may not work for everybody but the search is on for creative solutions to declining print circulations.

George Lansbury in *The Miracle of Fleet Street* stated with his customary certainty: 'I do not believe the power of the press is as great as it

was. If it were, the labour movement would not be as powerful as it now is.'

He may have been right in Edwardian Britain or he may have overstated his case then but make the same argument today, enlarging the press to the media, or what is referred to as the mainstream media – the MSM – in general, and it isn't a controversial assertion. These days it's more of a statement of fact than what might have read like wishful thinking in George's era.

But those of us who for decades yearned for a loosening of the vice like grip on political debate once exercised by the Tory press, who railed against the establishment bias of broadcasters, must now take up the cudgels against the tax-dodging, regulation-avoiding, amoral US tech giants represented by FaceBook and Google which turned into Fake News machines, cyberspace a Troll zone for Russian bots in return for a fistful of Roubles.

It is healthy for democracy that a free media on the one hand and politics, politicians and political parties on the other enjoy or endure a fraught relationship. That mutual suspicion, albeit laced with a healthy, if occasionally unspoken, respect should ultimately plant us firmly on opposite sides of a bed. Though we do and must remain on speaking terms.

The challenge both for progressive politicians and the responsible end of the media is how to be heard over a din when shouting loudest, peddling hate, scaremongering and demonising groups – Muslims chiefly among them – is too frequently dominating debate.

Faced with any tricky issue the choice is always whether we compromise, change the subject or confront. Lansbury would confront. We can take heart and learn from him on that, whether in the media or politics.

Trust is essential in my industry. Trust that's hard won, easily lost. Trust is far more than a blue tick on Twitter since a bunch of hate-mongers, including US white supremacist Richard Spencer and British Far Right extremist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon who spews poison under the football hooligan monicker Tommy Robinson, lost a sign of identify verification inaccurately presented as a seal of approval.

Trust is readers, viewers, listeners believing what you write and say. Admitting mistakes is evidence of strength, not a weakness. The line of demarcation between 'comment is free, but facts are sacred' was always

fuzzier than that drawn simplistically by Charles Prestwich Scott, the CP Scott who as editor of *The Guardian* doubled, Lansburyesque, as a Liberal MP.

The Guardian's current and first female editor, Kath Viner, emphasised the value of trust to be heard over the Facebook and Twitter screams in a long, fascinating piece in her own paper.

It was shocking news to me. *The Guardian*, a paper which wears its liberal values on its sleeve, sided with the slave-owning South in the American civil war, disparaged – as she put it – Nye Bevan's creation of a National Health Service, the paper fearing the state providing welfare – wait for it – 'risks an increase in the proportion of the less gifted' – eat your heart out, Paul Dacre – then endorsed the Conservatives at the 1951 General Election.

Anyway, Viner – whom I am 100% certain if born earlier would've been against slavery, for the NHS and sided with Attlee over a post-war Churchill – was on the money with a call to arms I endorse. She wrote:

Those in power have exploited distrust of the media to actively undermine the role of journalism in the public interest in a democracy – from Donald Trump calling the 'Fake News' media 'the enemy of the American people' to a British cabinet member suggesting that broadcasters should be 'partriotic' in their Brexit reporting.

Viner is referring there to Andrea Leadsom, a Brextremist who is Leader of the House of Commons, who didn't like Emily Maitlis on *Newsnight* asking pertinent questions. Viner went on:

All over the world – in Turkey, Russia, Poland, Egypt, China, Hungary. Malta and many other countries – journalists are undermined, attacked, even murdered.

In these disorientating times, championing the public interest – which has always been at the heart of the *Guardian's* mission – has become an urgent necessity.

If we're honest, no journalist will always write and tell the truth when we often have imperfect information, gaps in knowledge and those we

question will, found with an axe next to a freshly fallen tree, in some instances still flunk a George Washington test. We can though be truthful, striving to be accurate no matter the strength of feelings expressed.

Journalists and politicians bring to mind dogs and lampposts. I know which I'd rather be but that doesn't mean I've no respect for street lights.

This month a larger-than-life statue of George Orwell was unveiled in the piazza of the hub of the BBC, New Broadcasting House. Orwell, Eric Blair to give him his real name, worked for the Beeb from 1941 to 1943 in the Overseas Service as was. The BBC was 'Minitrue' in that study of authoritarianism and tyranny, 1984, a propaganda producing Ministry of Fake News. 'Half lunatic asylum, half girls' school,' was Orwell's cutting verdict on a BBC where the Old Etonian's habit of defiantly slurping tea from a saucer and puffing on roll-ups didn't exactly endear him to sensitive colleagues.

The BBC turned down the offer of a bronze of Orwell in 2011 on the grounds he was 'too left wing'. Don't tell the *Daily Mail* but I'm delighted the justifiably celebrated political writer and the national broadcaster are reconciled.

On the wall to the left of quotable Orwell figure is the inscription: 'If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.'

George Lansbury would appreciate that. Journalists and politicians would do well to heed the advice and never be too cosy.

I always smile at poet Humbert Wolfe's wicked epigram:

You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
(thank God!) The British journalist.
But, seeing what the man will do
unbribed, there's no occasion to.

I know many journalists, on the Right and somewhere in the political Centre as well as on the Left, brimming with integrity. I'm confident Lansbury would've recognised them too, including those whose politics he'd fundamentally disagree with.

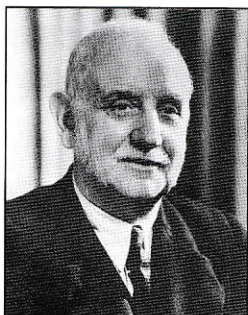
So slimeball politicians yelling 'Fake News' at truthful journalists and journalism, whether those journalists and that journalism are in

print, on the airwaves or the web, and whether the politicians are in Britain, the US or any country you care to name, these slimeballs corrupt democracy and therefore must be exposed, held to account and driven out of public life.

Thank you.

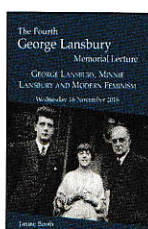
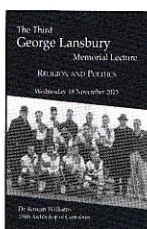
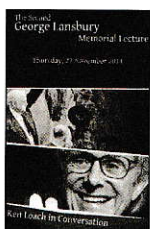
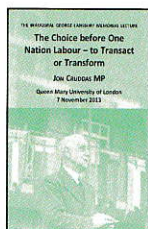


Kevin Maguire is a distinguished British political journalist who is currently associate editor of the *Daily Mirror*. Earlier in his career Maguire was chief reporter for *The Guardian*.



The George Lansbury Memorial Trust was founded in 2012 to commemorate the life, work and legacy of George Lansbury MP (1859–1940). A pioneering campaigner for peace, women's rights, local democracy and improvements in labour conditions, Lansbury was an adopted East Ender who made a great contribution to local as well as national life. For over 40 years he was a member of Bow Church, and his funeral was held there.

George Lansbury was one of the most distinguished Christian Socialists in British history, whose campaigning politics sought to apply his faith in public life.



Further copies of this booklet and of the four previous George Lansbury Memorial Trust Lectures may be obtained for a cost of £2.50 each, including postage to a UK address, from Raymond Port, George Lansbury Memorial Trust, 34 Brookesley House, Brookesley Street E3 4QL. Cheques should be made payable to 'The George Lansbury Memorial Trust.'

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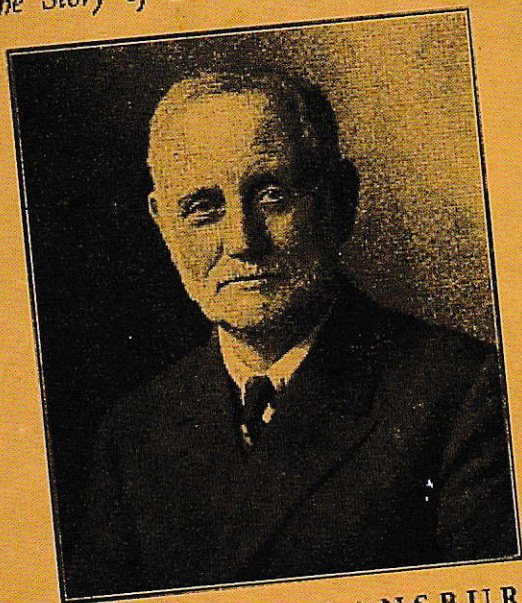
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