

Didn't Those Now Enraged at Boris Johnson's 'Smears' of Keir Starmer Defame Corbyn at Every Turn?

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"Why is Boris Johnson making false claims about Starmer and Savile?" runs a [headline](#) in the news pages of the Guardian. It is just one of a barrage of indignant recent stories in the British media, rushing to the defence of the opposition leader, Sir Keir Starmer.

The reason? Last week the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, blamed Starmer, now the Labour party leader, for failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile, a TV presenter and serial child abuser, when his case came under police review in 2009. Between 2008 and 2013, Starmer was head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Savile died in 2011 before he could face justice.

Johnson accused Starmer, who at the time was Director of Public Prosecutions, of wasting "his time prosecuting journalists and failing to prosecute Jimmy Savile".

The sudden chorus of outrage at Johnson impugning Starmer's reputation is strange in many different ways. It is not as though Johnson has any record of good behaviour. His whole political persona is built on the idea of his being a rascal, a clown, a chancer.

He is also a well-documented liar. Few, least of all in the media, cared much about his pattern of lying until now. Indeed, most observers have long pointed out that his popularity was based on his mischief-making and his populist guise as an anti-establishment politician. No one, apart from his political opponents, seemed too bothered.

And it is also not as though there are not lots of other, more critically important things relating to Johnson to be far more enraged about, even before we consider his catastrophic handling of the pandemic, and his raiding of the public coffers to enrich his crony friends and party donors.

Jumping ship

Johnson is currently embroiled in the so-called "partygate" scandal. He attended - and his

closest officials appear to have organised – several gatherings at his residence in Downing Street in 2020 and 2021 at a time when the rest of the country was under strict lockdown. For the first time the [public mood has shifted](#) against Johnson.

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— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [January 21, 2022](#)

But it was Johnson's criticisms of Starmer, not partygate, that led several of his senior advisers last week to resign their posts. One can at least suspect that in their case – given how quickly the Johnson brand is sinking, and the repercussions they may face from a police investigation into the partygate scandal – that finding an honorable pretext for jumping ship may have been the wisest move.

But there is something deeply strange about Johnson's own Conservative MPs and the British media lining up to express their indignation at Johnson's attack on Starmer, a not particularly liked or likable opposition leader, and then turning it into the reason to bring down a prime minister whose other flaws are only too visible.

What makes the situation even weirder is that Johnson's so-called "smears" of Starmer may not actually be smears at all. They look like rare examples of Johnson alluding to – admittedly in his own clumsy and self-interested way – genuinely problematic behaviour by Starmer.

One would never know this from the coverage, of course.

Here is the Guardian supposedly fact-checking Johnson's attack on Starmer under the apparently neutral question: "Is there any evidence that Starmer was involved in any decision not to prosecute Savile?"

The Guardian's [answer](#) is decisive:

"No. The CPS has confirmed that there is no reference to any involvement from Starmer in the decision-making within an official report examining the case.

"Surrey police consulted the CPS for advice about the allegations after interviewing Savile's victims, according to a 2013 CPS statement made by Starmer as DPP.

"The official report, written by Alison Levitt QC, found that in October 2009 the CPS lawyer responsible for the cases – who was not Starmer – advised that no prosecution could be brought on the grounds that none of the complainants were 'prepared to support any police action'."

That's a pretty definite "No", then. Not "No, according to Starmer". Or "No, according to the CPS". Or "No, according to an official report" – and doubtless a determinedly face-saving one at that – into the Savile scandal.

Just "No".

Here is the Guardian's political correspondent Peter Walker echoing how cut and dried the corporate media's [assessment](#) is: "[Starmer] had no connection to decisions over the case, and the idea he did emerged later in conspiracy theories mainly shared among the far right."

So it's just a far-right conspiracy theory. Case against Starmer closed.

But not so fast.

Given Savile's tight ties to the establishment - from royalty and prime ministers down - and the establishment's role in providing, however inadvertently, cover for Savile's paedophilia for decades, it should hardly surprise us that the blame for the failure to prosecute him has been placed squarely on the shoulders of a low-level lawyer in the Crown Prosecution Service. How it could be otherwise? If we started unpicking the thorny Savile knot, who knows where the threads might unravel?

Sacrificial victim

Former ambassador Craig Murray has made an interesting observation about Johnson's remark on Starmer. Murray, let us remember, has been a first-hand observer and chronicler of the dark arts of the establishment in protecting itself from exposure, after he himself was made a sacrificial victim for revealing the British government's illegal involvement in torture and extraordinary rendition.

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— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [July 30, 2021](#)

As Murray [notes](#):

"Of course the Director of Public Prosecutions does not handle the individual cases, which are assigned to lawyers under them. But the Director most certainly is then consulted on the decisions in the high profile and important cases.

"That is why they are there. It is unthinkable that Starmer was not consulted on the decision to shelve the Savile case - what do they expect us to believe his role was, as head of the office, ordering the paperclips?"

And of the official inquiry into Starmer's role that cleared him of any wrongdoing, the one that so impresses the Guardian and everyone else, Murray adds:

"When the public outcry reached a peak in 2012, Starmer played the go-to trick in the Establishment book. He commissioned an 'independent' lawyer he knew to write a report exonerating him. Mistakes have been made at lower levels, lessons will be learnt... you know what it says. Mishcon de Reya, money launderers to the oligarchs, provided the lawyer to do the whitewash. Once he retired from the post of DPP, Starmer went to work at, umm,..."

Yes, Mishcon de Reya.

Delighted to be joining Mishcon de Reya and to remain with Doughty Street Chambers under new dual capacity rules <http://t.co/ejoBDIxlmK>

— Keir Starmer (@Keir_Starmer) [June 23, 2014](#)

Starmer and Assange

Murray also notes that MPs and the British media have resolutely focused attention on Starmer's alleged non-role in the Savile decision - where an "official report" provides them with cover - rather than an additional, and far more embarrassing, point made by Johnson about Starmer's behaviour as Director of Public Prosecutions.

The prime minister mentioned Starmer using his time to "prosecute journalists". Johnson and the media have no interest in clarifying that reference. Anyway, Johnson only made it for effect: as a contrast to the way Starmer treated Savile, as a way to highlight that, if he chose to, Starmer was quite capable of moving to prosecute.

But this second point is potentially far more revealing both of Starmer's misconduct as Director of Public Prosecutions and about the services he rendered to the establishment - the likely reason why he was knighted at a relatively young age, becoming "Sir" Keith.

The journalist Johnson was presumably referencing is Julian Assange, currently locked up in Belmarsh high-security prison as lawyers try to get him extradited to the United States for his exposure of US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At an early stage of Assange's persecution, the Crown Prosecution Service under Starmer worked overtime - despite Britain's official position of neutrality in the case - to ensure he was extradited to Sweden. Assange sought political asylum in the Ecuadorean embassy in London in 2012, when Starmer was still heading the Crown Prosecution Service. Assange did so because he got wind of efforts by the Americans to extradite him onwards from Sweden to the US. He feared the UK would collude in that process.

Assange, it turns out, was not wrong. With the Swedish investigation long ago dropped, the British courts are now, nearly a decade on, close to agreeing to the Biden administration's demand that Assange be extradited to the US - both to silence him and to intimidate any other journalists who might try to throw light on US war crimes.

My latest: It is the ultimate, ugly paradox that Julian Assange's legal and physical fate rests in the hands of two states - the US and UK - that have the most to lose by allowing him to regain his freedom and publish more of the truths they want concealed <https://t.co/M7WTKq0ZXf>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [December 17, 2021](#)

The Italian journalist Stefania Maurizi has been pursuing a lengthy legal battle to have the CPS emails from Starmer's time released under a Freedom of Information request. She has been opposed by the British establishment every step of the way. We know that many of the

email chains relating to Assange were [destroyed](#) by the Crown Prosecution Service – apparently illegally. Those would doubtless have shone a much clearer light on Starmer’s role in the case – possibly the reason they were destroyed.

The small number of emails that have been retrieved show that the Crown Prosecution Service under Starmer micro-managed the Swedish investigation of Assange, even bullying Swedish prosecutors to pursue the case when they had started to lose interest for lack of evidence. In one email from 2012, a CPS lawyer [warned](#) his Swedish counterpart: “Don’t you dare get cold feet!!!”. In another from 2011, the CPS lawyer writes: “Please do not think this case is being dealt with as just another extradition.”

Prosecutors arm-twisted

Again, the idea that Starmer was not intimately involved in the decision to arm-twist Swedish prosecutors into persecuting a journalist – a case that the UK should formally have had no direct interest in, unless it was covertly advancing US interests to silence Assange – beggars belief.

Despite the media’s lack of interest in Assange’s plight, the energy expended by the US to get Assange behind bars in the US and redefine national security journalism as espionage shows how politically and diplomatically important this case has always been to the US – and by extension, the British establishment. There is absolutely no way the deliberations were handled by a single lawyer. Starmer would have closely overseen his staff’s dealings with Swedish prosecutors and authorised what was in practice a purely political decision, not legal one, to persecute Assange – or as United Nations experts defined it, “[arbitrarily detain](#)” him.

My latest: Lies about UN body threaten not just Julian Assange
<https://t.co/AKiTmP8VL5> [#Assange](#) [#unwgad](#)

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [February 5, 2016](#)

Neither Murray nor I have unique, Sherlock-type powers of deduction that allow us to join the dots in ways no one else can manage. All of this information is in the public realm, and all of it is known to the editors of the British media. They are not only choosing to avoid mentioning it in the context of the current row, but they are actively fulminating against Boris Johnson for having done so.

The prime minister’s crime isn’t that he has “smeared” Starmer. It is that – out of desperate self-preservation – he has exposed the dark underbelly of the establishment. He has broken the elite’s omerta, its vow of silence. He has made the unpardonable sin of grassing up the establishment to which he belongs. He has potentially given ammunition to the great unwashed to expose the establishment’s misdeeds, to blow apart its cover story. That is why the anger is far more palpable and decisive about Johnson smearing Starmer than it ever was when Johnson smeared the rest of us by partying on through the lockdowns.

Scorched-earth tactic?

Look at this headline on Jonathan Freedland’s latest column for the Guardian, visibly [aquiver with anger](#) at the way Johnson has defamed Starmer: “Johnson’s Savile smear was the

scorched-earth tactic of a desperate, dangerous man”.

A prime minister attacking the opposition leader – something we would normally think of as a largely unexceptional turn of political events, and all the more so under Johnson – has been transformed by Freedland into a dangerous, scorched-earth tactic.

Quite how preposterous, and hypocritical, this claim is should not need underscoring. Who really needs to be reminded of how Freedland and the rest of media class – but especially Freedland – treated Starmer’s predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn? That really was a scorched-earth approach. There was barely a day in his five years leading the Labour party when the media did not fabricate the most outrageous lies about Corbyn and his party. He was shabby and unstatesmanlike (unlike the smartly attired Johnson!), sexist, a traitor, a threat to national security, an anti-semiter, and much more.

Anyone like Freedland who actively participated in the five-year campaign of demonisation of Corbyn has no credibility whatsoever either complaining about the supposed mistreatment of Starmer (a pale shadow of what Corbyn suffered) or decrying Johnson’s lowering of standards in public life.

We have the rightwing populist Johnson in power precisely because Freedland and the rest of the media relentlessly smeared the democratic socialist alternative. In the 2017 election, let us recall, Corbyn was only 2,000 votes from winning. The concerted campaign of smears from across the entire corporate media – and the resulting manipulation of the public mood – was the difference between Corbyn winning and the Tories holding on to power.

Corbyn was destroyed – had to be destroyed – because he threatened establishment interests. He challenged the interests of the rich, of the corporations, of the war industries, of the Israel lobby. That was why an anonymous military general [warned](#) in the pages of the establishment’s newspaper, The Times, that there would be a mutiny if Corbyn ever reached 10 Downing Street. That was why soldiers were filmed using an image of Corbyn as [target practice](#) on a firing range in Afghanistan.

Johnson’s “smears” aside, none of this will ever happen to Starmer. There will be no threats of mutiny and his image will never be used for target practice by the army. Sir Keir won’t be defamed by the billionaire-owned media. Rather, they have shown they have his back. They will even promote him over an alumnus of the Bullingdon Club, when the blokey toff’s shine starts to wear off.

And that, it should hardly need pointing out, is because Sir Keir Starmer is there to protect not the public’s interests but the interests of the establishment, just as he did when so conscientiously he was Director of Public Prosecutions.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook’s blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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