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Undermining Democracy, Not Defending It: The ‘Integrity Initiative’ is Everything That’s Wrong With British Foreign Policy

Wednesday 12 December 2018, by [BASTANI Aaron](#) (Date first published: 10 December 2018).

Exposing the international and domestic subversion and manipulation of the ‘Integrity Initiative’ (II), a British think tank funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the tune of £2.2m.

While several of the think tank’s tweets – attacking Jeremy Corbyn and key advisors – have garnered the most interest so far, it is leaked documents concerning its working processes and efforts abroad that are particularly shocking.

In these documents the core approach of the II is made clear – their modus operandi being a ‘cluster approach’ where influencers, policy-makers and journalists coordinate across a range of countries. One such cluster [operates in Spain](#), where the II successfully obstructed the appointment of a reservist colonel, Pedro Baños, who was preferred by the socialist government as the country’s next head of national security. Despite his strong resume – Baños was once head of counterintelligence and security for the European army – his admission on Twitter that Spain ‘would not gain anything from provoking Russia’ was apparently a stretch too far.

The operation itself was named ‘[Operation Moncloa](#)’ and proved successful in less than 24 hours. Around midday on 7 June 2018, the Spanish cluster learned that Baños would soon be appointed to the role. Within hours a dossier began to be compiled, with the intention being to disseminate it across Spanish media. Shortly after, key influencers tweeted about the unsuitability of Baños for the role, calling it into question. One was [Gonzalez Ponz](#), the spokesperson of the Partido Popular in the European parliament. Another was Nacho Torreblanco, director of the European Council for Foreign Relations Office in Madrid and a columnist at El Mundo.

Within hours the UK-based cluster was activated to lend support to efforts in Spain. At the same time the Baños dossier was sent to the [El País](#) and [El Mundo](#) newspapers, who proceeded to publish relevant articles. By 19.45 the Spanish cluster noted the campaign had raised significant noise on Twitter, with contacts in the Socialist party confirming the matter had been brought to the attention of prime minister Pedro Sanchez. Not long after the Partido Popular and Ciudadanos asked the prime minister to halt the appointment. They were successful.

There are even WhatsApp screengrabs of the cluster organising to stop the appointment in real time, with those on it including former British military personnel. To be clear, this appears to be collusion between Spanish politicians, journalists and think tankers with a foreign power to block the appointment of an individual to a highly prestigious role. Only the foreign power in play isn’t Russia – it’s Britain.

The [cluster active in Britain](#) is even more impressive, including individuals not only from the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence, but also a Labour party MP – Ben Bradshaw – as well as journalists such as David Aaronovitch, Natalie Nougayrede and Deborah Haynes. Alongside military personnel the bedrock of the cluster are individuals working in think tanks, with Demos, RUSI, Chatham House, and the Henry Jackson Society all represented. Among the military names are high ranking officials including a captain in the Royal Navy and a colonel. On Twitter the II is followed by some interesting names, including Tom Watson, Luke Akehurst and Mary Creagh.

Among the organisation's top three 'deliverables' to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [the first](#) is to develop and prove 'the cluster concept and methodology, setting up clusters in a range of countries with different circumstances'. The II is essentially a proof-of-concept in how to exert influence in an era of hybrid war where information can be a critical variable. Subsequently, its model should be viewed as mirroring that of Russia, the morphology of influencers, narrativistic 'poles of attraction' and the leveraging of backchannels (WhatsApp groups, text messages and email) to coordinate a front-facing response: this being composed of a 'swarm' on social media which synergises with legacy formats in broadcast and print.

That such an approach is being applied by a British organisation to the politics of a European neighbour is cause for grave concern – and by itself merits an enquiry. What's worse, however, is the possibility that the same approach has been used against Corbyn's Labour. One only need look on the II's Twitter feed to see the low regard it holds Corbyn and his leading advisers in. Intriguingly, the organisation was founded in the [autumn of 2015](#) – the same time Corbyn became Labour leader.

It doesn't end there. Ben Nimmo, a fellow at the Atlantic Council and a 'senior fellow' at the Institute for Statecraft, which seems to enjoy significant if ambiguous overlap with the II (their staff are core members of national clusters) co-authored an article with Jonathan Eyal – based at the Royal United Services Institute – alleging that Russia Today broadcast "systematic bias in favour of Corbyn" when he first stood for the Labour leadership. The article went on to say the motivation for this was "most likely to be executing the interests of the government which funds it."

Mr Nimmo was also quoted in the Sun newspaper saying Russia was "supporting Corbyn against his opponents both in the Labour party and outside it." The newspaper used this to support its claim that "a twisted Russian cyber campaign which has backed Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is aiming to sow division across the UK." This was backed up with no evidence.

Such revelations are especially chilling given that, around the same time, an unnamed British general told the Sunday Times there would be, "mass resignations at all levels" in the event of a Corbyn-led Labour government and that "the general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardise the security of this country" using "whatever means possible, fair or foul to prevent that." In the context of those remarks, understanding the purpose and extent of II relating to domestic politics is of critical importance. The British public, and them alone, determine who governs this country, not the military, not the security services and certainly not paranoiac defence think tanks.

Given the scale of the story simply relating to the Baños case, one could reasonably expect an outpouring of coverage from the British media. And yet, at the time of writing, it has received little coverage. Where it has relates to Corbyn – and yet no mention has been made of meddling in the domestic politics of an ally, as if this were fair game.

The reason why is simple. Barely any of the British media – and this includes purportedly progressive outlets – care to give a balanced account of how Britain conducts itself in matters of espionage, foreign policy and weapons sales. The father of the Manchester Bomber, Ramadan Abedi, is believed to have been active in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an organisation which MI6

covertly supported in the mid-1990s. Ramadan was active in Libya in the 2011 uprising, as was his son, with the two enjoying easy access between there and Britain without raising alarm. It may even be possible that the Manchester bomber, his son Salman Abedi, fought for an organisation which received material support, and even training, from the British state. And yet the only mainstream journalists that dared touch the story aren't from the left, but [from the right](#). Beyond them [Mark Curtis has done outstanding work](#).

It's the same story with [recent sales of arms by Britain to Israel](#). With more than 230 Palestinians killed and thousands more injured by Israeli forces since March, you might think record weapons sales to the regime - £402m worth of hardware since Theresa May became prime minister - would be a story of national significance. You'd be wrong.

Similarly with Saudi Arabia the media has failed to hold the government to account. Mass protests in places like Venezuela invariably meet with a chorus from the media asking whether Corbyn will condemn the regime (despite similar scenes playing out in France right now). And yet when it was [revealed that senior officials](#) went to meet Saudi businessmen just days after the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed and dismembered there was, with a few exceptions, barely a peep.

A 2014 YouGov poll showed that 59% of Brits felt the empire was something to be proud of, while only 19% thought it was something to be ashamed about. Initially I was surprised the former figure was so high. But when you think about the levels of ignorance purposefully cultivated by the media and political establishment about what Britain does in the world, those numbers start to make sense. There is a democratic cancer at the heart of Britain's foreign policy and it is enabled by a complex bestriding the military, think tanks and the media. That, in short, is exactly where the II sought to insert itself. Such an initiative isn't about defending democracy, but undermining it.

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