

A prestige award for a liar and the McAlpine debacle

THE Orwell Prize, which advertises itself as 'Britain's most prestigious prize for political writing', was first awarded in 1994.

In 2007, the Common Purpose offshoot, the Media Standards Trust (MST), became the lead partner in running the prize. The Orwell no doubt chimed with the Leftish political leanings of the MST's founders and would be a beacon for the journalistic excellence and integrity that they espoused.

For the 2008 prize — the first to be awarded under David Bell's MST's auspices — the three judges were Annalena McAfee, novelist and formerly a Journalist on the Financial Times and The Guardian, former BBC executive Sir John Tusa and Albert Scardino, Guardian Journalist, MST trustee and husband of Marjorie Scardino, boss of the Labour-donating Pearson Group, friend of Common Purpose's founder Julia Middleton and financial backer of the Media Standards Trust.

Their award of the prize to Independent Journalist Johann Hari was the start of a farce that was to badly compromise both the MST and Britain's most high-minded paper.

A youthful, Left-wing polemicist with a taste for grandstanding, Hari was seemingly the perfect fit for the MST's first foray into journalism awards. (Hari's admiring boss Simon Kelner would be invited by the MST to join its 'non-partisan' review panel later that year.)

Hari's award was given in spite of serious and long-standing concerns about the integrity of his work. Private Eye ran a long piece in early 2003, which identified several Hari reportage pieces for The Guardian and Independent in which he had simply invented his eyewitness accounts.

But Hari's offences against Journalism were much wider than simply making up 'facts'.

Plagiarism, the use of old quotes as if they were new in interviews, alteration of Wikipedia biographies of enemies and 'sock puppetry' — the use of false identities to attack people on the Internet — were also part of his *modus operandi*.

By June 2011 the evidence against him became so overwhelming, that the MST had to act and instructed the Orwell Prize council to launch an inquiry into the allegations.

Within a month the Orwell Prize issued a statement, in which it said: 'No allegations have been made against Johann Hari's 2008 Orwell Prize-winning pieces.'

Given the clear evidence of Hari's dishonesty, this was disingenuous. In any event, both Private Eye and the Telegraph brought new allegations that Hari had made up parts of one of the Orwell Prize-winning pieces, about atrocities in the Congo.

In September 2011, Johann Hari announced that, though he stood by the articles which had won the Orwell Prize, he would be returning it as an act of contrition for the errors he had made elsewhere.

The Council later confirmed that he would have been stripped of the prize because of evidence of wrongdoing in one of his



Compromised: Johann Hari, who returned his Orwell Prize

articles. The result? A bitter blow to the journalistic integrity of Britain's so-called quality Press. But also to the credibility of the organisation which has given itself the role of determining the way the free Press is regulated.

WORSE, much worse, was to follow with another of Sir David Bell's Journalism-improving projects.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism was launched in 2010, funded by a £2 million grant from Pslon computer millionaire and Labour donor David Potter and his David and Elaine Potter Foundation. Sir David Bell, champion of what he regards as an ethical

Press, became a trustee. The BIJ was run out of London's City University, which three years earlier had awarded Sir David an honorary degree.

As we have reported, the BIJ proclaimed itself as the 'gold standard' by which other Journalism could be measured. Its output and reportage 'should be as close to incontrovertible as is possible'.

There were a number of experienced Journalists with good track records on board. But while the BIJ won acclaim in some quarters, there was also criticism.

Six months after launch, the BIJ was working with The Guardian and other news organisations in preparing the WikiLeaks release of classified American military documents. But in giving an interview to an

American magazine, BIJ managing editor Iain Overton leaked 'major details' which, The Guardian said this weekend, 'put the entire project in jeopardy'.

An investigation of the Help for Heroes charity was also described by its subject as 'misleading'.

Earlier this year, one of the Bureau's staff confided that the original seed money had almost run out and the BIJ needed to secure new revenue sources. They have even turned to very unlikely benefactors such as Oxfam. But there was an ever greater need to find paid work at relatively wealthy channels such as the BBC.

Which is how they came to be working with Newsnight on a child abuse investigation.

The subsequent disaster was heralded by Overton's now infamous tweet: 'If all goes well, we've got a Newsnight out tonight about a very senior political figure who is a paedophile.'

On Tuesday, Bell and his fellow BIJ trustees had a letter published in The Times. The tone was defiant rather than chastened.

'The BBC required and had full editorial control throughout the production of the Newsnight programme,' they said.

And they further qualified the Bureau's role in the scandal: 'We regret that a tweet by the Bureau's managing editor in advance of the programme helped to feed inaccurate speculation about the identity of a political figure.'

The letter ended: 'The Bureau's work has won awards by disclosing important information in the public interest and, with only this recent exception, by maintaining high standards of Journalism. The Bureau remains absolutely committed to that aim.'

Whether the Bureau — of which Leveson assessor Bell is a trustee — will survive to maintain those 'high standards' is a matter of some considerable doubt.

We need transparency — not this modern version of a freemason's handshake

mention of breaching the law. When Bell's participation as a Leveson assessor was announced last year, a Michael White, who had been on Common Purpose's Freedom of Information blacklist, pointed out the contradiction.

Mr White, from Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, was reported in the Sunday Telegraph as saying of Common Purpose: 'My private address was in their blacklist and I was described as a vexatious and harassing individual.'

'I felt sick to think that Common Purpose had passed this around half the public authorities in the country. They got this data from their contacts in councils. The hypocrisy is stunning. These people quite rightly condemn invasions of privacy by the press while invading people's privacy themselves.'

'They demand transparency for other people and fight it for themselves.'

Critics of Common Purpose can also be found among public figures who have had first-hand experience of its methods and networking.

David Gilbertson, former Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and Assistant Inspector of HM Constabulary, told us: 'I was invited to join Common

Purpose some years ago. I went to six or eight training sessions. I had just been promoted to Commander ...

'I dropped out half way through the course. I thought it was a waste of my time and public money. The fees were being paid by the Met.

'Some there clearly wanted to network... I know people use Common Purpose to do deals, because one person on the course turned up at my office in Scotland Yard with someone else pitching for an IT contract. I said I didn't do contracts. It certainly wasn't an application through the normal system.

'People do see it as a way of getting on. On promotion forms, police officers are giving membership of Common Purpose as evidence of

their ability to "negotiate". Or their competence.

'When I dropped out, I got a hard time from them. I was phoned by an organiser who told me I couldn't call myself a Common Purpose graduate if I left. "You've got to finish," he warned me.'

Perhaps the final word on Common Purpose should go to Demetrios Pantou, 44, an employment law advisor who has worked as an equalities consultant for many local authorities and national government bodies including John Prescott's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, for which he co-authored a report on race.

'It's a new old boys' network,' he explains 'but the Left's version of it — and I don't like secretive deal-

making and "group think" of any kind.

'What is interesting is that the same people appear in the same jobs, in different places, as if through a revolving door. They work for local authorities, leave, then come back as freelance "consultants" with huge, inflated fees. They are often mediocre and there is no evidence of how or why they were chosen.

'They can leave a council with a terrible reputation yet pop up next minute as head of a regulatory body and as a trustee of numerous bodies. It is a real money-spinner.

'I got a visit from a Common Purpose group in 1998. I then worked for Coventry Council as Area Co-ordinator for all its services in North Coventry, a very poor area. My boss David Galliers organised the visit. He was openly a member of Common Purpose.

'Common Purpose was a big thing at Coventry Council, it was the thing to be. About 20 members of Common Purpose locally visited my office as part of their training and I was required to talk to them about my work. They also went on a tour of the very poor estates I served, and met top local government officers. The area I worked for was very

deprived, yet I had to put on a spread for these people. They came and they ate and they drank and they looked at the poor people.

'I had an office that over-looked a particularly poor estate, and they looked at it through my windows and briefly visited it and I remember thinking that it was like a jamboree, an outing. I felt embarrassed by it, and uncomfortable for the residents that they were coming to look at. I didn't want to be part of it.

'It was like the visit at Christmas from the aunt that no one wanted. None of the individuals seemed to understand the real issues facing poor, working-class areas. I felt they were patronising and superficial, and that they were doing this to be in the fashion, rather than because they were really interested.

'People in employment interviews should ask: "What networks do you belong to?" If you apply now for a job in local government, you have to state your relationship to any local politicians. So why not also to Common Purpose?

'We need transparency in local government, not this modern version of the freemasons' handshake.'