

2019 The Post-Mortem

Ross [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. This week, 2019, the post-mortem, and we've assembled the perfect cast to rake over the wreckage.

Lisa MacKenzie (video clip) [00:00:37] You know where I live in County Durham before the election, you wouldn't have known there was an election on. And now you wouldn't have known that there's an election been. It's not a thing. It's like, you know what, there's these and there's these and everybody lies and let's just keep doing what we're doing because there's none of these people that deal with it. It's just situation normal. They do it like this all. Why are you bothered this year?

Ross (video clip) [00:01:02] Because I thought Jezza... Because I wanted free broadband.

Lisa MacKenzie (video clip) [00:01:07] Because you know what....didn't, didn't ah.....?

Ross (video clip) [00:01:09] Can we shoot this program, for the love of God?

Ross [00:01:17] Joining me to discuss what really happened in 2019, are the sociologist, Lisa MacKenzie, anthropologist and author Dr. Jason Hickel, and the Middle East based journalist Sharmine Narwani. So just before I'll do that intro, off-air everybody scrambling to talk about this election and we stumble. Let's come to you, Lisa, because we stumbled across the fact that you're an anarchist who doesn't vote, but has very strong political views.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:01:43] It's hardly stumbling across it. I tweet it everyday day. I publicly say every day, you know, I'm an anarchist. I don't vote or.....

Ross [00:01:53] But you're their chirping away on Twitter with very strident political views, but you can't get yourself into a voting booth?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:01:57] Yeah, I'm chirping away on the street. I do general chirping in pubs. I'm chirping in food banks sometimes as well. I'm generally chirping away, yeah, because I see that a political position is not about voting. And I see a political position and a political act is definitely not about voting. So all the chirping I'm doing is political.

Ross [00:02:23] Right. Can we park for one second the general election and we'll definitely get to it. Because there's an elephant in the room around what's gone on in Britain, 2019. Everyone wants talk about the political scene. Very few people want to talk about the thing that we're doing now, which is the media, but more specifically, the mainstream media. When you look at the general election coverage and what's happened over the year, Sharmine, what's your view on what's happened within media? Is the public's trust finally bust?

Sharmine Narwani [00:02:54] I think the public hasn't trusted in the media for a very, very long time. I mean, they were in poll after poll they repeat this. Yet, you know, what's discouraging is that the public then goes ahead and mimics everything they read in the media. So, you know, I was seeing something today where this chap says, you know, the media is telling us for the last few years that Jeremy Corbyn is a anti-Semitic commie pinko who can't

balance a budget and is dangerous for national security. And then the election happens. And then the media says, oh, it seems the public fear that Jeremy Corbyn is an anti-Semitic, you know, commie pinko. So this is what we're getting. It's it's a complete manipulation. It's offensive now, you know. Do people get it? I don't know. Do we learn?

Ross [00:03:38] You talk about the anti-Semitism stats and we just bring them up on the screen. If you look on this table in this spreadsheet, and if you look at 2015, 2016, 2017, thirteen thousand, fifty two thousand, twenty six thousand media articles on anti-Semitism. 2018, one hundred and twenty nine thousand. And then 2019, one hundred and thirty two thousand. It's quite a spike, Jason.

Jason Hickel [00:04:02] What's particularly striking also is the fact that Boris Johnson is on record with actually explicit anti-Semitic statements in addition to Islamophobic and racist and homophobic and virtually everything else.

Ross [00:04:11] And claiming that Jews, in inverted commas, control the media.

Jason Hickel [00:04:15] Exactly. I mean, explicit anti-Semitism. And yet the media seems to have almost nothing to say about that. It's astonishing, actually. Johnson went so far as to celebrate the idea of recolonizing Africa. Silence on this. And there is sort of this hunt for something that Jeremy might have said that was a problem. I mean, as far as Johnson is concerned, you don't need to speculate about the nature of his views, it's right there. And yet that didn't really become a story. So, I mean, to me, it was a big problem.

Ross [00:04:39] So media part of the problem, part of the solution?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:04:45] I mean, I think what we've got to do is start to think about what the media's supposed to do, what their job is. Because all I can see at the moment, and this has been for six or seven years, there is no investigative journalism any more. Nobody's invested in finding stories and telling stories and being truth tellers and speaking truth to power. What we've got is we've just got a load of people that are either connected to one side or the other, who are telling stories about the other side and commentary - constant commentary, commentary, commentary. The amount of stories that somebody that works, that does a lot of grassroots work. I do a lot of research, all my researches of working class communities. And I find stories and I have taken them to many, many journalists and journalists will look at them. And there's two things that they don't like about them. They either look very difficult because sometimes things are difficult to untangle...

Ross [00:05:40] Because life's complex?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:05:40] Yeah. And for me, that's the journalist's job, actually, to take that sort of story and then unravel it and then present it. And then the other thing that they do is they kinda well, you know, I mean I'm a this supporter or that supporter. And this won't fit with whatever audience we've got. And so, therefore, what we've had is we've had this six year round of people shouting at each other, who's more right. And to be honest, the British public are watching that. So the anti-Semitism stuff, they might have been hundreds of thousands of articles written about it. But, you know what, people were not really reading them.

Ross [00:06:17] So you don't think that the weaponization of anti-Semitism, which is how it's been defined, has had any effect on the public mood when it comes to voting in that election?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:06:28] In some communities it has obviously, you know, in communities like Golders Green in London it's definitely had an effect.

Ross [00:06:37] But in, for instance, in Durham, where you're living...

Lisa MacKenzie [00:06:39] Or in Sutton in Ashfield where I'm from, it's not really an issue that they would really understand. But equally, what's not an issue that they're going to understand or care about, is the whole Middle East, the politics of the Middle East. You know, I've sat in rooms, how many times, and we're sat there talking about class inequality in Britain or inequality in the world or global inequality. And the first question comes up in somebody going, what do you think about Palestine? And you just go, (sighs).

Ross [00:07:12] Well, it's still relevant.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:07:14] Nobody's saying that it's not relevant, but I don't know why parts of the left are so obsessed with it.

Ross [00:07:21] Sharmine, Middle East journalist famously is slow to file, think long time before you get your copy in and you are able to unravel those stories. People are interested in Palestine, the Middle East, as well as what's going on here. Are journalists serving that?

Sharmine Narwani [00:07:37] Look here, as a journalist who has done quite a few investigative pieces that challenge Western conventional wisdoms on, for instance, the war in Syria, what's going on in Iran, what's happening and protests in the region, I found fewer and fewer outlets willing to publish my work. What concerns me as we enter 2020, and what we've seen in 2019, is this narrowing of all discourse on anything that is remotely controversial. And media is absolute complicit in that. You know, mainstream media are pretty much stenographers at this point. You know, they're not all bad, but they fear for their jobs, you know. And every so often you hear someone speak out and then their career goes into a tailspin. So I think for me, 2020 what's really important, what you all touched on earlier is maybe tackling the subject. Free speech is under attack. And I think, and one of the things that I'd heard from the Corbyn team about a year or so ago, was to have the public vote in the BBC directors. OK, I would like to see state funded media, whether here or elsewhere in Europe or the United States, be sort of subject to that kind of relationship with that with the public, where the public get to vote in the directors. I think we'll see a lot of very different television then. And once you have the example, I think it'll spill over because that's what people want to watch. They want to watch the truth, you know. I also think we are getting pretty anti corporate. I think nobody disagrees that corporations are running policy in the Western world. And so I think the idea that six major corporations basically run mainstream media, you know, maybe there is a way to break that up a bit, you know, and push to break that up. If you can't break it up, maybe then they would have to take a percentage of their media assets and make them non-profit and accountable to the public in some way to their readers and viewers. But we have to tackle this because we're also seeing platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which we feel we own, OK, become narrower and narrower.

Jason Hickel [00:09:33] The problem is, it seems to me that our best shot at getting real media reform was going to be under a Labour government and that's now out of reach. And I think that's that's a problem. I mean, look, if you have media reform alongside the reduction of the voting age down to 16, alongside proportional representation, I mean, these three key reforms would mean that progressive governments would effectively stay in power for the foreseeable future. We had a shot at that and that's blown. And the next five years looks bleak as far as I'm concerned in terms of that kind of regulation.

Ross [00:09:57] What would happen to the BBC if you did have a system where the public elected the people that they think should be running it?

Sharmin Narwani [00:10:03] Well, I think here in the UK you have a lot of activists who have a real issue with media and participate heavily in trying to influence these things. So these people would run, okay. They would run for these elections. And I think if you've got a nice bunch of them in, they would start to talk about the kind of programming, what you include in the news, OK? Sometimes it's not just how you cover the news, it's what you include in it, you know, the kind of presenters that would present shows. You know, I think we would we would see diverse opinions or more for diversity of opinion.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:10:35] Do you think so? Because what you're not doing is thinking about the way that the British structure works. Well, the fact is, so you said there'd be loads of people who would stand. You know what, we were talking about this earlier, you know, kids of politicians and offspring of.....

Ross [00:10:55] People get their jobs through nepotism?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:10:56] Yeah, they do. And the thing is, is that system is still there. It's still strong. It's still untouchable...

Ross [00:11:03] But do you think that Sharmin is being too idealistic when she says, actually, people would run? Because what you would get are people from different backgrounds. At the moment the BBC is festooned with bright young things from Oxford. It turns out they are from Oxford but not that bright.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:11:14] But you know that even if you had to run, who would stand, and then how would they get the backing to do it? And how would they have the experience to do that? And how would they know? Because we've got to remember something else has happened with media as well is local media has disappeared.

Ross [00:11:32] That's a really good point.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:11:34] Things like local newspapers, local television stations, things where local people would have stayed, got their teeth into something, understood an area, learned to craft, learn to scale. That has now gone. So what you're doing is you're saying, well, of a democratic voting system. But let's be honest, who would go for those jobs? Who would put themselves up? Who would have the knowledge of how to sit on a panel and talk in front of certain people, who would know how to fill that application form in?

Sharmine Narwani [00:12:03] Well, there's a cadre of journalists, and I think we've gotten to know each other through social media platforms, you know, and retweeting each other and learning each other's problems within their industry, within their media outlets, etc. And many people have come together. And I mean, I can think of a bunch of people immediately who would run for this and would have groups like Momentum and other groups that have transparency and accountability in journalism, etc.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:12:27] Momentum don't don't speak for me and they don't represent me.

Sharmine Narwani [00:12:31] No, no, they would push a view.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:12:32] Yes I know.

Ross [00:12:33] We're not trying to get you elected.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:12:33] What I'm saying is, the minute you said Momentum, what you're doing is you're now thinking about groups connected to other institutions.

Sharmine Narwani [00:12:44] They would just be a point of view that isn't represented at the BBC. It could be anyone. It could be people who who think that nobody should ever consider banning hunting again, you know, it doesn't really matter. It's people who are not represented are the ones who are going to participate in these kind of elections and they're ready to go. So I certainly feel this within the journalist community. There are quite a few excellent journalists I know who have been marginalized who would happily run and bring a diversity approach. I mean, I'm thinking of people like Peter Osborne, for instance, who's a conservative, and he's spoken out brilliantly during this election cycle who has spoken about the media. I mean, Seamus Milne, for instance, you know, you get someone like that of the BBC, the whole the whole thing changes.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:13:25] Seamus Milne, the Oxbridge son of a....

Ross [00:13:33] Jason, you should run. We need an anthropologist running the BBC, right?

Jason Hickel [00:13:38] If I was to run, people would love my accent. It's going to be great.

Ross [00:13:52] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about what really happened in 2019 with Lisa MacKenzie, Dr. Jason Hickel and Sharmine Narwani, let's have a look at some of the best tweets of the year in this week's Renegade Inc index. First up, we've got a tweet from the Iain Duncan Smith's and that's in reference to this video:

TV presenter [00:14:11] Again, another point that was made in the comments there from jurors. Somebody's calling your son Pinocchio. I know that you referred, you responded to these allegations....

Stanley Johnson [00:14:20] That requires a level of literacy, which I think the great British public doesn't necessarily have.

TV presenter [00:14:25] Sorry, what do you mean by that?

Stanley Johnson [00:14:27] I'm not going to get into that.

TV presenter [00:14:28] Well, that's quite a pejorative thing to say about the great British public.

Stanley Johnson [00:14:32] They couldn't spell Pinocchio if they tried, I wouldn't have thought.

TV presenter [00:14:32] Why would you say that?

Stanley Johnson [00:14:36] Well, can you spell Pinocchio?

Ross [00:14:39] Top tip, if you find yourself forgetting how to spell Pinocchio, just look at this picture and you'll remember it's got two c's. I mean, quite a thing, Lisa, isn't it? Quite a thing to say about the great British public?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:14:51] You know, I'm not shocked by that at all. You know, I've lived with this all my life. The British working class are stupid, they don't know what they're doing, you know, they wouldn't understand a complex argument. You know, the British class system is absolutely static. Snobbery and prejudice is all over it.

Ross [00:15:10] Next up, Jacob Rees-Mogg tweets, 'Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Hallelujah'. And one smart Twitter user responds, 'Yep, you can declare him fit for work now'. This in reference to the Department of Work and Pensions. Jason, I mean, the fact that someone has to tweet this, pushing people back into work, draconian stuff isn't it?

Jason Hickel [00:15:34] It's draconian, yes. This is not a funny tweet. I think it's funny in some way. But the thing is, it represents a really tragic turn. I mean, not turn. Over the past 10 years this has been the norm, right? I mean, an attack on the poor. We have 14 million people who are homeless in this country. This is extraordinary. When I first arrived here in 2011, I mean, we barely saw homeless people on the street. And now look at it, it's crazy. This election to me is just..., you know, the result is an assault on precisely people that suffered most over the past 10 years.

Ross [00:15:59] Finally, we have this famous picture which was taken in Chile, tweeted by Uptown Berber. 'Neo liberalism was born in Chile and will die in Chile'.

Jason Hickel [00:16:07] When I first saw that photograph, I truly was sort of taken up with the hopefulness of the struggle that's happening in Chile. And it's not just Chile across Latin America, right, where neoliberalism has been tested most brutally, really. And Chile, of course, as you said, is where it was born in 1973. There's something inspiring about thinking about this movement as potentially the beginning of the end of neo liberalism. But the problem is that we keep saying this, right? I mean, in 2008, 2009, we were saying the same thing, this has got to be the end of neo liberalism. We had Occupy Wall Street, et cetera, et cetera. And it's like a zombie. It just keeps chugging along. Where is the constituency for neo

liberalism anymore? It doesn't really exist. And yet, nonetheless, it's still with us. It's extraordinary.

Sharmine Narwani [00:16:44] Like the two state solution in Palestine. It's been dead forever. And you just keep going, you know, keep announcing it. But as long as the institutions that support neo liberalism exist, we're going to have this drawn out for the indefinite future. I mean, they have to change.

Ross [00:16:59] We've shown great self-restraint of not talking fully about the election. But if we're gonna talk about 2019, we've got to talk about the general election. As a non-voting anarchist, give us a pithy roundup of what happened in 2019.

Lisa MacKenzie [00:17:11] Well, I suppose we came in 2019 knowing that Brexit, which you know, that the whole of what was going to happen in December of 2019 was built on. We knew in January 2019 as we came into the New Year, that Brexit was going to take charge of that year. And that's exactly what happened. Every single week, you know, it's been astounding, the scenes that we've watched, you know, of parliament discrediting themselves, each other, the way the media has worked, the way the commentariat have worked, the way that all of this has come together to show, you know, what an absolute... You know, Brexit has been almost like a vehicle that pulled the curtain back from The Wizard of Oz.

Ross [00:17:58] And what's it revealed?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:17:58] It's revealed a bunch of useless, mediocre people who don't know what they're doing. That includes with the media. It includes politics. It includes the commentariat. It includes academics. You know, they've all been sort of hiding behind the curtain and making these narratives and talking narratives. And then when Brexit has pulled the curtain open...

Ross [00:18:25] And everyone's swimming nude?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:18:26] Well, yeah. And that for me is what has happened. And it's happened slowly and painfully on a day by day and sometimes hour by hour basis. And the whole of the British public, make no qualms about this, have watched it.

Ross [00:18:48] So we can get caught put in a parochial mindset of what's happened on Mud Island in England or Great Britain? When the rest of the world looks at what's gone on in Britain, what do they see from your point of view?

Sharmine Narwani [00:19:00] I think the vote over Brexit and these elections, which was clearly to me a second referendum on Brexit, are just a reflection of splits that are happening globally in most countries and most continents. You know, it's like the status quo versus something new. Anything new. Left or right doesn't matter. So this is what it is. You can't even intellectualize it. Why would people be so determined, people who would benefit from a radical program that Labour was offering, you know, the working class in this country, why would they turn their backs on that for this stupid Brexit vote? I voted leave and I voted Corbyn because I thought we had to look at the bigger picture. But people have been split so much everywhere on one issue usually. For me, it means the world is turning. OK. You didn't

hit it this time. It doesn't matter. England's going to chug on. It's a work in progress everywhere.

Ross [00:19:53] So there's a hopeful element to that. When you say the world is turning. Define that. What does that mean?

Sharmine Narwani [00:19:58] Well, we're in an era now where it's almost like the kind of changes that are taking place are the changes that take place after world wars. Okay, institutions start to fray and fall apart. People don't take them as seriously anymore. Financial networks, economic networks, you know, commercial networks start to fall apart. There are new players now building out new instruments which they will use to trade, which they will use as soft power, et cetera. These are these are seismic changes. This isn't just you know, it's a lot of people think, oh, the stock market's up. It'll be down again and back up again. It isn't. These are fundamental shifts and they're showing themselves in different ways in different countries. They can rally around one topic, one issue, you know, a tax hike or a Brexit or whatever. It doesn't matter. It's happening in every single country. And we haven't, unfortunately, framed what's happening yet. It's very hard to.

Ross [00:20:50] Frame it for us. Just frame that bit for us, because what you're actually saying is multipolar world is coming and it's unstoppable. There are different social trends that are moving. So actually, this is a hopeful time because that a lot of people out there thinking this is just a disaster?

Sharmine Narwani [00:21:07] No, it's a very hopeful time. Look in your personal lives when change happens, it's so painful, you know. The times you grow in life, the times you learn, are the ones where you experience pain, not joy or pleasure. So this is just the world turning, you know. And it really is like the end of a world war, because that's the kind of change we're seeing. It's not a little change. It's a massive change across the board.

Ross [00:21:31] Jason, this pain...

Jason Hickel [00:21:33] That's hard.

Ross [00:21:34] We've got to go through this pain because, ultimately, that's where the growth comes.

Jason Hickel [00:21:37] That's hard. I mean, do I feel optimistic or pessimistic? I'm not even actually sure I see what you mean. There's hope. I think that I mean, we're looking at unprecedented popular struggles happening around the world right now. That's extraordinary. That gives me a lot of hope. But at the same time, capital is powerful. And what I worry is that is that capital will prove to be more powerful than we are actually, right?. I mean, it's especially in a time of secular stagnation, you know, what we're seeing is that capital in the global market is just desperate to find an outlet for a surplus. It's looking everywhere, desperately. I mean, look, the elections are partly a consequence of that, right? The extent to which money was piled into the leave campaign, piled into Boris Johnson's campaign, piled into the media to swing things. You know, capital will not go lightly. And so when you have, you know, movements like Jeremy Corby's Labour Party, when you have movements like

what's happening with AOC and Sanders in the US, I mean, these are threats to capital. We have to be serious about that and it's a difficult battle to fight.

Ross [00:22:36] In the second part of these two programs, we're going to come to you all and ask for your predictions. And they have to be absolutely bang on, dated and time stamped, right, and you have to solve all the world problems and just half an hour. But before we go in this program, just tell us each of you, what is the one thing that has really shocked you over 2019? I know you're generally an unshockable bunch, but what's the one thing that's really shocked you over 2019?

Jason Hickel [00:23:03] I'd be happy to talk about the climate for a little while. I was actually shocked by the extent to which 2019 was the year of climate action. That to me was striking. I think I might've predicted that actually.

Ross [00:23:14] Well, it's funny you should say that Jason because on the show last year, Jason said, "Climate breakdown gets worse, triggers political unrest and action." You were right?

Jason Hickel [00:23:25] I was right. And really, I think that 2019 will go down in history as the beginning of real action on climate, in terms of popular movements. I mean, we saw with Greta Tunberg becoming a major international icon. AOC's green new Deal was launched in 2019, remember? Extinction Rebellion became a big deal in the UK. The UK government declared a climate emergency. They were followed not only by councils across the country, but by other nations as well.

Ross [00:23:49] So that really for you, was the...But you was shocked but in a good and positive way?

Jason Hickel [00:23:53] Well, I suppose it was a shock because I predicted it. But for me, this was one of the defining features of 2019. But on the other hand, it was also a year of catastrophic climate failure, like failure in terms of climate action. And we see that very clearly what happened in Madrid this month, right, with the climate summit completely collapsed as a consequence of the US basically ruining the game, despite the fact that it's walking away from the negotiations.

Ross [00:24:18] We're looking forward to your 2020 prediction. You'd better be right again. What shocked you in 2019, Sharmine?

Sharmine Narwani [00:24:24] There's nothing particularly shocking for me since about 2003, you know.

Ross [00:24:29] Really?

Sharmine Narwani [00:24:30] Yeah. Yeah, I know. I'm serious. I was the annoying black sheep of the family saying crisis is coming, lots of changes coming. You could feel the instability in the workplace. You could feel that people didn't feel secure in jobs and still to this date. And of course, you know, I focus on geopolitical changes, so I was seeing that take place in the Middle East. So I don't think anything shocks me anymore. But I will say, if

we're looking at my own Arab specialty, which is the Middle East. What probably was the most shocking event or series of events in 2019 was the US/Iran standoff that didn't happen. The fact that the Americans sent troops to the region, sent their Navy, you know, took a maximalist approach and a lot of bellicose war propaganda. And then Iran shot down a 220 million dollar U.S. drone. Saudi and Emirati energy targets, you know, essential ones, were hit by unknown players and there was a US non reaction. And you could hear the penny drop in the Middle East, you know. So I think for 2019, that's got to be the event that defined, you know, a real shift.

Jason Hickel [00:25:42] But in terms of the Middle East, I mean, the Kurds have not fared so well this year under U.S. policy. It would seem?

Sharmin Narwani [00:25:48] I mean, there's the Turkish invasion of northern Syria. I mean, but none of these things are shocking, is what I'm saying. I mean, you could see them coming. And, of course, the Americans were going to abandon the Kurds, when have they not abandoned the Kurds. So, you know, the Kurds are foolish to, time and time again, ally with the same people and then expect a different result.

Ross [00:26:07] Lisa, you're generally unshockable. What shocked you in 2019?

Lisa MacKenzie [00:26:10] There was something that did shock me. I remember I actually watched, it was about two o'clock in the morning. And this is where I was saying the people, the British public have been watching this debacle. And I was watching parliament and it was when Boris Johnson perogued parliament. And, you know, the thing that genuinely shocked me, not that Boris Johnson would perogue parliament. And actually, I didn't even know what perogue was until that day, and neither did anybody else. So it shocked me that there was this new word that none of us knew. But the shocking bit was Caroline Lucas, Clive Lewis and some other MPs trying to hold on to John Bercow at 2 o'clock in the morning while singing the Red Flag. And I remember watching it thinking, my God, these people, they have no clue. The British public are watching you. Do they not realize that? And I remember watching it thinking whatever election's coming, you've lost it.

Ross [00:27:17] Thank you all very much. That's it for Part 1. Next week, our guests will give their bold predictions for 2020 and beyond. Meanwhile, you can drop the team a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com where you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for those predictions from people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.