

‘The BBC’s Road To Damascus...?’

Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. It is incredibly rare for the BBC to admit that one of their Syrian reports failed to meet the corporation's editorial standards for accuracy by reporting false claims. The programme, having referred to Alex's disclosure in the winter of 2019, said it was "interesting" that they came at a time when WikiLeaks was offering a \$100,000 reward for any leaked materials relating to the Duma incident". The ECU agreed that this amounted to an insinuation about Alex's motives. Similarly, the program's statement that Alex "believed the attack was staged" seemed to the ECU to rest on evidence which, although strongly suggestive, was not so conclusive as to justify stating as a fact that he believed the attack to have been staged. The ECU found that, although they were limited to one aspect of an investigation into a complex and hotly contested subject, these points represented a failure to meet the standard of accuracy appropriate to a programme of this kind". Blink and you'd have missed this admission, but we didn't, and it adds to a volley of misreporting that's dogged both journalism and peace in the Middle East for decades.

Ross: Professor Piers Robinson, welcome back to Renegade Inc. Great to have you.

Piers Robinson: Good to be with you. I'm a doctor now.

Ross: Oh, wow. Well, sorry I'll upgrade it. Dr. Piers Robinson.

Piers Robinson: You'll upset Oliver Kamm.

Ross: Piers, what a difference three years make. When we first sat down together on this programme, it was on the 4th of June 2018, and we were talking about Douma and the fact that you had been labelled Assad apologist and a conspiracy theorist by various bits of the mainstream media. And very recently, the BBC has admitted that the Syria gas attack - the report that they put out, a broadcast on Radio 4 called Mayday: The Canister on the Bed - had, quote, "serious flaws". Just talk us through this story for our audience who may not have kept up with it, but do know intuitively that there's something pretty fishy going on when we report what's really going on on the ground in Syria.

Piers Robinson: Well, the Douma 2018 alleged chemical weapons attack was a high profile alleged attack in a broader context of what had been repeated claims made about allegations made about the Syrian government carrying out systematic chemical weapons attacks against its population. And in 2018 there was such an attack appeared to have occurred and it was controversial straight away. The Russian Federation and the Syrian government denied that they had carried out the attack. There was very rapidly question marks being raised by some of the people who had been filmed in a hospital associated with this attack. And then you had an OPCW Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons went in in order to investigate the attack and really from there on the rest is history. The controversy increased rapidly after it became apparent that there were OPCW persons who were involved with the investigation who were indicating that they'd been some kind of fraud or some kind of suppression of evidence in a way that allowed the OPCW and the US and the French and British governments to point the finger at the Syrian government and say you're responsible for the attack. And that controversy has just grown and grown ever since then. And the stakes

have been very high with this, of course, because the French, British and Americans bombed Syria seven days after the alleged attack in Douma in retaliation for it. So they actually carried out airstrikes on the country. And when the OPCW went in they were obviously under tremendous pressure to find or reach a conclusion which would underpin the French, American and British decision to bomb a sovereign country. And that's been it since then. There's been controversy, and we can talk a bit more about it. It has grown and grown. There are OPCW persons who have whistle blown and spoken out, leaked documents and so on, statements of concern signed by eminent people around the world calling for greater scrutiny of the OPCW. And that's where we are today. The issue remains with a lot of controversy over what happened at Douma and the OPCW investigation of the alleged attack.

Ross: Before we do talk a little more about that, let's just go back to the 4th of June 2018. We'll play this clip because when you were attacked by the mainstream media in the UK, this was the upshot of it.

Video clip (Ross): You have brought this up right at this sort of critical moment when everyone in the West, certainly France, the US, the UK, was gearing up towards taking action against Syria. Dubbed by the mainstream media, specifically the Times, as one of Assad's useful idiots, you were on the receiving end. And I just read a little bit from the Times leader from the Saturday that had hit people's doormats. 'Given all that's known about President Assad's willingness and capacity to inflict harm on a captive population, it would take an extraordinary degree of credulity, sophistry and ignorance to exculpate him of this atrocity. Exactly those characteristics are exemplified by a small group of academics who we report today at respectable institutions that include universities of Sheffield and Edinburgh'. When you read that and you're tarred as Assad's useful idiot, what's your reaction to it?

Video clip (Piers Robinson): In one sense, it's a very obvious propaganda technique. You're asking difficult questions in a middle of a conflict. You're not pro-Assad. You're pro-truth. You want to find out what exactly is going on. And it's a very common tactic as the tactic of calling people conspiracy theorists or pro-Assad or apologists. These are ways of trying to humiliate people in public and to discipline people so that they don't ask questions.

Ross: So the pesky problem with truth is that eventually it comes out. If you've told lies right at the top, whether you're the mainstream media or a politician or whatever it might be, things start to unravel. Where are we now, do you think, on the timeline?

Piers Robinson: On the one hand, I think there's enough factual evidence out there in the public domain to have a pretty clear picture of what has happened. The leaked documents, testimony from OPCW whistle blowers, etc. gives a very clear understanding that information was suppressed and the claim that the Syrian government carried out the attack clearly cannot be stood up. That doesn't make any sense. So in terms of this kind of idea of where are we in this story, I think the evidence is out. I'm not sure if you need much more evidence to come out for any objective observer to reach any other conclusion than was attacks that not occur and is being propagandised and sold as part of this broader narrative of alleged Syrian government use of chemical weapons. The issue at the moment, of course, is this sustained campaign by U.S., French and British to maintain the narrative, to shore it up, the refusal of the OPCW, to answer straightforward questions or to even entertain a very

reasonable request that the inspectors should be allowed to be heard, the dissenting inspectors to be properly heard and for there to be a proper investigation of the Douma case. All of those elements, in a sense, being blocked because the authorities don't want to concede the ground. And I guess the broader explanation for that is that the regime change strategy continues in relation to Syria. The US seems to be continuing on that path, as does the UK, France and other European allies. And so they can't let go of this narrative. It's not served its purpose as it were. So they're doubling down on maintaining the line, not answering questions - OK, reasonable questions, obvious questions such as why was the original interim report produced by the team who went to Douma why was that changed by somebody in secret at the OPCW? Even then, they didn't try to publish it until they were caught out doing that. Now all these questions I can't answer, so they are not answering and then smearing people. And this is where the BBC Mayday series comes in, that you had - as the BBC internal inquiry has conceded - a breach of their editorial standards. And the real breach was what they insinuated was that one of the OPCW persons, as it were, was motivated by money, a WikiLeaks reward, which they had no evidence for, which is untrue. And they put that out and of course, they put that out to discredit the OPCW whistle blower pure and simple and so on. So you've got this kind of full force of the British, American, French governments and then the OPCW trying to maintain the narrative not to open up the can of worms that the Douma investigation is. And then the smear campaigns. And that's just holding this thing almost in balance at the moment. The facts are there but being able to move the issue forward is challenging because of that political drive and because the smear campaign. And because of that, people are scared of talking about it, right? I mean, I think this has been one of the problems from the beginning is that people are reluctant, journalists are reluctant, to engage the issue because they're scared of being called conspiracy theorists or scared of being called pro-Assad or Russian apologists and so on. And you, of course, saw this with the statement of concern that was published in March of 2021 signed by people such as Bustani, first Director General of the OPCW, Hans von Sponeck, and also Lord Admiral West, a British war hero, a Lord. And the immediate response he was being attacked for being sort of pro-Assad or a Putinist and so on in terms of the response he got from the Foreign Office. And these threats and smears have a powerful disciplining effect on people. And I think that that is helping contain this issue, even though the facts are out. And I suspect they will stay contained until there's some broader shift in the geopolitical agenda in relation to Syria. When the Syrian government perhaps falls and so on, or if the US and its allies give up on the regime change strategy, then when those kind of forces are gone, then yeah, the truth will come out. The truth is already out, but it will become much more widely known at that point. But when that is, is anybody's guess.

Ross: Those people in the West who are watching this, who have also had enough of Western belligerence and aggression, regime change, wars, weapons of mass destruction, all the stuff that we've been inundated with over the last 20 years, and the lies, what can they do now to ensure that elected leaders, political leaders, do not walk us into, often on a pack of lies, another one of these conflicts? They don't want the American stealing the oil in Syria, they don't think it's right that oil should be, and the natural resources should be, used to build that country, not siphoned off. They don't want their troops going over there and being killed. They don't want taxpayer dollars, pounds, being spent on absolutely futile exercises. What can those people do now to in some way stand up, not feel helpless and stop this tyrannical military- industrial complex stomping around the world?

Piers Robinson: Well, it would be nice to be able to say that it's as simple as go join in the anti-war movement and so on. But I think we're a much more profoundly serious situation than that. In the last 20 years, 911 itself and all of the questions surrounding 911, all of the regime change wars that we've seen, all of the death and destruction caused by those wars, and now what we see in relation to Covid-19, all of these are very powerful indicators that our institutions in Western democracies aren't working. Our parliaments aren't working. The mainstream media, even academia as well. Look at how weak academia has been in relation to the Syrian conflict. I mean, you know, the few academics who do pipe up and raise some questions have found themselves on the front page of the Times. You know, I think that there needs to be a profound realisation amongst public's that our institutions in the West are not functioning as they should be. We need to rebuild them and to restore them, and that's going to take a long time. And it's going to require people, even if they don't like the idea of it, it's going to require people to be politically engaged to get active. So I think that's that's a problem. That's what we've got now. We wouldn't be where we are today in Syria if we had a functioning media, we had a functioning academia, we had a functioning parliament. The tough questions would have been asked. The truth would have been gotten out. We're living in a world where deception in foreign policy and more widely is so deep rooted and it's so powerful a tool of political control, I think at this point in time. And this is a real root and branch rebuilding of our democracies so that we can then have greater resilience, a more robust defence against wars built on lies and all the destruction that flows from that.

Ross: Vanessa Beeley, it's great to have you back on Renegade Inc.

Vanessa Beeley: Hi Ross. It's really nice to be back on. Thanks for inviting me.

Ross: Vanessa. Wow. Oh wow. So it turns out having been maligned as a conspiracy theorist, having had all sorts of character assassination go on, aspersions cast about you, it turns out that actually the corporate or mainstream media in the UK has had to backtrack on its Syria narrative. It's a narrative that you have been dogged with insofar as you've gone for the truth throughout your journalistic career. Just if you can bring us up to date, bring our viewers up to date, with what's going on, specifically, the BBC having to admit that there were serious flaws in its Radio 4 programme that targeted you quite hard. And that programme was called Mayday: The Canister on the Bed.

Vanessa Beeley: Of course, it was Peter Hitchens who also doggedly pursued this complaint against the BBC and the fact that the executive complaints unit of the BBC has actually come back admitting that there were flaws in this particular episode. Of course, this is really only the tip of the iceberg. There were a number of other complaints that myself and members of the Syria Working Group, Piers Robinson, also submitted to the BBC that have largely been ignored. But the very fact that the complaints unit has come back and admitted that the claim that one of the dissident inspectors at the OPCW that has challenged the final OPCW report on the Douma alleged chemical attack had received incentivization - 100,000, I can't remember whether it was pounds or dollars.

Ross: It was dollars.

Vanessa Beeley: Right. From WikiLeaks, this was claimed in that particular episode. And another element, I think, was that the inspector who's named Alex had not said that the entire chemical event was staged. Now, of course, to some degree, this is semantics. But my belief, certainly, and of course, the belief of one of the BBC producers, Riam Dalati, is that certainly the hospital things were staged. That then, must ask whether the following scenes were also staged and one can easily come to the conclusion that they were. But clearly, the inspector didn't want to let's say, veer away from the scientific facts. So the BBC basically tried to frame this OPCW inspector as somebody that had been paid to lie to discredit the OPCW. That's the bottom line.

Ross: The journalist working on that programme for the BBC, Chloe Hadjimatheou, would have had to come to you, having made all the allegations that she did about you and all the character assassination, she will have had to have come to you and asked you for a right to reply. Did she?

Vanessa Beeley: After the programme was made?

Ross: Before it went to broadcast.

Vanessa Beeley: Before it went to broadcast, I was in communication with Chloe up to the point where she sent me the final questions, which were clearly targeting me in the usual manner, trying to frame me as a conspiracy theorist, someone that was incentivised by both the Russian and the Syrian government that was against the British government. Although, of course, in the case of Syria, I am against the actions of successive British governments. And so I declined to respond to those questions because I felt they were simply going to be edited to the point where I would be framed in the normal manner, as I have been framed by all of these media outlets that are defending US and British involvement in the Syrian war to overthrow the Syrian government.

Ross: Did you have subsequent communication with Chloe after this programme went to air?

Vanessa Beeley: Yeah, we had a number of exchanges that became, let's say, more and more heated because I challenged many of the conclusions that she came to and much of the framing that she produced as part of the programme. And also one of the major questions that I raised was the researcher, one of the primary researchers that the BBC used for this programme, was a Syrian guy called Abdul Kader Habak. Now Habak had, number one, been trained by an outreach agency of the British Foreign Office, Basmal Journalists and Ark. Ark, of course, were also responsible for the formation of the White Helmets in 2013 by the former British military intelligence officer, James Le Mesurier. So already there was a conflict of interest there. But there was also the fact that Habak had been caught filming with Nour al-Din al-Zinki, the group that had actually beheaded a 12 year old child in August 2016. When these two elements were pointed out to the BBC. I received a reply not via Chloe in the end, but by their PR department, saying, 'Well, other media departments have used this guy, so that's our excuse', basically. Chloe, interestingly, sent me an email or copied me into an email by mistake that showed very clearly her investment, her personal investment, in the defence of Habak. She was basically asking the BBC to defend him against the evidence that I was producing, that he 1) worked with brutal extremist armed groups, terrorist groups,

inside Syria, and 2) that he was trained effectively by the British Foreign Office and that this conflict of interest hadn't been made clear by the BBC during the making of this programme, and it still hasn't been clarified.

Ross: When we come to where we are today, as we know, once you tell one lie, you have to tell seven to cover that up and then exponentially, we get to mass untruth. When we get to where we are today with Syria, how does the corporate or mainstream media now get itself out of the position that it's clearly painted itself into? How now, with all the conflicting evidence that's come forward, but all the positions that the Foreign Office has taken and other groups, what does the corporate or mainstream media do now? Is it as simple as, say, mea culpa? Look, we've got this wrong. We've got to go back to basics or is it you know what, we're going to double down and we're just going to tell more and more lies and we're going to fall gras down people's throats and hope above hope that some of it comes to fruition?

Vanessa Beeley: Well, you know, I think this is very much what the purpose of the Mayday series, Chloe Hadjimatheou's absolute train wreck of a series was about. It was about finally discrediting those that were challenging the mainstream narratives in Syria. And the chemical weapons narrative is equivalent to the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. So if you like, I see very much the BBC as an extension of British intelligence agencies and of the British government. So therefore the BBC is not going to be allowed to hold its hands up and say mea culpa, just in the same way as they didn't really over Iraq. I mean, John Pilger held them to account, but they still, to a large degree, doubled down on their narratives. Tom Wright, another producer on the programme, sort of basically put out a tweet defending the judgement by the complaints unit and saying that it still didn't show that the chemical weapons attack didn't happen. So effectively, yes, the BBC is trying desperately to double down. It's being instructed, in my opinion, to double down because let's not forget the British government committed a war crime in Syria if it had proven that the Douma alleged chemical attack didn't happen, and it largely is proven by the dissenting inspectors. So effectively, now, the BBC is protecting the British state against prosecution, potentially, for unlawful supreme, unlawful aggression against the Syrian state. But what I will say is that alliances are changing dramatically in Syria and in the Middle East generally, and at some point my belief is the US is going to withdraw and the US is going to drop the Syria project.. And at that point, the BBC is going to be the emperor with no clothes on. It doesn't speak truth to power, it protects power from truth. So, you know, for me, the BBC is not fit for purpose. It's not a media operation. It's an extension of power. And it is there to silence dissent, to silence investigative journalism. It's not doing investigative journalism. I mean, even after the Mayday series, Chloe Hadjimatheou published, I think it was two 7,000 word articles again attacking me and even doxing me, showing my car that I drive. It's not my car, but the car I drive with the number plate front page on the BBC website. This is not journalism. This is a hate campaign.

Ross: Before we go, Vanessa, people hearing this, watching the mainstream or corporate media and knowing intuitively that something isn't quite right, especially in the wake of WMD and the pack of lies that the British people and others around the world have been sold with monotonous regularity. What does one do now, what does the interested observer do now? Obviously, come read your work. Your popularity is growing massively. What else do people do so they can find out the truth so they can be informed and they don't have to go along with the official narrative?.

Vanessa Beeley: I always say that people should make mainstream media irrelevant because it is largely irrelevant when you consider that it is controlled by such a tight knit community of corporatocracy. Find independent analysts, researchers, journalists that respond to your intuitive belief that something is wrong and can give you answers to the questions that you are asking, but also do your own research. You know, everyone is capable of doing this research if there's something that you're not sure about, research it. Look at those that are saying something different to the to the mainstream narrative. And above all, remind yourself that the BBC and corporate colonial media lies and they will keep lying to you. And so you have to read it with the assumption that they're lying and look for the truth behind the headlines.

Ross: You're asking people to trust their intuition. You certainly trusted yours so much so you moved to Damascus and have been reporting this reliably for many years now. No wonder that popularity is growing. Vanessa, well done for withstanding all the ad hominem attacks. They played the woman, not the bull. It hasn't worked. You're still standing. We thank you for your work. Vanessa Beeley, thank you very much for your time.

Vanessa Beeley: Ross, thank you so much for having me back on and for letting me speak about this.