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NEWS

Top science journal faced secret attacks from Covid conspiracy theory group

A conspiratorial group of extreme Brexit lobbyists mounted an extraordinary campaign against one of the world's most prestigious science journals – part of a series of joint investigations between Byline Times and Computer Weekly

By Computer Weekly and Byline Times

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One of the world's [most prestigious general science journals](#), *Nature*, was the target of a two-year-long sustained and virulent secret attack by a conspiratorial group of extreme Brexit lobbyists with high-level

political, commercial and intelligence connections, according to documents and correspondence examined by Computer Weekly and [*Byline Times*](#).

The group attempted to have *Nature* and its staff put under surveillance and investigated by MI5, MI6, the CIA, Mossad, and Japanese and Australian intelligence agencies. They met Cabinet minister Michael Gove and later asked him to arrange phone taps and electronic surveillance. One member of the group led intrusive investigations into the intimate personal life and background circumstances of senior *Nature* staff the group suspected of “extreme Sinophile views”.

When their campaign flopped and a Covid vaccine promoted by the group failed to reach any form of clinical testing, the group arranged for unfounded accusations against *Nature* magazines and staff to be published by the *Daily Telegraph* and on other right wing news sites. They called themselves the “Covid Hunters”. Their allegations against science reporting helped fuel an explosion in “lab leak” claims on right-wing conspiracy sites.

Pushing their “extraordinary, true story” to a top Hollywood producer in 2020, the group wrote self-adulatory biographies and explained how fate had brought them together ([*see box: Covid Hunter heroes who became victims*](#)). The movie proposal portrayed them as victims of imagined Chinese-led information operations, aided and abetted by an imagined network of communist fellow travellers in the west. The movie idea “has all the ingredients of a major hit”, they blagged.

The producer did not write back. No movie was made. The truth was that their campaign helped flame divisive and damaging rows, potentially hindering international Covid research.

The campaign was led by former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) Sir Richard Dearlove in conjunction with retired history academic Gwythian (Gwyn) Prins, and lobbyist John Constable of the privately funded climate change denial group [*Global Warming Policy Foundation*](#). The scientific member of the group, oncologist professor Gus Dalglish, was a prominent member of UKIP who had

stood as the party's parliamentary candidate in a south London constituency then campaigned for "Leave Means Leave". All were avid supporters of Brexit.

The early months of 2020 were a time of celebration for the gang. "We had a splendid party," Prins wrote to Dearlove the night after Brexit day, 31 January 2020, signing off: "Brexit Baby ready to rock."

Two months later, as infection overcame the world, the five Brexiteers and a Norwegian scientist became convinced that the deadly and newly discovered SARS-CoV-2 virus (Covid-19) had been human-made in China. They came up with a scheme to make money from promoting a vaccine idea from Dalglish and Norwegian colleague Birger Sørensen. Sørensen ran a small Oslo pharma company, Immunor AS. Immunor had previously claimed to have found "functional cures" for HIV, the cause of Aids. Sørensen and Dalglish – and later Prins – described holding stock or stock options in Immunor.

The group began lobbying Britain's prime minister early in the pandemic. A cache of thousands of leaked personal emails reveals how the group hoped they and their contacts could cash in by getting the British government to commit to buy millions of doses of the untested Norwegian-made "Sørensen Vaccine" – and how *Nature* got in the way.

17 March 2020. As the UK faced rising Covid deaths and hospitalisations, and prime minister Boris Johnson refused to act, Dalglish prepared an *Urgent Briefing for the Prime Minister and his Advisers* on vaccine development. Backed by Dearlove, Dalglish claimed that the virus "is very probably the result of laboratory intervention". DNA evidence, he claimed, was consistent with the virus being a laboratory "escapee".

The alleged man-made origin of SARS-CoV-2 had "important implications for vaccine design", Johnson was told. This meant, in the confident minds of the Covid Hunters, that only the Sørensen Vaccine – later called BioVacc-19 – was likely to work and save the world.

“A vaccine based on these findings is currently in production for pre-clinical testing, expected to start in April 2020,” Dalglish claimed – meaning that “UK funding for rapid trials and changes to normal trials protocols are now required”.

As Dalglish finalised the pitch for government funds, the group was confounded when *Nature Medicine*, the peer-reviewed monthly clinical medical subsidiary of *Springer Nature*, published a [scientific report on the origins of SARS-CoV-2](#), showing that it was “not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus”.

The group were, according to the private email exchanges examined by Computer Weekly and *Byline Times*, infuriated by this science-based finding. Science provided clear evidence that their idea was wrong – so undermining their vaccine idea. To the Hunters, this was clear evidence of a Chinese-led conspiracy. The article triggered their campaign against *Nature*. The author of the report, Prins later claimed, was an “arrogant young pup”.



Fearing they could be pipped at the post, impacting hopes for vaccine funding, Hunter group member John Constable began digging for dirt. At the last minute, Constable’s “swift and effective primary research” was added to a new note sent to Downing Street. Using the internet, Constable quickly found out that *Nature* had once visited and written about the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and also that staff had visited Beijing and sent birthday greetings to the Chinese Academy of Sciences on its 70th anniversary. These points were added to the warning note to the prime minister.

Constable later dug into individuals’ hobbies, social media posts, Chinese contacts, lovers, career history and parentage, concluding in one instance that a person’s “tone of voice” when talking about Chinese research showed them to be a “committed Sinophile”.

The writers, Dalgleish and Prins, omitted to state that they held or were offered stock in Immunor. Dalgleish was required to disclose stock options in Immunor in a scientific paper. Emails from Prins disclose that Sørensen offered him stock in Immunor “as recognition for my involvement in the project”. Dalgleish offered to hold these for Prins as a nominee. “Much cleaner please to transfer the stock in my name directly to me please,” Prins wrote back. “I have no ethical problem.”

He added: “We need to do this before the stock value rockets as it will!”

Lockdown


23 March 2020. The UK was ordered into lockdown. The Hunters’ campaign was “co-ordinated remotely by Gwythian from his bucolic summerhouse deep in the English countryside, with encrypted voice and video conferences and messages flashing around the world day and night”, according to the failed Hollywood movie pitch he wrote later.

Prins and Dearlove doubled down on their attack on the science and science journals they disliked. They completed and delivered a pompous [15-page dossier](#) to Cabinet minister and number two to the prime minister, Michael Gove. A large, red diagonal overprint across each page aped the style of genuine government classified secret information with the warning “SECRET – RECIPIENT’S EYES ONLY”.

Titled *Urgent Briefing for the Prime Minister and his Advisers*, the dossier claimed to identify Chinese “agents of influence”. They meant *Nature* and its staff.

“It is now beyond reasonable doubt that Covid-19 was engineered in the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV),” Dearlove and Prins claimed. China was undertaking an “information and influence operation” to trick the world into believing “the natural causation narrative – and, by misdirection, to conceal true origin and responsibility”. There was, they alleged, “circumstantial evidence” that scientific journals were pursuing the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) narrative.

27 March 2020. Prins wrote to thank the team for “support in the mission”, adding: “Michael Gove called me last night to apologise for the fact that Gus had not yet been contacted on the offer ... and that Birger [Sørensen] was yet to receive a call

 Screenshot of leaked document showing the first page of a pompous 15-page dossier from the 'Covid Hunters' to Cabinet minister Michael Gove claiming to identify Chinese agents of influence.



about the Immunor vaccine.

He promised that both these things would happen very soon.”

Prins also informed fellow Hunters that Gove had “received the briefing last night ... I am leaving him to digest it over the weekend. I have advised that he should restrict circulation to himself, the Prime Minister and [advisor] Dom Cummings.”

31 March 2020. Prins again emailed his group, saying: “I am speaking to Michael [Gove] at 1030 and will ask for the warrant and taps a.s.a.p. Once in place, Gus [Dalgleish] will deliver [an imagined bait they thought would reveal that the Chinese were secretly in



The ‘Covid Hunters’ delivered a pompous 15-page dossier to Cabinet minister Michael Gove claiming to identify Chinese agents of influence

control of *Nature*].”

Prins was asking, in effect, for MI5 surveillance to be started against *Nature Medicine* and *Nature*. Prins had also warned of an imagined “China Persons of Influence Network” of senior officials, politicians and academics allegedly under the influence of the communist state. Prins and Dearlove were particularly concerned about praise for Chinese scientific research coming from the UK: “The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] has long pursued a strategy of identifying ‘agents of influence’... who, wittingly or otherwise, can be exploited to advance the interests of the PRC.”

Prins meant not only *Nature*, he explained, but also the Royal Society (of Science) and Imperial College, and the London School of Economics. He wanted them all targeted as nodes of “climate catastrophism”.

Prins and Gove spoke again on 31 March 2020.

Prins’s request for surveillance was “advice which I understand he [Gove] is taking very seriously”, according to an email Dearlove sent after Prins and Gove’s planned discussion. Dearlove mailed a former senior Foreign Office official and intelligence contact asking that MI6 – whom he called “the powers that be” – should have the group “on warrant”. This meant that he wanted electronic surveillance to be used to reveal how Chinese agents were allegedly running their target, *Nature*.

The former Foreign Office official appears never to have replied to Dearlove’s email. The official, who *Computer Weekly* is not naming, did not reply to our enquiries.

Vaccine deadline warning

5 April 2020. Britain’s daily death toll had climbed past 1,250. Prins and Dearlove sent the prime minister a third set of demands via the Cabinet Office. Johnson was informed that after the group had sent him a second secret dossier on 27 March and then spoke with Gove: “All key intelligence agencies are active. This analysis will shortly become public.”

“HMG must brace and prepare to exploit the coming geopolitical storm,” they claimed in bold red capitals. “There will be worldwide fury.”

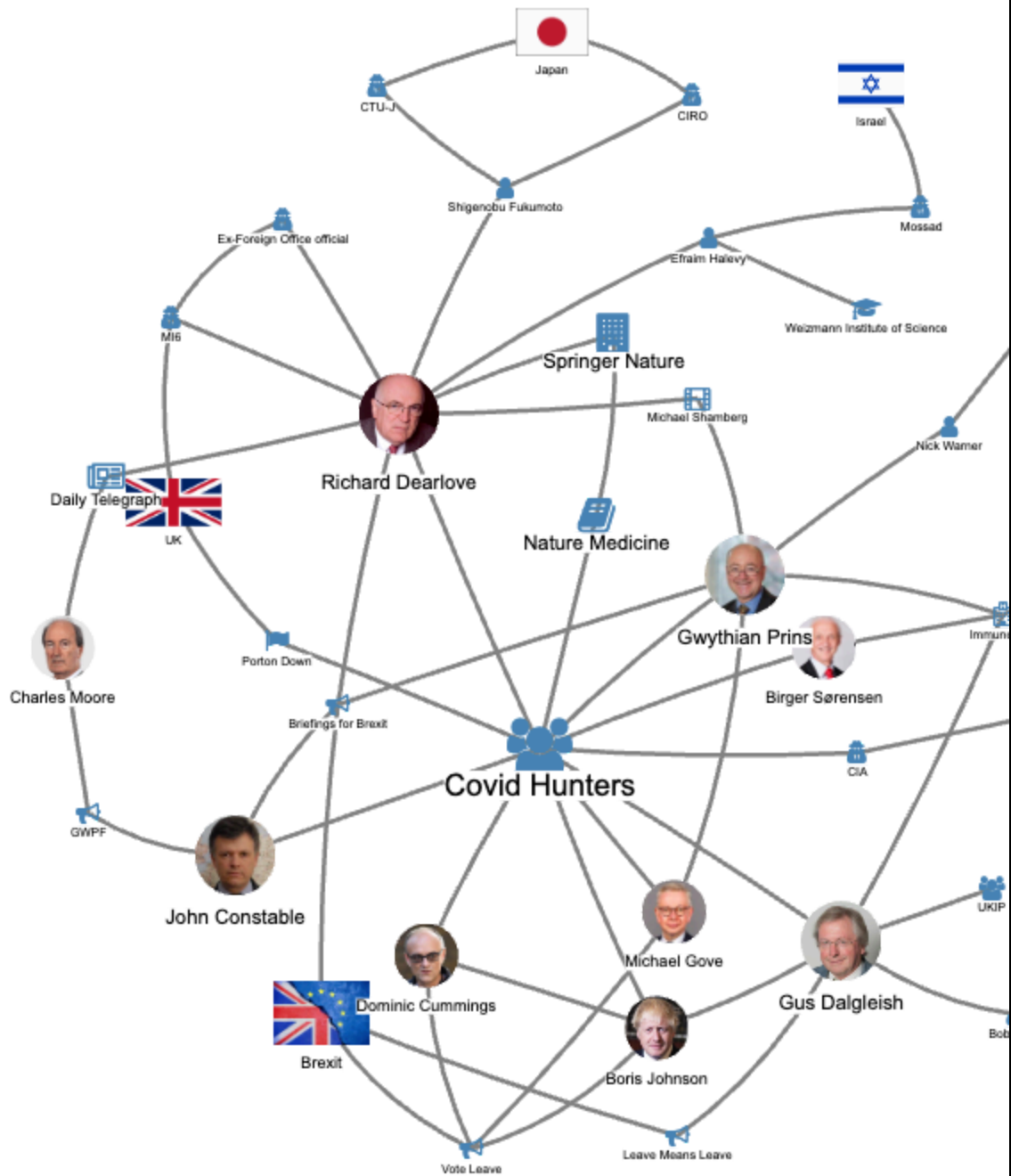
Johnson also faced “an even more momentous deadline” to immediately order millions of doses of the Sørensen Vaccine. Uniquely, this vaccine was “based on the correct aetiology”.

The group told the prime minister he had 24 hours to make up his mind: “The manufacturer is holding Full Priority until 2.00pm tomorrow ... after which the production slot – and the offer of accelerated trials – will transfer to another country.”

The Covid Hunters

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Johnson was also warned of their fury that Dalglish had received a “scientifically illiterate and disrespectfully gauche email from a civil servant” working for the chief

medical officer, proposing “animal trials”. “The last time we checked, human beings are animals,” the group complained.

In an aside, Prins and Dearlove added that the NHS should face “deconstruction”.

There is no evidence in the emails that Johnson or Cummings received, read, or commented or acted on any of the dossiers and instructions sent to Number 10 by the Hunters.

‘Plan B’ to be activated

6 April 2020. Prins and Dearlove informed Johnson that their patience with *Nature’s* refusal to publish their opinions was running out. They warned the prime minister that *Nature* “must accede” and publish “or a Plan B will be activated” adding: “In either case, the truth about Covid-19 and the scientific cover-up will shortly become public.”

In further emails, Dearlove alerted the former head of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, and Japan’s director of cabinet intelligence (DCI) about the alleged Chinese activity. They also sent a briefing package to Australia’s Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS).

Shigenobu Fukumoto, the director general of Japan’s Counter Terrorism Unit, said he would pass the claims to Japan’s DCI and other “top government officials”. Dearlove then offered to arrange talks with MI6. There is no evidence in the email collection that Japan acted on the documents it received.

Prins contacted Australian intelligence officials, including its director general of national intelligence and former spy chief Nick Warner, who had headed ASIS until 2017. The group sent Warner details of China’s alleged activity and their claim about the origin of Covid-19. Prins told Warner to use Protonmail or WhatsApp to create a secure communications channel to the British group. There is no evidence in the email collection of Warner responding.

6 April 2020. A week after Prins met Gove, the group demanded that *Nature Medicine* publish their theory that the Chinese government had deliberately

engineered and manufactured the Covid virus, in the form of a response written by Dalgleish.

The demand was intended as a supposedly cunning trap. Their secret ruse was to unmask the Chinese agents they were sure were working inside *Nature*. Prins sent a draft to Dearlove to pass to MI6: “We will fix a transmission time and I’ll let you know ... if they are watching as we hope,” he added.

Prins and Dearlove’s theory was that if there was a highly positioned agent in *Nature*, and if the possible agent reported their letter to their possible handlers in Beijing, this might be picked up by the phone taps on *Nature* they had asked for – if MI5 or MI6 had paid any attention.

The plot flopped. *Nature Medicine* rejected the response in a polite and considered editorial note: “The content complements other viewpoints that have been considered and published elsewhere, and therefore would be as appropriate for publication in the specialized literature. Please note that this is not a criticism regarding the importance of the matter or the quality of your analyses, but rather an editorial assessment of priority for publication, in a time when there are many pressing issues of public health and clinical interest that take precedence for publication in *Nature Medicine*.”

To Prins and his group, these words were proof of Chinese infiltration – further evidence of what he had told Dearlove was “something nasty in the woodshed”.

Professor Dalgleish, who is a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Pathologists and the Academy of Medical Scientists, then joined the fight. He sent *Nature* increasingly severe warnings. If *Nature* failed to publish, he warned, “we will immediately take appropriate other steps in the public interest”.

Prins noted that ignoring them was “a VERY big mistake by *Nature* ... they are cornered and sweating”. Dalgleish added: “It was a choice *Nature* had made and would have to own.”

Failing to recognise the group’s genius was “extraordinary”, Dalgleish told a *Nature Medicine* editor in a further email: “We can only conclude that the *Nature* editorial

team does not understand that there is no scientific issue in the world at present more important than establishing with scientific precision the aetiology of the Covid-19 virus.”

14 April 2020. Dearlove contacted spy counterpart and former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy and sent him a new briefing the group had sent to the prime minister. Called *The Three Interlocking Arms of The Intelligence Case against PRC*, the new dossier claimed China was “attempting to control the terms of the [virus origins] debate ... with active help from non-Chinese agents of influence, notably at the scientific journal *Nature*”.

Halevy passed the papers on to researchers at Israel’s Weizmann Institute of Science. Following up, Prins told Weizmann Institute researchers that the only others privileged to see their dossiers had been UK prime minister Johnson, advisor Cummings, MI6, Australian intelligence, the CIA, and Britain’s bio-warfare defence centre, the Porton Down Science and Technology Laboratory. There is no evidence in the emails that the group had any form of contact with the CIA or Porton Down.

Separately, Sørensen and Dagleish made at least five attempts to have their man-made Covid theory and vaccine claim published. The peer-reviewed *Journal of Virology* declined, twice. *BioRxiv*, a pre-print archive, rejected two versions as not including “new research”. The US journal *Science* also declined, explaining: “We do not publish papers that are critiques of works in other journals.”

2 June 2020. Cambridge University journal [*QRB \(Quarterly Review of Biology\)*](#) [*Discovery*](#) accepted Sørensen and Dagleish’s paper – but only after they removed claims that Covid-19 was man-made. Dagleish immediately sent the QRB report to famous US virologist Bob Gallo and asked him to show it to White House staff. Gallo had been a leading figure in Aids research in the 1980s.

Two days later, the *Daily Telegraph* published a podcast interview with Dearlove, followed by a piece by former *Daily Telegraph* editor Charles Moore. Moore wrote that China has “[questions to answer](#)”. Readers were told that Dearlove’s “intelligence-service mind made him suspicious about the speed with which the Chinese ... rushed out a series of publications fixing guilt on pangolins and bats”.

Last gasps

9 June 2020. From his “bucolic summerhouse base deep in England”, Prins wrote to an Israeli scientist introduced by Mossad. “Shalom”, he began, before claiming that White House advisers were “highly impressed” and “inspired” by the QRB report. “I can activate other parts of the White House to adopt Biovacc-19,” he claimed. The emails seen contain no record of Prins or Gallo having had any contact with White House staff.

Sørensen again asked *Nature* to publish their alleged discoveries. He was politely turned down: “We hope that you will receive a more favourable response elsewhere.” The gang carried on trying to fuel their theories internationally, for a further year, infuriating scientists and damaging Covid research. As allegations exploded in the febrile US administration, *Nature* ran a [news report](#) of “dire warnings” from scientists (paywall) about the harm.

“The rhetoric around an alleged lab leak has grown so toxic that it’s fuelling online bullying of scientists and anti-Asian harassment in the United States, as well as offending researchers,” the journal warned. “For many researchers, the tone of the growing demands is unsettling ... the volatility of the debate could thwart efforts to study the virus’s origins.”

The [Daily Telegraph hit back](#) the next morning, quoting Dearlove, adding fuel to the fire: “*Nature* has been absolutely outrageous in the way they have co-operated with the Chinese narrative ... Some scientific journals absolutely refused to publish anything that disagreed with the Chinese view.”

He added: “I put *Nature* at the front of the queue. It’s clear that [the Chinese] have run an information operation to try to suppress any other view.”

Nature riposted: “We make decisions based on the strength of conclusions.”

Almost one year later, the gang went back to *Nature Medicine* with a new demand. This time they claimed to have found a “criminal level of proof” that Sars-Cov-2 had been manufactured in a lab. When *Nature Medicine* rejected the paper, Dearlove emailed senior publishing executives at *Springer Nature*, demanding a response: “I

think that a blunt editorial refusal, as previously received, would ... no longer be acceptable.”

Dearlove received the explanation: “The piece is written as a stream of consciousness rather than as a scholarly/scientific paper. It asserts certain assumptions and demands [that] are accepted as fact without sufficient evidence.”

“I can assure you that we do not have a side,” the magazine added. “The right decision has been made in this case.” This was the final rejection of their ideas. Computer Weekly has not found publications or relevant emails after April 2022.

BioVacc-19, the Norwegian Covid vaccine idea promoted by the Prins-Dearlove group in 2020, flopped after failing to attract scientific interest, funding or testing. The [latest news on BioVacc-19](#), published by manufacturers Immunor AS in May 2020, claimed that Biovacc was “in advanced pre-clinical development and had passed first acute toxicity testing”. This typically means that tests found that it did not poison laboratory rats or mice.

Between May 2020 and October 2021, BioVacc-19 was mentioned only in the *Mail Online* and on US and other conspiracy sites. No scientific reports have been published.

Past glories

Dearlove, Prins and other “Hunters” originally came together in 2018 to campaign for an extreme hard Brexit, [Computer Weekly has previously revealed](#). They communicated using encrypted Protonmail email addresses and WhatsApp telephone calls to hide their plans from “Remainers” they suspected infested the government and the Civil Service.

The group’s first campaign, codenamed Operation Surprise, aimed to replace then prime minister Theresa May with Boris Johnson, according to [emails later published by suspected Russian government hackers](#).

Computer Weekly has also revealed that the group [attempted to clandestinely replace](#) Britain’s main national security organisation, the National Security Council (NSC). Dearlove then [leaked the names of three former SIS](#) officials who had run

agents while working as diplomats in China as part of an aggressive right-wing US campaign against Chinese telecoms company Huawei.

The methods used by the suspected Russian government hacking group that targeted Dearlove and Prins and copied their emails in 2022 is well known to security researchers, who have designated its activities by names such as Seaborgium and Coldriver. The Russian group is believed to have used “spear phishing” methods to obtain information from a wide range of British and western targets. The emails were published on an anonymously registered website called [Sneakystrawhead](#), and used in an attempt to discredit Boris Johnson after he gave active support to Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelensky.

Previous articles have explained checks on the authenticity of the material. Every email writer mentioned above was provided with full details of the mails before publication and was invited to respond.

Responses

Asked by *Computer Weekly* to comment on the contents and significance of his emails and documents, Gwythian Prins said: “Nothing which is the result of a proven FSB hack can be relied on.” He repeated a previous comment refusing to “offer any opinion” on the authenticity or accuracy of the leaked information because in his view they were “Russian material”.

Richard Dearlove did not respond to requests for comment. Dearlove previously told *Computer Weekly* that as “this is Russian origin material and not in fact the original uncontaminated material from a Proton account which carried some of my private and personal emails, it is unfortunately not possible for me to respond to your questions”.

Angus Dalgleish, John Constable and Birger Sørensen did not respond to requests for comment about the activities described in the hacked emails. Dalgleish suggested that one of the authors of this article was employed by the Russian government.

After the failure of their Covid campaign, the group moved instead to coordinate attacks on climate change prevention activities, which they also blamed on a Chinese-run “Green Blob”.

Springer Nature told [Byline Times](#) and Computer Weekly that the publishing group did not wish to comment in this report.

At the request of *Springer Nature*, Computer Weekly agreed to exclude from this article the names of the staff members and editors who were targeted by the “hunters”.

Computer Weekly’s investigation has established that the slurs the Hunters circulated and published in the press, alleging that *Nature* and its staff were Chinese agents, were false and baseless.

Covid Hunters – the movie

4 August 2020. The Hunters expected fame and celebrity for their work. They offered Hollywood a project about their efforts to expose the alleged Chinese creation of Covid. The working title was *The Covid Hunters: In Pursuit of the Chimera and the Vaccine*.

Dearlove sent the Prins proposal to producer Michael Shamberg, best known for his 2011 film *Contagion*, about a highly contagious airborne virus that resulted in a worldwide pandemic.

According to the proposal: “The film is the true story of how a group of individually singular and highly accomplished friends came together in March 2020 to find the true origins of Covid-19 and to design a vaccine against it, both of which, by June, they had done. It is a scientific detective story of bold and brilliant research of the highest quality but also of defeating extraordinarily low skulduggery in their struggle to get their work published as the truth dawned that the Chinese Communists and their fellow travellers in the west were striving by all means to silence them.

“The work which the Covid Hunters did in those super-charged weeks will have huge geo-political impact as well as life-saving effect when made public. The vaccine will save lives.”

Helped by a community of “friends of China” in the west, the PRC mounted an “intense campaign to prevent the Sørensen and Dalglish research being published and their

vaccine developed". it said.

"We – the Free World – are in a no-holds-barred contest with the PRC to control the narrative," Prins wrote. "[In] this context we have two advantages over the PRC: telling the truth – and the heft of Hollywood. These assets were deployed before in previous wars."

Covid Hunter heroes who became victims – in their own words

Birger Sørensen – Hero. Brilliant and eccentric with astonishing brain. Uncovered scientific aspects of Chinese cover-up. Passionate 6 Dan Aikido Black Belt.

Angus Dalglish – Hero. World-leading research oncologist. Threatened with instant dismissal by the University of London for suggesting that virus was man-made. Passionate offshore sailor and petrolhead.

Gwythian Prins – Anglo-Dutch polymathic Cambridge don. Ghost who fine-drafted Hunters' papers. Lives in deep west country. Passionate fox hunting man.

Richard Dearlove – Intelligence officer who rose to become "C". "Fears no-one across Whitehall and is feared by everyone." Pivotal in facing full-on CCP Influence Operations. Lives partly in Cambridge. Passionate salmon fisherman.

John Constable – Descendant of famous landscape painter. Polymathic Cambridge don (poetics). Director of the Renewable Energy Foundation. Lives in Constable Country. Passionate pike fisherman.

'Caroline Bell' [not her real name] – Entered Civil Service as a secret agent to spy on Remain control. Heroine of struggle against Establishment "Fifth Column". Worked to expose "Remainer Undead" working with Sinophile agents of influence supporting the PRC.

John F Moxnes – Norwegian defence research scientist. Forced to withdraw from project when threatened with immediate dismissal. Victim of misrepresentation by CCP western fellow-travellers to discredit the Hunters.

The biographic notes above are condensed from "The Gathering", part of "Covid Hunters – the Motion Picture", written by Gwythian Prins in August 2020. Full proposal [here](#). CCP means the Chinese Communist Party.

The Brexit conspirators

This story is part of an investigative series by *Byline Times* and Computer Weekly, examining the activities of a group of self-appointed lobbyists and hard Brexit supporters who attempted to influence government policy on science, technology, climate change and the environment post-Brexit. The secretive group were typical English good chaps, former Cambridge academics, doctors, members of the military, and highly placed civil servants. Led by a former head of MI6, Richard Dearlove, and former history professor Gwythian Prins, they had the ear of Number 10, the Cabinet Office and government ministers. They operated in secret using encrypted email and encrypted WhatsApp phone calls, until their activities were exposed by a Russian hacking group working for the FSB who gained access to Protonmail accounts used by members of the group and published their emails on the internet. Computer Weekly and *Byline Times* have systematically analysed 22,002 leaked documents.



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