

# Piggate

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**"Piggate"** refers to an uncorroborated anecdote that during his university years former British Prime Minister David Cameron put a "private part of his anatomy" into a dead pig's mouth as part of an initiation ceremony for the Piers Gaveston Society. The anecdote was reported by Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott in their unauthorised biography of Cameron, *Call Me Dave*, attributing the story to an anonymous Member of Parliament who was a "distinguished Oxford contemporary" of Cameron's. Extracts from the book were published in the *Daily Mail* on 21 September 2015, prior to its publication.

Downing Street sources responded by saying that Cameron would not dignify the anecdote with a response while friends reported him saying that it was "utter nonsense". Cameron said later that "a very specific denial was made a week ago".

Ashcroft and Oakeshott failed to receive a response from the purported owner of a photograph of the alleged incident, and since the extract's publication no corroborating evidence has as yet been produced to support the anecdote.

In an interview, Valentine Guinness, one of the Piers Gaveston Society founders, said that Cameron "may well have attended one of their parties" but as far as he knew he was never a member.

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## Anecdote

It was alleged that, as a student at Oxford University, former British Prime Minister David Cameron inserted "a private part of his anatomy" into the mouth of a dead pig, as part of an initiation ceremony for the Piers Gaveston Society. The pig's head is said to have been resting on the lap of another society member during the act.<sup>[1]</sup>

In their unauthorised biography of Cameron, *Call Me Dave*, Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott recount that a Member of Parliament and "distinguished Oxford contemporary" told the anecdote "out of the blue" at a business dinner in June 2014. They initially assumed the statement to be a joke, but the MP repeated the anecdote some weeks later, and for a third time with more detail some months after that. The MP claimed to have seen photographic evidence of the event, describing the dimensions of the alleged photograph and naming an individual who he claimed now possessed the image.<sup>[1]</sup>

Ashcroft and Oakeshott failed to receive a response from the purported owner of a photograph of the alleged incident, and since the extract's publication no corroborating evidence has as yet been produced to support the anecdote. In their book, Ashcroft and Oakeshott comment that "Perhaps it is a case of mistaken identity. Yet it is an elaborate story for an otherwise credible figure to invent."<sup>[1]</sup> Speaking to *Channel 4 News* in September 2015, Oakeshott said: "We couldn't get to the bottom of that source's allegations ... So we merely reported the account that the source gave us ... We don't say whether we believe it to be true".<sup>[2][3]</sup> Speaking at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in October 2015, Oakeshott said that the source of the allegation "could have been slightly deranged" and said that "there is no need for burden of proof on a colourful anecdote where we're quite upfront about our own reservations about whether to take it seriously".<sup>[4]</sup>

The anecdote first came to public attention when extracts from the book were published in the *Daily Mail* on 20 September 2015, prior to its publication.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

## Background

Lord Ashcroft had long been a supporter of the British Conservative Party and was its biggest donor, having donated around £10 million, before dropping his support for the party in 2013 due to conflicts with David Cameron, especially his refusal to give Ashcroft a senior role in government despite his donations.<sup>[7][8][9]</sup> Some commentators have interpreted the pig story and other anecdotes in the book as Ashcroft's revenge and reignition of the feud.<sup>[10][11]</sup>

## Response

After being asked about the anecdote, Downing Street said that it would not "dignify" the claim with a response.<sup>[12][13]</sup> *The Independent* reported that Cameron had told friends the claim was "utter nonsense".<sup>[14]</sup> Cameron did not post a tweet on his Twitter account until 23 September, whereupon he received a barrage of pig-sex-related replies.<sup>[15][16]</sup>

Cameron joked about the situation during a talk in Oxford later that week, stating "I've had an interesting week. It's a week in which thousands of trees have died in vain, sales of Supertramp albums have gone through the roof and one man's reputation lies in ruins. I don't think Michael Ashcroft will ever recover."<sup>[17]</sup> Six days after the story broke, Cameron responded to a question about the issue saying: "Everyone can see why the book was written and everyone can see straight through it. As for the specific issue raised, a very specific denial was made a week ago and I've nothing to add to that."<sup>[18]</sup> At the time of the statement, Downing Street had made no on-the-record denial of the anecdote.<sup>[18]</sup> Cameron also stated that he was deferring taking action at the present time to sue Ashcroft over the allegations because he was "too busy running the country".<sup>[19]</sup>

With the specific detail that the source of the story was a contemporary of Cameron's at Oxford, speculation mounted about which of the limited number of candidates could be the source of the story. Conservative Party vice-chairman and former MP Mark Field was initially suspected within his own party as having been the source of the anecdote due to having briefed the co-author Isabel Oakeshott. Government sources accused Field of fabricating the anecdote as a part of a leadership plot, an allegation he furiously denied.<sup>[20]</sup> Other MPs would go on to deny being the source including Boris Johnson and Ed Vaizey as Downing Street announced the launch of an investigation into the identity of the MP in question.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

Valentine Guinness, one of the founders of the Piers Gaveston Society, was quoted by journalist Toby Young as saying that although David Cameron "may well have attended one of their parties", as far as he knew Cameron "was never a member of the Piers Gaveston Society", so would not have taken part in such an initiation ceremony. Guinness called the story "purely malicious gossip".<sup>[23]</sup> Young and Cameron attended Oxford together.<sup>[24]</sup>

On 21 September 2015, James Kirkup in *The Daily Telegraph* wrote, "Toby Young, a Telegraph writer, [...] has investigated Mr Cameron’s university antics and found no evidence of the pig incident. 'I think it’s a figment of someone’s imagination,' he says."<sup>[25]</sup>

## Reactions

Within minutes of the *Daily Mail* posting an article about the anecdote, #piggate, #snoutrage and #hameron became trending topics on Twitter.<sup>[26]</sup> The "Piggate" name was quickly accepted by the media reporting on it.<sup>[27]</sup> Scandals are often named with a -gate suffix.<sup>[28]</sup> This example of social media distraction was so great that there were concerns from some employers about the impact on workplace productivity.<sup>[29]</sup>

After the anecdote appeared, social media users quickly made connections to the Charlie Brooker TV series *Black Mirror* which featured an episode wherein a fictional Prime Minister has sex with a pig under duress. Brooker quickly denied any connection or prior knowledge of the allegations.<sup>[30][31]</sup> Sky New Zealand's official Twitter account advertised its airing of *Black Mirror* with a comment saying "A strangely prudent tale" and using the hashtag #piggate.<sup>[32]</sup>

Suzanne Moore in *The Guardian* compared the incident to the story related by Hunter S. Thompson on Lyndon B. Johnson's campaign tactics early in his political career. Johnson supposedly planned to spread a fabricated story that his opponent had a penchant for "carnal knowledge of his own barnyard sows". Although the story was unbelievable, Johnson's purpose, according to Thompson, was to force his opponent to discuss it even in a refutation: "But let's make the sonofabitch *deny* it."<sup>[33]</sup>

Journalist Solomon Hughes has argued that Ashcroft "has an 18th century attitude towards buying a place in government" and says that Ashcroft thought that his donations to the Conservative Party would provide him with a "shortcut" to a ministerial position. He says that when Cameron "didn't let Ashcroft buy a place in government" Ashcroft filled his book with "barely political smears". Hughes argues that this means the book "tells us something about our political world, but not much about David Cameron".<sup>[34]</sup>

Claims were made that the story was deliberately avoided by some media sources. The initial decision not to report on the anecdote by the BBC and some other broadcasters was criticised by the assistant editor of *The Independent*, Ian Burrell, who described its choice to "dodge" the story of the day as "unacceptable".<sup>[35]</sup> The BBC published the story from 21 September.<sup>[36]</sup>

The publication of the anecdote elicited responses from other politicians as well as media such as a clip by Cassetteboy parodying Will Smith's song "Gettin' Jiggy wit It"<sup>[37][38][39]</sup> and an animated enactment from Next Media Animation.<sup>[40]</sup> HBO's satirical news program, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, also covered the published anecdote, saying 'bizarre is a kind way of describing it'.<sup>[41]</sup>

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn criticised the media's handling of the accusations, telling ITV News: "The media treatment of any politician [over] unsubstantiated allegations, be it David Cameron, me or anyone else is wrong, too much of our media is obsessed with personality politics."<sup>[42]</sup>

UKIP leader Nigel Farage referred to the matter in the context of the upcoming British European Union referendum. After noting that there was the "In" campaign and the "Out" camp, he reflected: "And then we've got the Prime Minister. Or should I call him, in this context, piggy in the middle"<sup>[43]</sup> Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP also made reference to the incident, accusing Cameron of being "pig-headed" with regards to the Scottish independence referendum, 2014.<sup>[44]</sup>

On 4 October 2015, a protest rally outside the Conservative Party conference in Manchester city centre was attended by a reported 60,000 people. A number of demonstrators carried signs or wore costume items referring to the anecdote.<sup>[45][46]</sup> At one of the country's biggest Bonfire night celebrations in Lewes, a large effigy of Cameron with a pig's head was processed through the town and then burnt.<sup>[47]</sup>

In November 2015, solicitor Myles Jackman, an expert on sexual liberties and obscenity law, said that performing a sexual act with a dead animal would not be illegal under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. (He did not address the laws at the time the event was said to have occurred.) He noted that possessing a photograph of such an act would be illegal under the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 if it was produced for pornographic purposes, but not if the purpose was "satire, political commentary or simple grossness".<sup>[48]</sup>

## See also

- Hazing

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