

## EVIDENCE TO LEVESON INQUIRY

**Chris Mullin**

*MP for Sunderland South 1987-2010; a minister in three departments and a former chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee*

1. I note that your terms of reference include the plurality and independence of the media and its relationship with politicians. It is this that I wish to address. It is a regrettable fact of British public life that the power of the individuals and corporations who own much of what we see and read is now so great that the leaders of the two main parties live in fear of them. Rather than confront the media oligarchs and their representatives, they have sought to appease them. This has had a significant impact on government policy, both in relation to the commercial interests of the corporations concerned and in relation to government policy in general. It has also resulted in the trivialisation and debasement of our culture. Successive prime ministers have each, with varying degrees of success, tried to ride the tiger. Usually this has ended in tears. Witness, David Cameron's employment of Andrew Coulson. Or the extraordinary lengths to which Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell went to keep the tabloid media onside. The following passage from the introduction to the diaries of Piers Morgan give a flavour of the problem: *"Bored one evening, I counted up all the number of times I had met Tony Blair. And the result was astonishing really, or slightly shocking – according to your viewpoint. I had 22 lunches, six dinners, six interviews, 24 further chats over tea and biscuits and numerous telephone calls with him..."* (The Insider, p x)
2. A free press is the life blood of democracy. Regrettably, so far as most of the written media are concerned, we do not have a free press. Instead we have one to a large extent owned by a handful of oligarchs and corporations who frequently abuse their power to advance or protect their political and commercial interests. While individual proprietors vary in the extent to which they interfere in the editorial line of their newspapers, they do not have to tolerate views significantly different from their own and, by and large, they don't. In recent years, helped by the erosion of the cross-media ownership rules, the oligarchs have begun to extend their ownership into the broadcast media. Only the fact that our broadcast media is more strictly regulated prevents it being debased and abused in the same way as many of our newspapers have been. One has only to look at Fox News in the USA for a glimpse of what might happen were the regulation of our broadcast media ever to be relaxed. It is, however arguable, and I will argue, that the tabloid virus is gradually spreading beyond the tabloids.

3. Consider who owns our media. The Times, Sunday Times, The Sun – and until recently the News of the World – are the property of News International which is controlled by Rupert Murdoch and his son James. In addition Murdoch has a controlling interest in Sky Television which appears in a majority of British homes. Over the years Murdoch has used his relationship with successive prime ministers to extract significant commercial advantages. Those that come most readily to mind include (a) the Thatcher government's decision to allow him to purchase Times Newspapers without a reference to the Monopolies Commission. (b) The hugely advantageous exemption of Sky-TV from the obligation, which applies to its terrestrial rivals, to broadcast a fixed percentage of domestic or EU-made programmes. (c) The Labour Party's abandonment in the mid-1990s of support for limits on cross-media ownership. (d) During the late 1990s the government turned a blind eye while Murdoch pursued a policy of predatory pricing, clearly intended to sink or inflict serious damage on his competitors.
  
4. Andrew Neil, a former editor of the Sunday Times, has eloquently described how Rupert Murdoch exercises control over his empire. It is worth quoting at length: *“When you work for Rupert Murdoch...you are courtier at the court of the Sun King – rewarded with money and status as long as you serve his purpose, dismissed outright or demoted to a remote corner of the empire when you have ceased to please him or outlived your usefulness...All life revolves around the Sun King. All authority comes from him...The Sun King is everywhere even when he is nowhere. He rules over great distances through authority, loyalty, example and fear. He can be benign or ruthless, depending on his mood or the requirement of his empire. You never know which; the element of surprise is part of the means by which he makes his presence felt in every corner of his domain. He may intervene in matters great or small: you never know where or when, which is what keeps you on your toes and the King constantly on your mind. ‘I wonder how the King is today’ is the first thought that springs to a good courtier’s mind when he wakes up every day.”* (Full Disclosure, p214)

Murdoch, of course, is merely the most successful contemporary media oligarch. In years past, much the same might have been written of Lords Northcliffe, Beaverbrook or Conrad Black.

5. The Mail, the Mail on Sunday and, until recently the London Standard, are or were the property of Associated Newspapers which is controlled by the Harmsworth family. Although previous generations of Harmsworths have been notorious for the extent of their interference in British political life, the current generation are content to leave day to day editorial control in the hands of Mr Paul Dacre. The Mail's interference in the political life of this country for more than 100 years is a matter of record. Less well documented is the extent to which successive prime ministers have been willing to dance to its tune on social issues: the government's recent announcement that, notwithstanding the crisis in the public finances, it has somehow found up £250 million to fund the restoration of weekly bin collections is only the latest example. The principal plank of the Mail's marketing strategy appears to be directed at keeping its' readers permanently apoplectic. Words like “Fury” and “Outrage” occur frequently in Mail headlines.

6. The Daily and Sunday Telegraph, previously the plaything of the Canadian businessman Conrad Black, presently a guest of the American penal system, is now owned by a couple of tax avoiders who live on a rock in the Channel Islands, since when much of its political coverage, often eccentric, has become doo-lally.
7. The Daily and Sunday Express and the Daily Star are owned by a pornographer who has demeaned everything he has touched. He has taken the Daily Express to depths unplumbed by any British newspaper since Lord Rothermere's Daily Mail briefly flirted with the Blackshirts in 1934. As to the *modus operandi* of the Express, I refer you to the statement of the former Express journalist Richard Peppiat in the earlier part of your inquiry. Recently Mr Desmond has acquired Channel Five television.
8. The Daily and Sunday Mirror and The People, formerly owned by Robert Maxwell who grievously abused his ownership thereof, are now under the relatively benign ownership of Trinity Mirror. Arguably, Rupert Murdoch has had as great an impact on the Mirror, a once great newspaper, as it did on The Sun, as the Mirror plunged down-market in order to compete.
9. Which leaves only The Guardian, owned by a trust, The Independent, owned by a Russian Oligarch, and the Financial Times, owned by a large corporation. They all pursue independent editorial policies and are examples of British journalism at its best.
10. There are those who argue that, whatever the quality of our written media and the depredations of the oligarchs or their employees, the impact on our politics and culture has been negligible. I disagree. The impact is considerable.
11. First, the growth of corrosive cynicism, to which Tony Blair referred in his "feral media" speech. *"This relationship between public life and the media is now damaged in a way that requires repair. The damage saps the country's self-confidence and self-belief; it undermines its assessment of itself, its institutions and, above all, it reduces our capacity to take the right decisions in the right spirit for our future"*. (Reuters Institute, 12 June, 2007)
12. Second, it is a sad fact of British political life that there is a growing range of issues on which no rational discussion is possible, especially in the approach to a general election. I list them in no particular order: tax, prisons, asylum and immigration and drugs policy -- and, of course, relations with the EU. These are all areas of policy where mainstream politicians fear to tread for fear of the hysteria than can be organised if they stray from the received wisdom.
13. Third, the hounding of dissidents. Any politician or other public figure who takes a stand on a controversial issue risks what is known in tabloid parlance as "a monsterring". I speak from experience, having been repeatedly monsterged by The Sun for taking up the cases the people wrongly convicted of the Birmingham, Guildford and Woolwich bombings. MPs who opposed the Falklands war, the first Gulf War or the invasion of Iraq found themselves

pictured in the tabloids under banner headlines proclaiming that they were “traitors”. This inevitably generates a considerable hate mail. Indeed the tabloids have among their readers a pool of poison pen writers willing to send letters, or worse, to the hate-figure of the hour. This was brought home to me in the early ‘80s when, following a strike by train drivers, I was invited by Ray Buckton, general secretary of the train drivers’ union ASLEF, to view the large pile of abusive letters, some containing death threats and even excreta, he had received during the course of the strike. Some were delivered direct to his house since at least one newspaper had printed a photograph of his house – a thatched cottage in Essex – with a signpost outside giving away the location. Many of the letters contained the press cuttings that had aroused the ire of the writer and some were scrawled with threats such as “won’t this thatch burn nicely”.

14. Fourth, the tabloid virus is spreading to the broadsheet newspapers and to the broadcast media. Even the BBC is not immune. When Gordon Brown attended the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2009, the political media as a whole decided in advance of his departure that the story would be “Brown snubbed by Obama”. The story raged fiercely for a day or two, but quickly burned out after Brown moved on to Pittsburg for the G20 summit where he had plenty of one-to-one contact with Obama. On an earlier visit to the US, Lobby journalists decided to amuse themselves by seeing if they could get Brown to apologise for allegedly causing the global recession. To the astonishment of the Americans, they pursued this foolish game into the Oval Office of the White House. “Why do you take the Lobby with you”, I asked a friend who worked in 10 Downing Street? Why not just leave the reporting to Washington-based correspondents?” He replied, “because they would cause even more trouble, if we left them at home.”
15. Finally, it is my view that decades of tabloid denigration, have created a corrosive cynicism about politics and politicians that is generally unjustified and which long predates the great parliamentary expenses meltdown (which, I readily concede, was to a large extent self-inflicted). In particular, our media have established in the minds of a fair swathe of the British public three unshakeable falsehoods: (a) that when Parliament is not sitting all MPs are on holiday; (b) that MPs were allowed to ‘buy’ a second home using public money -- whatever abuses may have occurred, that has never been the case; (c) that MPs expenses are part of their salary and that MPs, therefore, had incomes of over £200,000 a year. This figure was achieved by lumping together the salaries of our employees, the office rent and utility bills, the cost of travel to and from Westminster and adding it to our salaries. This was not implied. It was explicitly and repeatedly stated. And not only in the tabloids. An article in the financial pages of the Daily Telegraph on April 4, 2009, by Ian Cowie argued ludicrously and at length that we all owed the taxman £54,000 on account of our supposed £200,000 incomes. A theme to which he repeatedly returned in subsequent weeks. See also the Daily Mirror of March 31, 2009, a front page lead article by Bob Roberts headed “THEY ARE ALL AT IT”: “Greedy MPs pocket an average of £144,176 in expenses on top of their bumper salaries, shock figures revealed yesterday...” These falsehoods are so deeply engrained as to be not worth rebutting. Many local as well as national newspapers report the annual publication of MPs’ expenses in similar terms. Such reporting has become an annual event following the Freedom of Information Act. “Our MPs cost £1m” was the

headline over one such story in my local paper. A similar headline appeared the previous year. This figure was achieved by aggregating the office costs, travel and London allowance of the half dozen or so MPs in the paper's circulation area and then implying that it was income. In case anyone was in doubt, the final line of the report slyly added, "The national average wage is...."

16. "OUR GREEDY MPS DEMAND A MASSIVE PAY RISE" (Daily Express 18 June, 2008)) is another is another favourite theme. The trick here is to find an MP, usually anonymous, willing to assert that in his or her view MPs salaries should be at least £100,000 and then to present this as if it were the norm. In fact the pay rise subsequently agreed was 2.25 percent, in line with the rest of the public sector. I have not checked, but I would be surprised if the outcome was reported by the Express. Such chicanery is not confined to the tabloids. "MPs set to claim £40,000 perk" was the heading over a front page lead in the Sunday Times of June 22, 2008 by the paper's Whitehall Editor, Marie Woolf. This was much the most fanciful of a number of options considered by the Members' Estimates Committee for reforming MPs' remuneration and expenses. In fact the option chosen was at the opposite end of the scale: to leave the system unchanged, but to require greater scrutiny. Again, I have not checked, but I would be surprised if the outcome was reported in the following week's Sunday Times.

17. What, if anything, can be done? Should we just shrug our shoulders wearily and accept the debasement of our culture and our politics as a fact of life? And even were we to diminish or even eliminate the influence of the oligarchs, what guarantee is there that anyone better would replace them? If we accept that, like the banks, the key problem with News International (and other media empires) is that they have been allowed to grow too big, then part of the solution is surely to make them smaller. This is an issue I have pursued for some years. On January 18, 1995, I moved a Bill which would have confined national newspaper ownership to one daily and one Sunday per proprietor. It would also have imposed strict limits on cross-media ownership and required that only EU citizens should be allowed to acquire a significant stake in a British media corporation. There were no takers for this at the time, although John Major told me some years later that in the mid-90s he did, very quietly, examine the possibility of limiting ownership of British media to EU citizens. He dropped the idea after concluding that it was not, at that time, politically possible. I respectfully submit that now, for the first time, it is politically possible to contemplate limits on the size and nature of ownership of British media and I invite you to recommend accordingly.

18. Specifically, I suggest:

**(i) that no corporation or proprietor be permitted to own more than one daily and one Sunday newspaper and that those who do should be obliged to divest;**

**(ii) that ownership be confined to EU citizens -- in line with the rule in the USA that confines ownership of the US media to US citizens;**

(iii) that no individual or corporation that has a controlling interest in a British national newspaper should be allowed a more than ten percent interest in our national broadcast media and vice versa;

(iv) that consideration be given to devising a test as to who might constitute a fit and proper person to have a controlling interest in any part of the British national media – and that it be somewhat more rigorous than that currently applied by OFCOM in relation to the broadcast media .

19. That Newscorp should be allowed to acquire a much larger holding in Sky-TV subject to the following conditions:

- (i) That the company is obliged to relinquish control of its national newspapers;
- (ii) That Sky-TV is obliged to compete on a level playing field with commercial terrestrial channels – in particular that it is obliged to broadcast a similar proportion of British or EU-made programmes and to continue funding an independent news service.

20. Desirable though it is, merely obliging the largest media corporations to downsize, will not by itself put an end to the abuses which your inquiry has documented, though it may have some impact on the culture of impunity that has thus far existed. **Any lasting change will require a set of ground rules providing for a minimum standard of integrity. To be effective these would have to be statutory.** It will, of course, be objected that any such proposal is an affront to the notion of a free press. This is, of course, nonsense. Because (a) much of our written media is not free, it is owned by a handful of corporations and oligarchs who have grievously abused their powers; and (b) we already have statutory regulation of our broadcast media and that, by and large, works well.

## Statement of Truth

**I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true**

**Name: CHRIS MULLIN**

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