

31 May 2012

Leveson Inquiry Witness Statement

1. I, Margaret Aspinall, Chairman of the Hillsborough Family Support Group, on behalf of our group, have been closely following your important Inquiry. I appreciate that your consideration of the issues is now well advanced but, before you conclude, I felt it important to write to you for two reasons:

2. Firstly, to share with you my sincere belief that our experiences over the last 23 years are highly relevant to your terms of reference and could help shed further light on more recent events (including phone hacking) by placing them into a broader historical context. What happened to our families was in many ways a forerunner and people are only now saying things that we, the Hillsborough Families, have been saying for the last 23 years.

3. Secondly, to bring to your attention a specific event relating to the conduct of News International which we believe is relevant to Part 2 of your Inquiry. As you may know, just days after the terrible events at Hillsborough in which 96 people lost their lives, stories appeared in national and regional newspapers - most prominently in The Sun - which made dreadful and untrue allegations about the tragedy and the conduct of Liverpool supporters. Ever since, our families have been fighting to undo the damage caused by these lies and to clear the names of our loved-ones once and for all.

4. It seems to me that the harm our families suffered all those years ago was caused by the same problem which is the focus of your Inquiry: that is, unaccountable collusion between the press and police working against the public interest and, in our case, natural justice. It is our belief that the South Yorkshire Police was the source of the stories, which were printed in lurid terms without being properly checked, in a crude attempt to shift blame off the police force and onto ordinary supporters. This was widely suspected at the time and should have provided an early warning about the unhealthy relationship between press and police. But it was left unchallenged and this unaccountable culture of the press has grown and grown over the years leading to the terrible intrusions of privacy which your Inquiry has uncovered.

5. The specific incident that I wish to draw to your attention happened to the Committee of the Hillsborough Family Support Group five or six years ago. The HFSG Committee was requested to attend a meeting with Graham Dudman from The Sun. Mr Dudman had been sent to meet us by Rebekah Brooks, who was then the editor. The meeting was recorded, on our insistence, for the BBC, the producer's name was Ash. Unfortunately, I cannot find my copy of the tape, but I'm sure you would be able to obtain a copy of this from the BBC?

6. Ms Brooks was not the editor of The Sun at the time of their infamous headline. Perhaps I could say that she was trying to make amends for her predecessor. But the offer that was put to us at the meeting came with conditions: if we allowed the Sun to publish that we, the Hillsborough Family Support Group, accepted their apology then they, in return, would help us in any way they could to get to the truth about Hillsborough. Our committee was informed that they would do a lot of digging and also find out the name of the person who told the lie to them. They also said they would help us to perhaps build a sports centre for children in Liverpool, or anything else we might need. We informed Graham that we could not make such a decision without discussing it first with the family members of our group. We mentioned his offer to the families at our next family meeting and they were appalled at the offer, which many saw as a bribe, and voted against it. It left a very sour taste in all our mouths. Our families have suffered a great deal over the past 23 years, but nothing can compare with the untold damage that their article caused us at a time when we were already suffering the pain of our individual losses.

7. The Sun newspaper tried to bribe us to accept their apology, which I find disgraceful, disrespectful and certainly dishonourable to the memory of the 96 and all our survivors. We know that this was the way the media reacted back then and it is still the way The Sun conducts its business today.

8. I wanted to draw this matter to your attention as it seems to me highly relevant to your Inquiry. If you would like me to give oral evidence to your Inquiry, then I would be glad to so as I have a strong feeling that people need to know how the press in our country has been operating for many years.

9. As you may know, we are hopeful that the truth about Hillsborough will finally be told. Later this year, the Hillsborough Independent Panel will disclose publically-held documents and report on how that adds to public understanding of the tragedy. While it may touch on issues mentioned here related to the conduct of the press, the focus is on the actions of public bodies. It is for this reason that I make this approach to you so that you may help us tell the whole truth about Hillsborough and finally hold News International properly accountable for the terrible suffering they have caused to us.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

Dated: 31.5.2012.....