

LEVESON EVIDENCE

- Witness statement from Rt Hon Peter Riddell
- 1. I am Peter Riddell. At present, I am Director of the Institute for Government, a non-partisan charity concerned with improving the effectiveness of government. For nearly 40 years I was a journalist: on the Financial Times from 1970 until 1991; and on The Times from 1991 until mid-2010. For the last 18 months of my time on The Times I worked for three days a week on the paper and for two days as a Senior Fellow of the Institute for Government. In my first decade as a journalist, I primarily covered finance and the economy (as property correspondent, a member of the Lex team and as economics correspondent of the FT- and in the latter role I had considerable contact with politicians and civil servants). Nearly three-quarters of my career was as a political journalist: from 1981 until 1988 as Political Editor of the FT, running its political news team at Westminster; then from late 1988 until 1991 as US Editor and Washington Bureau Chief of the FT; and from 1991 until 2010 as a political commentator for The Times, under various titles but essentially as a commentator and analyst of British politics. Apart from my first 1991-92 year on the Times spent in Wapping, when I was both a political columnist and a part-time leader-writer, the rest of my career on The Times was based at Westminster. (I had minimal managerial responsibilities in signing off the expenses of the political team and in supervising the budget for opinion polling.) There are two relevant aspects of this experience. First, that for thirty years I worked away from the head office of the paper, whether the FT or The Times, visiting it once a week at most and I was therefore detached from what happened there. Second, I had very close, daily contact with politicians, both on an informal basis (bumping into politicians around the Palace of Westminster) and more formally at scheduled meetings. Moreover, these contacts had been developed over a long period. Separately from my career as a journalist, I have been involved for nearly two decades with the Hansard Society, a non-partisan body concerned with promoting understanding of Parliament, which I have chaired for the past five years. Most recently, I was a member of the privy counsellor inquiry into detainees - which is now being wound up, and from which I resigned at the end of 2011 to take up my current post.

Relations between politicians and the media

- 2. Politicians and the media have always been close. As I wrote in my 2011 book, 'In Defence of Politicians- in spite of themselves', (page 109): they are 'locked in an embrace of mutual dependency, occasional friendship, frequent suspicion and barely hidden bitterness and scorn. The relationship will always be tense, for good reasons since the interests of seeking power and governing, and exposing and scrutinising, are fundamentally different. But we have moved a long way from the High Victorian talk of the Fourth Estate or the grand assertions of press independence in Delane's

Times. For many politicians, the media are the enemy, while, for many in the media, the political class is inherently corrupt and weak'. There are dangers equally of 'golden ageism', believing that everything was fine in the past, and of exaggerating recent developments. There is a wonderful passage in Trollope's 'The Warden' about Tom Towers, a thinly disguised version of Delane (who edited The Times from 1841 to 1877). Towers, he wrote, 'loved to listen to the loud chattering of politicians and to think how they were all in his power—how he could smite the loudest of them, were it worth his whole to raise his pen for such a purpose. He loved to watch the great men of whom he daily wrote and flatter himself that he was greater than any of them'. The relationship between politicians and the media has always combined closeness and volatility, and a large dose of hypocrisy. I will address more specific points about the relationship in later answers and focus here on what has changed.

The key recent change in the dynamic has been that the media (and this covers a wide range of organisations and people) have sought to supplant politicians as wielders of power, however much they disavow such ambitions, or, at least, to be sought after for their opinions and views. This has applied as much to big name, celebrity columnists as to editors and proprietors. Phrases such as 'we are the only opposition' when one party is dominant underline this mentality. This has reflected a tone of contempt towards politicians- viewing them as all scoundrels, in it for themselves and inept. Politicians have increasingly seen themselves as the weaker part of the relationship and have assiduously courted owners, editors and even ordinary journalists. Over three decades, I attended many breakfasts, lunches and even the occasional dinner between the editor and senior executives of the paper for whom I was working and the Prime Minister or another senior minister. There was invariably mutual flattery, and at least pretended interest in the paper's leaders and in each other's opinions. The worst experience were the dinners and receptions held at party conferences where editors and newspaper executives appeared to wine and dine leading politicians. These could often be gruesome and embarrassing events at which the often naive opinions and prejudices of the newspaper executive were treated with awkward politeness by the senior politician and fawning approval by the other executives present. I always regarded such meetings as demeaning for the politicians involved. Courtship of this type has invariably been followed by a sense of betrayal. Recent prime ministers—John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron—have all sought close relations with the media, at various levels, from proprietors, through editors to political correspondents, during their rise to the top. But, when they have been in office for some time, the relationship has soured as media criticism has increased, and each PM has complained about the stridency, intrusiveness and unfairness of the media. Both the initial closeness and later disillusion have been detrimental to the public interest. It would have healthier to have a more distant, workmanlike, relationship throughout.

3. The main benefit to the public from the relationship between politicians and the media is a better informed debate on the main issues of the day. As a political reporter and commentator, I saw my main role as using the insights which I gathered from my experience, and privileged access, to inform readers about what was happening in politics. I could provide information, insights, context, perspective and judgement- part of the broader process of holding politicians, and not just governments, to account. Politicians know that the relationship with political journalists provides a crucial, though not sole, means of communicating their message to the wider public. That involves informal as well as formal contacts, understanding each other, usually over a long period. After the 1983 general election, I asked the late John Smith which of the small new intake of Labour MPs I should get to know. He said Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. I followed his advice, to the benefit of my readers as well as myself over the following nearly three decades when I talked to them often, and so was able to understand their thinking and approaches. The risks to the public interest are from the media and politicians becoming too close. Inevitably, you get to know politicians pretty well over the years, particularly those of roughly the same age, some of whom were university contemporaries. While I mixed with some socially from time to time, my rule was that the relationship had to be robust enough – and implicitly not too close – so that I could write critically about a politician contact—and for the politician to recognise the legitimacy of this. The other danger is of journalists being too politically identified with MPs or ministers. The past 20 years has seen the rise of the committed political journalist. You can regard this as being more honest, ending the pretence that journalists do not have views. But it risks turning political reporters—as opposed to columnists—into propagandists, contrary to the proper role of journalists and the media.
4. There is no fundamental distinction in the relationship between the media and politicians in government or in opposition. Any assiduous political journalist will want to maintain close relations with leading politicians regardless of whether they are in government or in opposition. Indeed, contacts developed the opposition years will often prove their worth when the politician becomes a minister. Access becomes more restricted then and ministers are more likely to make themselves available to journalists with whom they have built up a relationship in opposition. The same point applies to developing relationships with promising backbenchers and junior ministers.
5. Again, I do not think that the interaction between politicians and the media changes very much in the run up to general elections. Obviously, pre-election periods are times of heightened public interest in political issues but there is no real change in the relationship, except perhaps that the media exhibits both the best and worst sides of its behaviour—best in terms of extent of analysis of the performance and

pledges of rival parties and candidates and worst in terms of increased partisanship and bias. However, I am very sceptical about claims that the media, and in particular the press, have a significant, let alone a decisive, influence on the outcome of elections. The evidence is that the press follows its readers on voting intentions rather than leads them. In general, what matters is the tone and substance of press coverage between elections rather than during campaigns. For instance, Rupert Murdoch's decision to switch The Sun to support Tony Blair and New Labour at the start of the 1997 election campaign had little or no effect on the voting preferences of Sun readers over the following weeks. Readers of The Sun had already moved decisively against the Conservatives over the previous three or four years. What mattered was The Sun's earlier hostility to the Major Government not its final backing for Labour.

6. Politicians and journalists are always going to mix informally, as well as formally, and so they should. But it is in the public interest, as well as in the interests of both politicians and the media that such contacts be less cosy. They should be more robust. The guiding principle should be one I applied during my time as a journalist, told to me when I was a financial writer in the 1970s well before the days of FSA regulations. It was described as the Private Eye test: can you defend what you have said or done if it appeared in Private Eye, not that private contacts or conversations should appear in Private Eye, but could you defend yourself if they did. This always seemed to be me a good and workable guide in a world where many contacts are informal. To insist that every contact between a journalist and a politician is put on the record and declared is unworkable and naive. I have not discussed in detail the system of unattributable lobby briefings to accredited political correspondents at Westminster, since it is now largely defunct. This closed, quasi-masonic system of nods and winks still existed when I became the FT's Political Editor in 1981. This system of briefings operated against the public interest since it allowed government spokesmen to escape responsibility and it encouraged lazy and pack journalism. This broke down in stages from the late 1980s' onwards and- in the world of the internet and 24 hour news—it is now largely irrelevant. My comments refer mainly to the contacts between political correspondents and politicians, not those between editors and owners and politicians, of which I have little or no direct knowledge. I believe that all contact at the level of editors and corporate executives with ministers and civil servants, whether formal or social, should be recorded and published, going beyond the existing registers of such meetings to cover social contacts.
7. There are big distinctions between the press and other media. When I became a political journalist, coverage was dominated by around 10 national daily newspapers and three terrestrial television channels (this was before Channel 4) plus radio. The world has been transformed by 24 hour news, a multiplication of channels and the

internet, blogging, social media etc. These developments are generally positive by broadening the debate about politics. Of course, there is a downside in increased stridency, and partisanship. To that extent, the tone of political debate has become more heated and biased against information and understanding in favour of the expression of (often angry) opinion.

8. Sticking to the area of political journalism, I believe, for the reasons stated above, that what matters are changes in behaviour not a change in regulations (apart from the specific example at the end of paragraph 6).

Particular questions about the influence of the media on public policy

9. I have no direct knowledge of any influence by the media on the content or timing of the formulation of a party's or a government's media policies. Like my colleagues on the political teams of the FT and The Times, I had no involvement in the contacts between the papers' owners and politicians on media and regulatory issues. All such contacts were contacted separately.
10. The impact of the media on government policy more generally is a fascinating, though elusive, topic. For the reasons stated earlier, politicians, and, in particular, ministers, are often nervous about the media reaction to policy announcements. They are too nervous since they exaggerate the influence of newspapers over their readers, not least given their declining circulations and the increasing diversity of media outlets. But what matters here is less the reality of media influence than the politicians' belief that the media does have influence. The political response is both tactical and strategic. By tactical, I mean that politicians and their advisers tailor the announcement of events to gain favourable media coverage—what is popularly known as spin—by pre-briefing a speech or new policy initiative, or giving it selectively to a particular media outlet or journalist. Journalists are never going to reject the chance of such exclusives. When presented with such stories, I always tried to check them, to ensure balance. For instance, Alan Clark recorded in his diaries about how, in March 1984, he floated with me a story about David Young, now Lord Young of Graffham, being made Downing Street chief of staff. As I knew, Clark's aim was to create a public fuss to block the appointment. He describes my subsequent front-page story in the FT as 'the fish has taken'. What he did not, and could not, know was that I had checked out the story with Bernard Ingham, the Downing Street press secretary, without obviously naming my source. So I was able to write a balanced, and accurate, as well as exclusive account of an important political story.

The danger is that such stories are presented uncritically and that, increasingly, there is no follow-up when the announcement is made. That is more a case of the politicians influencing the media. The urgency of 24 hour news can also force policy

decisions or often gimmicky initiatives so that ministers can be seen to be in charge and having a grip. This does not always amount to sensible public policy. Ministers have a tendency to make policy up as they go along, as during the fuel crisis of September 2000 and the foot-and-mouth outbreak of the following spring.

Much more important is the strategic response. The media has had a long-term influence on some policies: for example, the increasingly euro-sceptic tone of the News International papers, the Daily Telegraph and, later, the Daily Express since the early 1990s made politicians of all parties more cautious over Europe. The politicians have been afraid that media opposition would both make it impossible to win a referendum where one had been promised, as over euro membership and the European Constitution, and would risk making media outlets generally more hostile. The coverage of immigration, and especially asylum seekers, by some papers has made it harder to devise and implement sustainable and workable policies.

Equally significant, though less discussed, has been the influence of the media in making decision-makers more cautious and risk averse. When something goes wrong, an accident occurs or a mistake is made, many papers are eager to find someone to blame. There is little acknowledgement that mistakes and failure are inevitable in any organisation and that seeking blame is likely to inhibit innovation and experiments. This blame culture undoubtedly works against the public interest.

This media influence over policy has been expressed through personal contact between media owners and editors and politicians, as well as through the content of papers (often through biased news stories as well as comment). Newspapers invariably say they are speaking on behalf of their readers. On some issues, such as Europe, the papers probably do reflect the euro-sceptic views of many British voters, which they themselves have reinforced, if not created. But often newspaper claims to speak for their readers are humbug. There has been no real attempt to assess the views of readers on a proper basis. The number of occasions when media outlets advance their own explicit commercial interests are rare though various News International outlets have pursued anti-regulatory and anti-BBC agenda.

11. The media's influence on public appointments has been mainly negative, in helping to force people out of office, rather than in promoting the successful candidacy of new appointees. When a public or political appointee runs into trouble, a strong momentum can develop in the media against them remaining in office through a succession of high profile negative stories—10, 15 or 20 questions that x minister must answer and x hangs onto office etc. Such coverage is not automatically fatal but on many occasions it is. However, the media is usually only part of the pressure against a minister and often as important is a Prime Minister seeking to head off damaging criticisms by sacrificing a colleague or adviser. The problem with media pressures is that they do not give politicians and advisers time to reflect, to find out

more and to reach a balanced judgement. Twenty-four news forces instant responses and they are not always fair or in the public interest. Lord Mandelson's second resignation from the Cabinet in January 2001 was an over-hasty and unfair move resulting from politicians' panic in face of media pressures.

The media is less influential in securing appointments—particularly those conducted through formal procedures. There is, however, a familiar pattern ahead of ministerial reshuffles where senior advisers, party whips and occasionally civil servants float the names not only of those they would like to see dropped but also of possible candidates for promotion. But that is true in all walks of life.

Concluding thoughts

In general, politicians and the media are bound to have a close relationship. But it needs to be less cosy, more open and more robust. I have discussed these issues previously in my chapter on the media in 'In Defence of Politicians, in spite of themselves', published by Biteback in 2011, and in an article 'The Rise of the Ranters: Saving Political Journalism', in 'What Can be Done? Making the Media and Politics Better, edited by John Lloyd and Jean Seaton, and published by Political Quarterly and Blackwell Publishing in 2006.

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April, 2012