

LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

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WITNESS STATEMENT OF LAURA KUENSSBERG

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I, LAURA KUENSSBERG, of ITV News, 200 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8XZ WILL SAY as follows:

I have recently received a letter from Kim Brudenell, the Solicitor to the Inquiry, dated 5 April 2012 and I respond to the questions raised in the equivalently numbered paragraphs below.

1 I am the ITV News Business Editor having joined ITV News, produced by ITN, in September 2011. Prior to joining the ITV News team I was the Chief Political Correspondent for the BBC News Channel having been with the BBC for more than a decade. I started out in journalism as a BBC News trainee in 2000 after working in local TV and radio in Scotland and as an intern on NBC political programmes in the United States. I moved to London as the producer to the BBC Social Affairs Editor, Niall Dickson, and then to the Daily Politics programme in 2003 as a reporter.

2 From my perspective as a broadcast journalist, the dynamic of the relationship between politicians and the media has been, inevitably, affected by the dramatic speeding up of communications generally. This has placed extra demands on politicians who, like journalists, are expected to be pretty well permanently accessible. This has meant that there has been more communication in recent years between journalists such as myself and politicians.

For example, I find that I am in touch with politicians, and increasingly business figures (I am covering business stories now), by text, as it is more immediate, rather than by letters or email.

The relationship between politicians and business leaders and the media is still symbiotic. But I personally believe that the public interest is better served by this new additional and speedy access to politicians. Newer MPs seem up to speed on the technologies available to them and accepting of the need for this access (which I accept can be potentially intrusive) as well as being aware of the benefits to them of it.

I think the public have become more informed as a result of this free flow of information and more demanding of accurate information. Things may have become more informal with many

journalists (including myself) on first name terms with businessmen and politicians but I do not think that this necessarily suggests any potential difficulty in holding the powerful to account.

This increasing informality is not evidence of too close or improper relationships but a general reflection of a change in society.

Viewers of the journalism of the BBC and ITN (the organisations for whom I have worked more recently) tend to have access to breaking news stories online or through 24 hour news on television or radio and expect greater analysis from journalists such as myself during main bulletins like the Ten O'clock News. It seems to me people want more than simply what Government Minister A said today and the response of Shadow Minister B but probing and independent punditry, with recent developments being put into context. In broadcasting, one has to be impartial as well as accurate and, unlike as can be the case with some newspapers, I am not there to be giving my personal opinion but an impartial one.

Increasingly there seems to me to be a role for journalists to act as curators, filtering through the increasing amount of information to identify what is important and explain, during main television bulletins, the significance of developments. Journalists like me also use Twitter and write online frequently to provide the public with more instant updates as news breaks.

So I would not view there to have been a fundamental change but things have got quicker and potentially better, with journalists seeking (demanding!) instant responses from all stakeholders in the running of the country (politicians, the business community, journalists, viewers and so on) whilst we all have much greater access to knowledge (from statistics to a particular politician's old quotes) thanks to the internet. I have found the business world to be more effectively secret than the political one, perhaps because of the financial implications of leaks, effective city regulation and concerns in business that ill judged leaks could amount to criminal conduct such as insider trading. But subject to journalists always having in their minds why information might be being leaked to them I still think there is a legitimate role for the leaking of information to journalists as this can continue to serve the public interest. Those who work in politics, business and elsewhere in the public eye are sophisticated in their attempts to put out their particular message and it is incumbent upon TV journalists to be diligent, accurate and independent (and sometimes even brave) to avoid these pressures, to keep relationships professional and ensure that the viewer gets as complete a picture as possible.

I think it is important that we should continue to have good access to politicians (and business figures) available to journalists as this remains in the public interest. The personal relationships that can develop, so long as they remain professional (or at least disclosed), are important and help ensure that important information (such as Government or shareholder disharmony) reaches the public domain.

I am generally aware that some politicians seem to choose to have closer relationships with particular newspapers and individuals at those newspapers and I do not regard these relationships as necessarily inappropriate. In broadcasting, however, there is a tradition as well as regulatory imperative in there being a greater distance between politicians and journalists. In my experience I have found that politicians and business figures seem to respect my need for due impartiality. I have not, for example, become close friends with politicians I have interviewed or interacted with, or their close advisers. I have not received or been offered frequent or extensive hospitality which could be likely to be seen as unethical. Put simply, while conversations are often robust, I have never felt improperly pressured to report a story in a particular way by any politician or business or their advisers.

There has not, for example, been anything that I am aware of to promote or damage my fortune and reputation and consider that I have had good (relatively, as inevitably there can be frustrations) access to those that I wish to interview.

- 2 (a) Having worked in the broadcasting area of the media and primarily for the BBC I am not an appropriate person to comment here.
- 2 (b) The influence of the media is, in my view, sometimes overstated. Consider for example coverage of the National Health Service reforms, a complex area of public policy. There are a variety of players in this debate - politicians, campaigners, unions, even victims whose concerns make it into the public domain. It is the broadcast journalist's job to report fairly and accurately on the concerns that are believed to be significant. I have not encountered any significant lack of transparency, and it is the duty of the broadcast media to give exposure to existing concerns and issues and put them before the public. When covering stories around bank bonuses for example, we have reflected the real pressure from small businesses, institutional and small shareholders, as well as the wider public. That is the basis of reports we have undertaken rather than any notion to campaign on an issue for our own benefit.
- 2 (c) As I have been working in public service broadcasting at the BBC and now ITV News I have no personal experience of this.

As set out above, in broadcasting a financial or political journalist provides an analysis of news stories rather than seeking to make or influence political events. I do not see myself stepping into the role of political opposition at all but ask the questions that viewers (and my editorial team who assist me) would like asked and answered so that those in positions of power are held to account.

I have now left the Lobby system. During my time there the system did evolve. As Downing Street chose to communicate more by email, the importance of the actual Lobby briefings diminished. Equally, as Government departments have put more information online, there is more available to journalists and the public to look at themselves. However, the main feature, and the main importance in my view of the Lobby system is the ability for journalists to talk to

politicians more informally in Parliament and obtain a deeper understanding of developments and personalities.

But I was aware, and they appeared to be aware, of the obligation upon me to be impartial in my reporting. I did and still do see politicians from time to time, normally for lunch meetings to discuss ongoing stories, sometimes with ex-colleagues from the Lobby. While I was not a regular frequenter of the Commons bars, I do feel that the public expect journalists like myself to have some understanding of the personalities of various politicians, and an inkling of their personal plans, as well as the policies and future policies of the Government and the Opposition.

- 2 (d) It is fair to say in my experience politicians were keen to be on good terms with me as a BBC reporter (and now an ITN one) and their Parties were also determined to ensure that their preferred message was presented to me. This involved not just talking to me but sending texts and emails. But politicians are increasingly seeking to communicate with the public directly via tweets and blogs.
- 2 (e) My experience with politicians was as a journalist with the BBC (and now ITV News) and I did not feel constrained. I appreciate I had the back-up of editorial support and the broadcasters' culture of impartiality.
- 3 I believe it is absolutely in the public interest for the public to be engaged in and able to find information and analysis of politics and the business world. To develop an understanding of politicians as individuals it is important that journalists have access to them in order to inform their journalism. But I was and continue to be aware that those I interview should be kept at an appropriate professional distance. To carry out my role as an impartial broadcaster I need to be in the position to be able to probe and identify issues and problems if this is editorially called for.
- 4 No.
- 5 As the Leveson Inquiry will be aware there are strict rules regarding the reporting of General Elections and other national polls. I believe that the current Ofcom code (and ITN's Compliance Manual and the BBC Editorial Guidelines) allow me to serve the public interest in reporting the campaigns and the issues behind them. Broadcasters do not endorse candidates or Parties.
- 6 As explained above I think there has been an evolution in the relationship between politicians and the media and the public interest is better served by this greater openness. As individuals, it is a simple fact of human nature that journalists may interact more easily with particular politicians. But it is vital, and incumbent on editorial staff to ensure that politics is presented in an even handed and entertaining way, continuing the tradition of fairness and due impartiality.

7 As discussed above.

8 I think that, where appropriate, the media should enhance its transparency and ability to interact with viewers (and readers) by using the new technologies available to us online like Twitter and blogs, and whatever may come next, so the public can witness stories unfold. There is still a need for detailed analysis to pull together competing or contradictory issues but these new tools can add huge value and, I believe, have opened up to greater public scrutiny some of the processes of newsgathering. Online and TV technologies such as the red button can also create space where viewers can find further information for themselves, whether that is reading a firm's annual report in full, watching more video of a particular event or doing their own research into a story of interest.

9-11 I think that it is important journalists should have access to media specific legal advice and at least some understanding of the legal process and the law itself. Legal advice should be available to journalists to ensure that reports comply with the law and the regulatory framework. At the BBC and ITN legal advice is always available to me if required. Broadcasters seek to reflect the views and concerns of many interested parties and it is part of our editorial role to seek to focus on what is important and relevant rather than loudest or best presented. It is a matter for those in positions of power to listen to the concerns of electors (and shareholders) as reflected in the media but the right to hire and fire should remain with those with the greatest knowledge of the facts. But this does not mean that any public outrage should not be reflected in media reports on particular stories. Individual broadcast journalists need, and have, the back up and support of editorial teams to help ensure that programmes taken as a whole, as well as individual reports, retain an appropriate quality and continue to provide the public with a non-partisan overview of the workings of the rich and powerful.

I do not believe that I have any relevant emails or other documentary evidence from my time at the BBC or ITN that could assist the Inquiry. I am informed that ITN is not prepared to waive legal privilege and nothing in this witness statement should be read as having or intending that effect.

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

Signed:  .....

Laura Kuenssberg

Dated: 9/5/12 .....