

MEMORANDUM

To: The Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards, Relations between Press and Politicians

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Question 5. The Inquiry is interested in the nature of media influence on public policy in general (for example in areas such as criminal justice, immigration or European policy). Do you have views, or any specific examples, about how that influence is exercised and with what effect? How transparent is the process? Is the public well served by it?

In this submission I intend to address this question, with a specific example which I think the Inquiry may find helpful.

But let me begin with a declaration of interest. I hold a part-time post at the University of Bedfordshire, but am writing, not at the request of the University or the Vice-Chancellor, but in my capacity as a scholar of political communications and having previously been invited to the initial 'Leveson Seminar' and having provided the Inquiry with written evidence.

On 27th January 2012 it was announced that Professor Les Ebdon, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, was the Government's "preferred choice" for the post of Head of OFFA – the universities fair access watchdog. The announcement attracted no coverage whatsoever in the national press.

On 3rd February Professor Ebdon was due to appear before the Commons Business Select Committee for a 'pre-appointment' hearing. Normally such hearings are uncontroversial but in this case the *Daily Mail* clearly knew better. On the day the hearing was due to take place its Political Editor, James Chapman, reported: "Vince Cable's attempt to appoint a former Labour adviser as the new university access tsar could be blocked. The Business Secretary wanted Professor Les Ebdon, an outspoken critic of the Government, as head of the body that regulates higher education." It was not difficult to work out the source of Mr Chapman's intelligence, for in the next paragraph he wrote: "But David Cameron is understood to have 'serious concerns' about the proposed appointment, fearing top state and independent schools will be penalised by his attempts to 'socially engineer' university admissions."

The committee did indeed do what they were expected to, and recommended against the appointment of Professor Ebdon. What then followed was an intense campaign of vituperative criticism of Professor Ebdon and the University of Bedfordshire, a campaign that gave the distinct impression of having been sparked off by Downing Street, before being taken up with unalloyed enthusiasm by the *Daily Mail* and its sister paper, the *Mail on Sunday*. The purpose of such a campaign can only be guessed at, but the suggestion that it was aimed at persuading, or intimidating, Dr. Cable and his minister for the universities, David Willetts, into withdrawing Professor Ebdon's nomination seems the most plausible.

Whatever the motive, its intensity cannot be gainsaid. Between 3rd February and 3rd March the two papers published no fewer than 25 articles about Professor Ebdon and the University of Bedfordshire. Not only were the papers' political staff involved but most of their star columnists – including Quentin Letts, Simon Heffer, Melanie Phillips and Peter Hitchens – were all enrolled into the campaign (though curiously enough, not Richard Littlejohn, who has been in the past a robust supporter of state education).

That the Prime Minister, and then the Education Secretary, were opposed to the appointment, is repeated in the newspapers no fewer than 12 times during the month in question – presumably in an attempt to galvanise public opinion, encourage back bench Conservative MPs to keep the issue alive and to try and pressurise Messrs Cable and Willetts to change their position.

The series of articles (attached) are a fine example – if that is the right word – of an attempt to establish as fact, something that is highly contested. Professor Ebdon is pilloried by the newspapers (though others might see this as an accolade) for being a “champion of widening access to higher education” and his University is damned for putting this ethos into practice – indeed this championing is embedded in the University of Bedfordshire's strategic plan which has, as its number one objective to “enhance the opportunities to access higher education for all those able to benefit”. By definition this means offering courses, not always found in more traditional universities that have a strong vocational bent. In Bedfordshire's case this includes subjects such as nursing, fashion design and media production. The newspapers use this and other subjects taught at the University to pillory Professor Ebdon and

the University - in particular attributing the term 'Mickey Mouse degrees', repeated and distorted so that it eventually sound as if it is Professor Ebdon's own term of approbation.

This process begins neutrally enough on the first day of the campaign – 3rd February – with the following: “In the past, he (Professor Ebdon) has also defended courses which have been criticised by ministers. In one article, he wrote: 'Subjects such as media and cultural studies, fashion design and consumer software computing are far from professionally irrelevant or academically unchallenging.’”

The following day columnist Quentin Letts provides a more pejorative tone by writing: “David Cameron and Michael Gove were yesterday said to be against the idea of Lib Dem-backed Professor Les Ebdon becoming university access supremo. Looking at some of the Mickey Mouse courses offered by his college, it is not hard to see why. Chum Ebdon is vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire (formerly Luton College of Higher Education). Some of its degrees are less than scholastic in flavour.”

On February 7th the Mail's diarist Ephraim Hardcastle writes as established fact: “Professor Les Ebdon - a champion of 'Mickey Mouse degrees...’. A day later Political Editor, James Chapman, notes in more measured tones: “He (Professor Ebdon) has also defended what have been nicknamed Mickey Mouse courses” Chapman repeats the assertion two days later, when he writes: “He has also defended so-called 'Mickey Mouse' courses such as media studies as 'far from professionally irrelevant or academically unchallenging'.”

Quentin Letts returns to the attack on 11th February, bizarrely portraying Professor Ebdon as implicitly accepting something that he contests, and failing to have a sense of humour about it into the bargain: “Prof Ebdon crossly denies that his Mickey Mouse courses at Bedfordshire University are a waste of time.”

Columnist Melanie Phillips joins in on 14th February by asserting that Professor Ebdon has 'defended' something he has never accepted, she writes: “Having previously defended 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, he (Professor Ebdon) has also warned that he may use the 'nuclear option' against universities”

The message is repeated the same day by the political staff – this time Deputy Political Editor Tim Shipman - who writes: “Prof Ebdon, currently vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, is an outspoken opponent of government policy on tuition fees and has also defended so-called Mickey Mouse degrees.” And Mr Shipman repeats this allegation, almost word-for-word two days later: “The professor is a stalwart opponent of the Government's policy on tuition fees and has spoken up in defence of so-called 'Mickey Mouse' degrees.”

On February 19th another ‘star’ columnist can be seen falling into line when Peter Hitchens writes: “So now we have decided to do the same thing to our universities. Equality of outcome is to replace equality of opportunity, and politics is to override education. Professor Les Ebdon, friend of the Mickey Mouse degree, is to be appointed to help achieve this aim”

Tim Shipman returns to assist in the calumny a day later when he writes:” Prof Ebdon's credentials were further undermined when it emerged that the University of Bedfordshire, where he is vice chancellor, does not offer degree courses in traditional subjects such as maths, physics, chemistry, history or modern languages. Instead students can study for degrees in advertising and beauty therapy.” (It is worth pointing out, as the *Daily Mail*, fails to do – despite this being drawn to their attention - that this latter subject, and others highlighted by the newspapers, are available as part of foundation degrees, or other non-degree programmes offered, not by the University but by partner organisations.)

In a *Daily Mail* editorial the following day the campaign continues, albeit with little new information: “He (Prof Ebdon) believes undergraduates should be allowed to continue studying even if they fail first-year courses and he is on record defending 'Mickey Mouse' degrees.” (For the record, Professor Ebdon is on record as challenging both assertions)

On the following day Quentin Letts returns to the battle, and is now assuming that all his readers are up-to-speed on Professor Ebdon’s ‘crimes’. He writes: “He (David Willetts) went along with his Lib Dem colleague Vince Cable's choice of a Mickey Mouse-course don, Lefty Les Ebdon, as the university admissions supremo.” And he goes on to rage: “Mr Cable defended Mr Ebdon and the ex-technical college he used to run in Luton, where he was paid £246,000 a year to encourage poor students to pay for courses in such subjects as spa management, football studies and breastfeeding counselling.”

Columnist Simon Heffer comes slightly late to the party, but seeks to make up for his late arrival by filing over 1500 words denouncing Professor Ebdon and all his works. He fulminates: “It (the University of Bedfordshire) offers mainly vocational courses, some in worthwhile disciplines such as accounting and teaching. It also offers courses in subjects such as nursing, television production and sports journalism that, in the past, people would have learnt in the work place. Other courses include youth and community studies; travel and tourism; sports fitness and personal training; specialist make-up design; public relations; carnival arts; beauty therapy and spa management; post-natal group facilitation; breast-feeding counselling; and football studies.” (He might also have mentioned subjects such as law, business studies, nursing and social work, but that might not have served his, or his newspaper’s, purposes)

But on the very same day Mr Heffer is out-gunned, in terms of words, by feature writer Zoe Brennan who is given over 2,000 words to ‘profile’ Professor Ebdon and the University of Bedfordshire. A flavour of this far-from-neutral ‘profile’ can be gained from the headline and intro. which read: “The Man Who Wants To Dumb Down Britain's Universities - Despite furious opposition, this man (Professor Ebdon) has been appointed university access tsar. But, as we reveal, he runs one of Britain's worst universities - offering courses in breast-feeding counselling, beauty spa management and carnival arts.” But despite the length of the profile it contains precious little that hasn’t been repeated many times before in the pages of the *Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday*. Brennan writes how, “...critics of Ebdon, who is on record defending what detractors term 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, are deeply worried that he will simply continue to dumb down our higher education institutions” and notes, “The courses on offer at his institution do not include traditional degree subjects such as maths, physics, chemistry, history or modern languages.” – hardly a blinding revelation in a university that makes no attempt to pretend that it is offering the same fare as Oxbridge or the Russell Group universities.

All-in all – between the 3rd and 25th February - the two newspapers refer to ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees or courses no fewer than 14 times; and on most of those occasions, as demonstrated above, the casual reader could be forgiven for thinking that this was a term, and a concept, that Professor Ebdon not only accepts but ‘champions’.

It is worth pointing out that whilst this analysis has focussed on the Mail group newspapers, they were not alone The *Daily Telegraph* mounted a similar attack, though given the differing tones of the two newspapers, it was less personally vituperative and there were only five references to 'Mickey Mouse' degrees or courses over the same period during which the Mail featured the term 14 times.

It is reasonable to conclude that some, if not all, the campaign by the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday* (and other newspapers as well), was sparked off, and probably encouraged, by the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education personally, or via their media teams. The constant references to Messrs. Cameron and Gove being unhappy with the appointment point in this direction.

In the event, the Business Secretary (and presumably his universities minister David Willetts) stood firm, but damage was most certainly done to Professor Ebdon's reputation, to the standing of the University of Bedfordshire and, perhaps more damagingly in the longer-term, to the whole concept of making higher education more accessible to those who don't usually embark upon this level of tertiary education.

(I am happy for this submission to be published on the Inquiry's website)



Ivor Gaber

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