

## **Seminar 3: : Supporting a free press and high standards - Approaches to Regulation – 12th October 2011**

### **Defending freedom of Expression**

#### ***Presentation by Kelvin MacKenzie***

So where is David Cameron today? Where is our great Prime Minister who ordered this ludicrous inquiry?

After all the only reason we are all here is due to one man's action; Cameron's obsessive arse kissing over the years of Rupert Murdoch. Tony Blair was pretty good at it as was Brown but Cameron was the Daddy.

Such was his obsession with what newspapers said about him (and Rupert had three market leaders) that in the seven years he had led the party he had issued all his senior colleagues- especially Michael Gove- with knee pads in order to protect their blue trousers when they genuflected front of the Special Sun.

Cameron wanted Rupert inside as he believed, quite wrongly in my view, that The Sun's endorsement would help him to victory (when the paper did come out for Cameron the Sun's sale fell by 40,000 copies that day).

There was never a party, a breakfast, a lunch, a cuppa or a drink that Cameron and Co would not turn up to in force if The Great Man or his handmaiden Rebekah Brooks was there. There was always a queue to kiss their rings. It was gut wrenching.

An American with a disdain for Britain running a declining industry in terms of sales, profitability and influence was considered more important than a meeting with any captain of industry no matter how big their workforce or balance sheet.

Cameron had clearly gone quite potty.

And the final proof that he was certifiable was his hiring of my friend Andy Coulson. I remember telling anybody that would listen that if I were Brown every time Cameron stood up in the Commons he should arrange for mobile phones to ring on his side of The House. It would have killed Cameron.

Nobody took me seriously. And then the scandal broke. Not a scandal of Rupert's making but the order went out from Cameron; Stop the arse kissing and start the arse kicking.

Not a backward glance from Cameron to a bloke he had so assiduously wooed for almost a decade. Simply how can I- a ho hum Tory leader who couldn't even win a General Election in a recession against a turnip like Brown- avoid any fallout from the phone hacking.

And the answer is this bloody inquiry.

God help me that free speech comes down to the thought process of a judge who couldn't win when prosecuting counsel against Ken Dodd for tax evasion and more recently robbing the Christmas Island veterans of a substantial pay-off for being told to simply turn away from nuclear test blasts in the Fifties.

Its that bad.

I have been forced by what sounds like the threat of a jail term to give a witness statement to this inquiry.

The questions not only made me laugh through their ignorance but also that a subject as serious as free speech should be dealt with in this manner.

Question 7 basically wanted to know if an Editor knew the source of many of the stories. To be frank I didn't bother during my 13 years with one important exception.

With this particular story I got in the news editor, the legal director, the two reporters covering it and the source himself on a Friday afternoon. We spent two hours going through the story and I decided that it was true we should publish it on the Monday.

It caused a worldwide sensation. And four months later The Sun was forced to pay out a record £1million libel damaged to Elton John for wholly untrue rent boy allegations. So much for checking a story. I never did it again. Basically my view was that if it sounded right it was probably right and therefore we should lob it in.

How will this inquiry change that?

Question six also deals with sources and I disclosed another story that happened during my 13 years as editor of The Sun.

That morning we had led on a Ministry of Defence story revealing some kind of secret we felt our readers should know. The reporter concerned came in and said there was problem. No.10 had gone nuts and an official inquiry was starting into who had leaked the story with a colonel from MI6 being drafted in to head it.

The reporter told me the MoD were determined to get to the bottom of it but it was not all bad news. Why was that I asked.

Because the colonel heading the inquiry was the bloke who gave us the story in the first place.

How will this inquiry change that?

Yes there was criminal cancer at the News of The World. Yes there were editorial and senior management errors as the extent of the cancer began to be revealed. But why do we need an inquiry of this kind?

There are plenty of laws to cover what went on. After all 16 people have already been arrested and my bet is that the number may well go to 30 once police officers are rounded up.

Almost certainly they will face conspiracy laws, corruption laws, false accounting laws. There are plenty of laws that have been broken. Lord Leveson knows them all by heart.

Supposing these arrests didn't come from the newspaper business. Supposing they were baggage handlers at Heathrow nicking from luggage, or staff at Primark carrying out a VAT swindle, or more likely, a bunch of lawyers involved in a mortgage fraud would such an inquiry have ever been set up.

Of course not.

This is the way in which our Prime Minister is hopeful he can escape his own personal lack of judgment. He knows, and Andy knows, that he should never have been hired into the heart of government. I don't blame Andy for taking the job I do blame Cameron for offering it. It was clearly a gesture of political friendship aimed over Andy's head to Rupert Murdoch. If it wasn't that then Cameron is a bloody idiot-a couple of phone calls from Central Office people would have told him that there was bad smell hanging around the News of the World. Rupert told me an incredible story. He was in his New York office on the day that The Sun decided to endorse Cameron for the next General Election. That day was important to Brown as his speech to the party faithful at the Labour Party conference would have been heavily reported in the papers.

Of course the endorsement blew away Brown's speech off the front page. That night a furious Brown called Murdoch and in Rupert's words;" Roared at me for 20 minutes." At the end Brown said;" You are trying to destroy me and my party. I will destroy you and your company." That endorsement on that day was a terrible error.

I can't believe it was Rupert's idea. Strangely he is quite a cautious man. Whoever made that decision should hang their head in shame. I point the finger at a management mixture of Rebekah and James Murdoch.

The point of my anecdotes is to show that this inquiry should decide there is nothing wrong with the Press, that we should enshrine free speech in Cameron's planned Bill of Rights-just like America- and accept the whole scandal was simply a moment in time when low-grade criminality took over a newspaper.

If anything, the only recommendation that should put be forward by Leveson is one banning by law over ambitious and under talented politicians from giving house room to proprietors who are seeking commercial gain from their contacts.

In tabloid terms arse kissing will be illegal. Should have an interesting passage through Parliament.

Do that and you will have my blessing-and I suspect the blessing from Rupert Murdoch too.