

THE LEVESON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT FROM THE RT HON TONY BLAIR

I should make one point at the outset. I am still waiting for several papers from the Cabinet office about meetings etc. so this is written sometimes on the basis of recollection many years later. So, for example, I do not have proper figures for the number of meetings I had and with whom. As soon as I receive the papers, I can update this submission.

Even after 5 years distance from office, I find this issue extraordinarily difficult to be objective about. It is the media's job to hold politicians to account. It is in politicians' nature to be sensitive to criticism. The media are obviously going to be a powerful part of society and in particular a powerful influence on political debate. Politicians will therefore interact with them closely. Disentangling what is inevitable from what is wrong is a profound challenge.

This challenge is further complicated in respect of any individual political leader, by the fact that our views about particular media organisations are bound to be affected by how we are treated by them. So, in my case, the Murdoch media was broadly supportive; the Mail Group was violently hostile. For other leaders, it will have been different. This has to impact our view of them.

So objectivity is a rare commodity in this debate. Re-reading my speech on the media from 2007, shortly before resigning from office, it still represents my view and it at least pinpoints the issues. Nonetheless, I feel today that I can develop them further and with greater frankness. My argument would be that the unhealthy nature of this relationship is not the product of an individual but of a culture. It is the draining of the poison from that culture that is the real challenge, a challenge deepened by the arrival of social media and one not at all confined to the UK.

I was Leader of the Opposition from 1994-1997; and Prime Minister from 1997-2007.

Obviously I had a close interaction with the media throughout that time. My general points on the relationship between politics/politicians and the media are as follows:

1. Such interaction is inevitable and necessary given the fact that the politicians rely on the media as the primary means of communication; and the media rely on the politicians for political stories. What is more, of course politicians will court the media because they need to be reported and reported at least fairly.
2. This is not new; or confined to the UK. We can think of Northcliffe and Beaverbrook and their strong association with leading politicians of the first

half of the 20th Century. From time to time this would also cause tension as in Baldwin's denunciation of the media in the 1930s.

3. The UK newspapers at their best contain some of the finest journalism and reporting in the world and this dimension is internationally recognised and emulated. What follows in paragraphs 4-7 is therefore not an attempt to characterise the whole of the British media. It is to identify a part and a part only.
4. That said, the circumstances of the present period have been different in these respects:
 - a) Britain has a print media with an almost uniquely deep penetration with mass circulation newspapers who have developed a particular genre of writing.
 - b) They influence hugely the agenda of the broadcasters who tend, in my experience, to default to the print stories in choosing which broadcasting stories to go with.
 - c) The genre of a certain part of the UK print media is defined by a style and culture of writing that is very aggressive and designed for maximum shock and impact sometimes more than a genuine desire to inform and debate; and
 - d) Most important of all, certain of the newspapers are used by their owners/editors as instruments of political power, in which the boundary between news and comment is deliberately blurred. i.e. they do not report political news in a carefully objective way; but rather to promote a point of view. This is not confined to the tabloid press. So if you combine this genre of writing with this use of the media, the effect is very powerful.
5. The consequence of the above is that any politician who falls out with a section of that media, or in respect of whom they turn hostile, has a serious and potentially politically life-threatening problem.
6. For this reason the relationship between political leaders and their counterparts in the media matter enormously. But what is unhealthy is not the relationship per se, which is merely a derivative of the power wielded in that way. What is unhealthy is the use of media as an instrument of political power, when the proper boundary between news and comment is removed.
7. What this means is as follows. There are effectively 8 principal newspaper media groups: the Murdoch papers; the Mail Group; the Telegraph Group; the Mirror Group; the Express Group; the Guardian/Observer and recently the Lebedev Group that owns the Independent and Evening Standard. Then there is the Financial Times. I would estimate that over half of those, certainly in

circulation terms, adopt the style and modus operandi I set out above. So a breach with any of the dominant figures in these Groups has serious effects. Essentially it means that in respect of those publications, there is a complete block. From then on, the politician in that position is facing not merely an inability to get his/her message across; but likely an onslaught on their policies, character and person that can be very ugly and very corrosive.

8. This is emphatically not a problem confined to the Murdoch press. For obvious reasons this has been the focus. But it goes far wider and whilst it will suit other parts of the media to focus all on one individual; in my experience, this would be a profound mistake.
9. I have identified the use of media as instruments of political power. I believe this is more important than the use of the power to advance specific business interests. In my view, this is the wrong paradigm. Of course they have such interests and will defend them. But the principal purpose of using such power is, in my judgement, as much political i.e. to advance views as it is about interests.
10. However, undoubtedly, it means that even if a political leader came to the view (as I did) that there was something seriously damaging in the relations between politics and the media, and in the way certain papers behaved, it would, frankly, have been very tough to have waged a campaign on it, or tried to produce a policy solution to it. My own experience in respect of the speech I gave in June 2007 shortly before leaving office, is instructive. The speech – after all from a Prime Minister with 10 years in office – was either ignored or derided, except in some more considered circles of journalism already anxious about the issue. It has taken recent events to make this a permissible debate.
11. The tough question is: what do we do about it? We should be aware that some of the media profoundly disagree there is a real problem. Anything that is proposed, will be denounced by some as a constraint on a free press. On the other hand, there are real and substantial parts of the media that do recognise the issue and need something that creates or at least tries to create a different culture. There are really two distinct issues here which originate from the same source: power that is not properly accountable.
 - a) Practices that are abusive, improper or illegal, such as phone hacking, computer hacking, the use of private detectives to operate at a deniable distance.
 - b) Media designed to advance a political view point in the news section not just the comment or editorial section.

The first can be dealt with by a combination of law enforcement and a proper independent system of complaints (the PCC having little or no credibility). The second is far more tricky because whether the media is objective requires a subjective judgement. The broadcasters of course operate under a strict impartiality requirement and were this not so, the problem would have been much worse.

12. Finally, we should not forget the huge development of social media. This is a revolutionary phenomenon. The early hope that it might rectify the imbalance of the conventional media has turned out to be misplaced. It also makes a different culture in the mainstream media all the more vital and if the public got to trust the mainstream media as reliable, it would significantly enhance its credibility. But social media also means that the power of the mainstream media has been somewhat reduced and the ability therefore to affect the politics of the country similarly reduced.

Particular questions

Before answering the specific questions, let me make a general point. Having consulted those who advised me at the time, the Government more often than not, turned down the positions of the Murdoch media. For example:

- BskyB wanted to buy Manchester United. We referred the issue to Office of Fair Trading, who then recommended referral to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC). The MMC recommended that the government should prevent the takeover. The government did just that.
- BskyB opposed the BBC being granted new channels. We granted them. And the same for the BBC website.
- BskyB opposed increases in the BBC licence fee. We increased it from £91.50 in 1997 to £135.50 in 2007, above the rate of inflation and in the face of significant opposition from them.
- In Ofcom, we introduced a broadcast regulator with real powers to enforce fair competition – this put Sky under far greater scrutiny than before.
- We stopped them being able to buy ITV (which they really wanted not Channel 5).
- They opposed listed events for sport. We protected and extended them.

Turning to the particular questions:

13. Articles by the Prime Minister would always be based on my words and (even if effectively ghosted) can be useful in getting across a point of view. They also helped reach the regional media. But toward the end I concluded that unless I

wrote them personally or at least amended a draft, they had limited reach. I think the 1998 Award may have been somewhat given in 'irony'.

14. As far as the formulation of policy we tried very hard to keep the line between persuading the media of a policy; and allowing them privileged access in formulating it. Of course, again to be clear, there's nothing wrong in briefing the media or in interacting with them to understand their readers. This could influence policy but I don't think that was unhealthy. However, because of the practice I advert to above, it could be very hard to adopt a policy when it was likely to be the subject of an intense media campaign against it. The media would say: we're justified in representing our readers' views. I would say, in reply, that's true but the campaign should not affect the fair reporting of the issue. The types of subject in which the campaign could be fierce and partisan would run from Europe to MMR to gay rights to measures of reform.
15. I had regular meetings with media figures – owners and editors and indeed prominent journalists or commentators – and found this a useful way of gauging opinion and getting a message across. I have asked the Cabinet Office for a complete list of all such meetings. In doing this, I would say this is reasonably standard practice for all senior politicians and I see nothing wrong with it at all. The only reason for not publicising each meeting was the inevitable speculation (often misguided) that would follow, about what was discussed.
16. Between 1994-1997, we did change Labour's policy on media ownership. However it should be remembered that this policy was itself partly a product of the terrible relations between the Labour Party and the Murdoch press and the unions and that press. My view was and remains that there should be no presumption in favour of any media organisation or against it; that foreign ownership should not be regarded differently from ownership by British nationals; and that the best way of dealing with undue interference through size whether within one medium or across media, is through competition policy. So it would be fair to say that had we kept that policy, it would have been a problem with the Murdoch press. But there were sound objective reasons for changing it. I can't recall any conversations on it with anyone from the Murdoch media.
17. In respect of my raising the possible acquisition by Rupert Murdoch of the part of the Mediaset Group in Italy, I can't recall precisely how this came about. But after seeking the Cabinet Secretary's advice as to the propriety of doing it, I raised it in the course of a call with Romano Prodi, the Italian Prime Minister, to see if there was going to be a political objection to such an

acquisition. The call was taking place anyway. I doubt the Mediaset issue was more than a couple of minutes of the call. I would have done the same for any major company with UK interests and indeed frequently raised UK business with leaders of other countries in appropriate circumstances. The fuss resulting from this was in my view totally overblown.

18. I apparently did have a meeting with Rupert Murdoch and Mark Booth (the BSkyB Chief Executive) on 29 January 1998. This arose out of the plan by BSkyB and BT to launch, with HSBC and Panasonic, a joint service in email, banking and shopping provided through the television. It was named British Interactive Broadcasting, and later called 'Open'. The companies required clearance from the European Commission to launch this service, and had notified the Commission the previous year. The European Commission sought to intervene in it. We were against EU intervention in this area and were at the time in a sensitive negotiation over the EU Services Directive where some parts of the EU system wanted to enlarge the scope of EU regulation. We also supported innovation in services, which BT and Sky could deliver quicker together than either could on their own. So although of course the owners of the Open project were pleased at our position, it was justified on its merits. The Commission, after further discussion, authorised the service for a seven year period.
19. I have no recollection again of discussing the 2003 Communications Act with Rupert Murdoch or anyone from his organisation though of course, along with all the other media groups, they would have been heavily engaged with officials and Ministers on it, perfectly properly. My attitude to this legislation was to recognise the media was, through technology, undergoing a revolution in the way it combined different forms of media. So we were moving, and to a certain extent already had moved, to 24/7 media, online, written and broadcast all mixing in together. I therefore did feel the 20% rule irrational for Channel 5. I could see the competition issue clearly and wanted to ensure no one company could grab too much of the market, but thought that in general there was no longer a justification for rigid controls on ownership regardless of the circumstances.. So, in the end, we extended the jurisdiction of OFCOM, introduced a plurality test, strengthened competition rules, but got rid of the 20% rule for Channel 5. I don't know if the Mirror Group or Associated had indicated any desire to purchase Channel 5. It was common knowledge that the companies in the Murdoch group were interested. But that would have been complicated by the competition rules and in the event they never did seek to acquire it.

20. As far as the Premier League auction and the European Commission are concerned, I was lobbied on this by James Murdoch. Again since it affected a key commercial interest of a UK company, there was nothing unusual in this. But it is important to point out that the Premier League was also adamantly opposed to the EC proposal. Apart from that one call I can't remember anything else about it and Ministers handled it. The advice I received was to make no commitments on this issue and as far as I recall, I followed that advice.
21. As for the questions about the decision to go to the Hayman Island conference in 1995, I would strongly defend that decision. It is important to understand that the Murdoch press a) represented a large part of the media with large numbers of readers i.e. voters and b) had been viscerally hostile to the Labour Party. The fact is I was changing the Labour Party to become New Labour, capable of reaching beyond our traditional base, reaching the new aspirant upwardly mobile working and middle class and becoming a serious Party of Government. The continued hostilities between the Murdoch Group and Labour had no rationale to it given our changes and the fact that the Conservative Government was running out of steam. Actually, my speech held closely to all the policies I believed in (**see attached news report from The Guardian**). Some of those policies coincided with the views of the Sun and News of the World. Some didn't. So when given the opportunity to go into, as it were, the Lion's Den and explain how and why we were changing Labour, I took it immediately. Of course, I would have met Rupert Murdoch there but at that point there would have been no discussion about his support for New Labour. But naturally the purpose of going was to diminish the traditional hostility and open the way to such support.
22. I don't remember 15 years or more later, any of the quotes from Paul Keating, Andrew Neil or Lance Price referred to. However, I do recall the gist of the Keating conversation. Paul had known Rupert Murdoch well, had received his support and had a clear view of him. This was about 'dealing with him' but not 'doing deals' in some crude business sense. His view was provided that Rupert Murdoch understood that if he turned hostile, you would fight back i.e. verbally, then there could be a calm, if uneasy, terrain established between you. He said you had to achieve mutual respect. In time I came to my own view and there was no 'understanding' about how we treated his business interests. I do not think I ever had a conversation with Rupert Murdoch about his business interests, other than on the specific occasion stated above. But plainly, and this may be what Andrew Neil is referring to, if suddenly the

Murdoch group had reverted to the position they took on Neil Kinnock, I would have had to have fought back and gone on the counter attack, rather as we had to do later with the Mail Group. But as I say above, the issue was less anything to do with their commercial power, than the ability to shift opinion by the strength and force of their news coverage.

23. As far as lobbying, as I say Rupert Murdoch never lobbied me for special favours. What he did do was argue strongly with me about politics. He has decided views. On some issues, I agreed and on some I disagreed. So any 'lobbying' Alastair Campbell refers to, was probably much more to do with our constant and on-going disagreement over Europe or public investment than some business interest.
24. In respect of Europe, we have to be careful here. The reason for not calling a referendum on the Euro and for saying we would call one on the EU Constitution, is that in each case there was no other possibility politically. Now it is true that Rupert Murdoch had strong views on this, as did a raft of other dominant media figures. Most of all so did the public. Peter is wrong if he thinks that Rupert Murdoch prevented me from advocating that Britain join the Euro. The truth is, as I said publically and privately, the politics in favour of Britain joining the Euro were clear to me: Britain should be at the heart of Europe. However, unfortunately, the economics weren't clear; and I knew such a referendum would never be won without an unambiguous economic case. Now it is true also that, in my view, the treatment of Europe by a large part of the media is misguided and wrong. But that is not confined to Rupert Murdoch. As for the EU Constitution it was Jack Straw, then Foreign Secretary, who wrote a powerful and persuasive memo as to why I had to change my position on a referendum on the Constitution. He explained that the House of Lords would force one in any event and that therefore continued resistance was futile. Reluctantly, I agreed. I have no precise recollection of meetings with Irwin Stelzer about a referendum on the EU constitution. But I used to meet him regularly and discuss the global economy with him, where I found him informed and a very useful point of contact. It is perfectly possible at one of those meetings he would have spoken about the EU constitution – he had his strong views on it and was his own man on it. However the reason for the shift on policy was as I describe.
25. I disagree completely with Paul Dacre's assertion over Iraq. I had a view about this issue. I was prepared to lose a vote and resign over it. I had taken a position since 9/11 to stand with the US. I strongly believed it was right to remove Saddam Hussein. It is correct I spoke to Rupert Murdoch in the days

leading up to the vote. I can't recall at whose instigation. I would obviously have wanted to explain what I was doing and why to the Head of the Media Group that was most disposed to support the action; but I had long since made up my mind on it and the notion I required 'lobbying' by him or anyone else is plain wrong. And I have no doubt the Mail would have attacked me whichever course I took. In respect of the Hutton and Butler Inquiries, my two reflections are:

- a) That if I was issuing a dossier of intelligence again, I would not involve anyone from No. 10, but just publish the intelligence reports verbatim. This would have been more persuasive and saved us from the so-called 'sexing up' of the dossier allegations;
- b) That the Hutton Inquiry was the most comprehensive ever undertaken into an allegation against the Government. I, senior Ministers and intelligence chiefs all gave evidence. The allegation was that Downing Street had interfered improperly with the intelligence against the wishes of the intelligence service. This was completely untrue. The evidence overwhelmingly showed it was untrue. The judge made the only finding he could make on the evidence – namely that it was untrue. Once he made his finding, because it conflicted with a significant part of the media case – which was to prove not a mistake in respect of the intelligence, but a deliberate deception – the judge was trashed and the report described as a 'whitewash' (first by the Evening Standard, then part of the Mail Group). So an inquiry that should have re-established trust between politicians and public by showing there had been no deception, became a further reason for distrust.

26. As for our means of handling the media in No 10, we instituted a number of changes designed actually to make it more open. I did introduce Alastair Campbell as the Head of it and there was a debate about whether we needed the Order in Council so as to exercise authority over the civil servants. The advice was we needed one. (In the event, apparently, we didn't need one). I would, again, strongly defend this. In today's media world, you need a first class media head. Anything else is an act of insanity for a modern leader in this media age. It doesn't matter if they are a special adviser or a civil servant. They just have to be very good. Alastair was combative. David Hill was a pacifier. Tom Kelly was thorough. All were very good. All would testify, I would imagine, to the sheer strain and impossibility of the job.

27. The Phillis Review was a brave attempt by Sir Robert to find administrative ways of dealing with the toxic atmosphere between Government and media.

The recommendations were sensible. But, in my view, there's just a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem manifested in thinking there is a change in bureaucratic arrangements that will make the difference. We implemented change upon change. It made not the blindest difference. The problem is the style and culture of reporting. I simply cannot begin to relate the number of so-called scandals that were not scandals at all; the number of times something a Minister said would be lifted out of context to mean something completely different; the technique of applied distortion that the modern leader lives with. Naturally the media would say: we're just holding you to account. But from the perspective of the politician, it seems like an elaborate game of 'Gotcha'.

28. I think comments by Julia Simpson and others are fair. But I suspect this will always happen in relations between the Centre and Departments.
29. I have no real memory of the ICO publications to which you refer or the details of the 1998 Data Protection Act, other than in connection with the debate after Princess Diana's death.
30. The phone hacking was evidently going on whilst I was in office but I don't recall any awareness of the issue at the time. I think I just read of the arrests of Mr Goodman and Mr Mulcaire. The allegation by the Mail that I tried to pressure Tom Watson to end his campaign against News International is completely and totally untrue as we told the Mail at the time. Their reporting of the allegation was a classic example of the practice I refer to.
31. In respect of Wendi Murdoch's interview with Vogue magazine, I should say that I know Rupert Murdoch and his family far better today than I did when I was Prime Minister. I would never have become godfather to their child on the basis of my relationship in Government where meetings with Rupert Murdoch tended to be very much politics oriented and I knew the rest of the family only a little at that time.
32. There was obviously huge public concern following the death of Princess Diana, and immediately we began discussions on the changes necessary to meet that concern. I took the view that self regulation was still the best way forward, but that the PCC code had to be significantly strengthened. This was also the majority view of Ministers at that time, including the relevant Minister for Culture Chris Smith. So there was a consultation with Lord Wakeham, who had - it was felt- given new credibility to the PCC, about strengthening the Code. There was continued interaction on this throughout the next year or two, with final agreement to strengthen it further.

33. In addition, there was a debate about whether the PCC should have exemptions from the ECHR, which was being incorporated into UK law and the Data Protection Act. Here, there was substantial disagreement about whether to do this and its consequences- either way- for the media. Some, led by the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, thought they should be subject to at least the ECHR; others felt the opposite. At that point I still believed that self regulation should be given a chance to work and was well aware of the acute sensitivity of this issue right across the media spectrum. In the event, we tried to bolster self regulation. I am still trying to obtain further papers on this debate.
34. I kept up to date with the discussions that continued through 1998-2000; but, re-reading the papers I have been sent on this issue, it was not particularly prominent. There were discussions specifically around privacy for the Royal family, with Lord Wakeham finally reaching an agreement on this with the press.
35. I don't recall any discussions with the media myself over these issues and no such discussion appears from any of the papers.
36. That is a good place to answer your question which, in effect, is whether the relationship between media and Government was so wrong it merited Government action. This goes to the heart of the discussion/argument I had with Alastair Campbell over the years and in a sense to the heart of this inquiry. The truth is that I felt that if I had taken on this issue, I would have been engaged in a titanic battle with immensely powerful media interests who would not have hesitated to go after me and my Government with everything at their disposal. It would have, to a large degree, dominated the agenda of the Government. It would have submerged much else. I didn't feel that I could take that on without damage to the rest of our programme. However, I also felt that, in the end, the rest of that programme was more important. I do not minimise the importance of this at all. It is an essential debate for our democracy. But, for Government, our priority had to be around the economy, schools, health, crime, security and foreign policy. For Government to lead this debate is inherently difficult and fraught.
37. Which brings me to this concluding point. There is a lot wrong with the way the media operate. But politicians are also in a sense, the worst people to make the point. We have much experience of it. However, as I say above, we also are partisans ourselves. My view, out of office, is that the media environment is changing so much that the power they could use in so devastating a way at the time I came to the Leadership of the Labour party in 1994, can no longer be wielded in quite the same manner. The social media is a revolutionary phenomenon. Unfortunately though they can help bring about

enormous pressure for change – as in the Arab Spring – they can also be a source of rumours and stories that are untrue; they can be extraordinarily brutal in their treatment of people; and whilst Twitter etc. are a brilliant new means of communication, they're not exactly a place for deep debate on issues. So any debate on politics and the media today that ignores social media is more than a little unreal. This is where 2012 is an era away from even 2007 let alone 1997. I will try to address these issues in a further submission. One final point: in all of this we have to retain a sense of perspective. In my experience, in the end, the people genuinely do make up their own mind. So sometimes both politicians and media ascribe to the media a greater power than they have. Ultimately, the people decide.

Tony Blair