

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement of Simon Walters

1. I have been the political editor of the Mail on Sunday since 1999. I joined the lobby in 1983 with The Sun and was also political editor and Deputy Editor of the Sunday Express. I entered journalism as a reporter with the Slough Evening Mail in 1974.

Holding politicians to account

2. I share the view that a free press is an essential means of holding politicians and the powerful to account. But I also agree that the media has a duty to behave responsibly and ethically. For example, political journalists have a duty to respect lobby terms conversations.
3. There are countless examples of the media performing its duty of holding politicians to account. The most obvious example of this is the MPs' expenses affair. For many years, MPs and the Parliamentary authorities colluded to conceal how much they were claiming in expenses.
4. For some years before the Daily Telegraph obtained full details of the expenses, I had written several stories about MPs' expenses. For example:
 - 4.1 In 2002, I reported how Conservative MP Michael Trend claimed more than £100,000 in bogus second home expenses. It led to Mr Trend's de-selection as an MP.
 - 4.2 I wrote a similar story questioning the expenses of the then Commons Speaker, Michael Martin. His spokesman, former senior civil servant Mike Grannatt, resigned on the grounds that he had been misled by the Speaker's Office when asked about the Speaker's expenses by me.
 - 4.3 In 2009, I described how Labour Minister Tony McNulty claimed £60,000 in expenses on a home occupied by his parents. He resigned from the Government as a result.

5. All the above stories were clearly in the public interest. All the MPs involved would have preferred the information not to have been disclosed. Most went to considerable lengths to avoid exposure.
6. The above reports were among those that eventually led to greater scrutiny of MPs expenses.

Changing relations between the media and the press

(i) Greater transparency

7. The MPs' expenses affair is indicative of how relations between the media and politicians have changed.
8. In the past, the media was more deferential, as was society in general, and did not question a politicians' right to privacy on issues such as expenses. That has changed in the interest of accountability and transparency. In the past politicians were more likely to be viewed as members of the ruling class; the media was, generally speaking, expected to know its place.
9. It is a cliché but in the early days of television, the first question an interviewer would ask a politician could be little more challenging than 'Do you have anything to tell the nation, Sir?' Robin Day, Jeremy Paxman and others have changed that for ever. Newspapers have developed a similar more challenging approach in response to the public's demand for more openness.
10. All sections of society have been affected by this, including the Royal Family, whose finances are now published. In 1974, MPs were forced to disclose their outside interests. These rules were tightened in 1996 after the 'cash for questions' affair. Political journalists accredited to the Parliamentary Press Gallery are also expected to register their non-press gallery financial interests.
11. The Government is now considering publishing senior ministers' tax returns. The trend towards greater openness and transparency is driven to some extent by political scandals over the years. The mistrust caused by the MPs expenses and other scandals – uncovered by a vigorous media - has given it momentum.
12. That is not to say politicians, like members of the public, are not entitled to privacy where appropriate.

13. For example, John Prescott told me he was bulimic more than ten years ago and asked me not to report it. I observed his request. When, shortly before Lord Prescott's memoirs were published in 2008, I learned he intended to disclose this in his book, I informed my superiors at the Mail on Sunday.
14. A decision was taken not to report it before publication of his book on the grounds that it was a private medical matter and could only be published with his permission. He did not give his permission. We did not publish the story before his book was published.

(ii) Downing St lobby briefings

15. Downing St lobby briefings have changed considerably during my time as a political reporter. They used to be run on masonic lines. In the main, they were comprised of political editors who agreed not to disclose that information had come from Number 10 or even acknowledge that lobby meetings took place.
16. Now they are open, conducted on the record, with a full account placed on the Downing St website. Downing St lobby briefings for Sunday newspapers (the main purpose of which were to enable Sunday political editors to question Number 10 about the events of the past week) were effectively ended during Tony Blair's Labour Government after the political editors present filed a story based on a Sunday lobby briefing by Number 10 that Number 10 disagreed with.
17. Whether the changes have made any difference to the way politics is reported is debatable. Unsurprisingly, making the briefings public has had the effect of making the officials involved more cautious.
18. There are pros and cons to this. Greater openness is welcome. But journalists are always in search of new information of interest to readers or viewers. If by making briefings public, Downing St is more cautious, journalists will go elsewhere in search of new information.

(iii) Press officers/spin doctors

19. However, the number of press spokesmen and women employed in the civil service, or as political advisers – spin doctors – has increased in recent years, in part due to the increasing media demands on politicians. In part, this also reflects the importance attached by politicians themselves to promoting their message and image. Press officers and spin doctors can be valuable sources of information, but political

journalists also like to obtain information and check facts with politicians, officials and others direct.

20. In theory, therefore, there are many more 'sources' of information. In practice, modern governments devote a considerable amount of time co-ordinating their message. They have little choice in the 24/7 world of mass communications.
21. During Mr Blair's government, much energy was devoted to ensuring all departments were 'on message' – repeating the Downing St line on any given issue.
22. From the point of view of the Government, this greater degree of political control makes sense. But it can be argued that this is not in the public interest or that of the media. For example, if Number 10 is trying to cover up a politically embarrassing story, it is easier to do so if there is central control over the entire Whitehall media machine.
23. The alternative is to give back to Whitehall departments the autonomy they once had. This may provide a desirable degree of protection against manipulation by Downing St, and therefore be in the interest of an open media. But it can cause problems for Downing St. The rapid speed of the modern media means that if a Whitehall department responds to a media inquiry on any given issue without consulting Number 10 to obtain an agreed 'official line,' it can lead to confusion and damaging publicity.

Benefits to the public to be secured from a relationship between politicians and the media

24. Like most political journalists, I entertain politicians, at the company's expense, on an occasional basis to lunch, tea or drinks – though by far the majority of contacts are conversations in person or over the phone where no entertainment is involved.
25. In my experience, the main purpose of this is to get to know them better and to build a relationship, and vice versa. Journalists gain a better understanding of politicians and the issues of the day and can pass some of this information on to readers/viewers. The politician gets the chance to explain his or her views at greater length and to build a relationship with a journalist.
26. With very rare exceptions, I do not socialise with politicians or officials outside work hours or accept hospitality from them. That way the risks are minimised and managed and it makes it easier to retain a proper degree of professionalism. No

politician has ever asked me to do anything improper as a result of such a relationship. As a rule, editors I have worked for have few meetings with politicians outside the party conference season.

27. The relationships remain much the same in the run up to general elections. Politicians are even more keen than usual to get their message across, but in my experience journalists take this into account when deciding what to publish.

Lessons to be learned from the recent history of relations between politicians and the media

28. Despite the anger over the expenses affair, trust between politicians and political journalists has not been destroyed.
29. To some extent the relationship between them is self-regulating. It is less about codes of conduct and more about personal conduct. If a political journalist betrays a trust or files inaccurate reports, word will soon get out among MPs, ministers and officials. Similarly, political journalists learn which politicians can be trusted to tell the truth. Journalists soon learn when they are being used to spread false information.
30. Recent events have underlined the dangers of large media organisations getting too close to senior politicians and vice versa. In the main, these lessons relate to those in high places in politics and the media, rather than individual journalists. Academics continue to debate whether or not the media has the power to influence the results of elections, though clearly, it has the power to set political agendas.

Proprietors and politicians

31. Tony Blair's decision to court News International led to a very close relationship in which Downing St gave privileged information to News International, and in return, News International supported the Government on certain issues, for example the Iraq War.
32. In an article about his book 'A Spin Doctor's Diary,' Lance Price, former deputy to Alastair Campbell in the No 10 press office said in 2005 that Rupert Murdoch *"seemed like the 24th member of the cabinet. In my first few weeks as Alastair Campbell's deputy, I was told by somebody who would know that we had assured Mr Murdoch we wouldn't change policy on Europe without talking to him first. No big decision could ever be made inside No 10 without taking account of the likely reaction of three men - Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Rupert Murdoch. On all the really big decisions, anybody else could safely be ignored."*

33. David Cameron tried to replicate this relationship, notably by employing former News of the World editor Andy Coulson as his spin doctor and by cultivating close friendships with senior figures at News International.
34. One of the beneficial effects of recent events is that politicians and the media are more likely to remain at arms length. The recent exposure of the unhealthy closeness of the relationships between politicians in both major parties and senior News International figures means that politicians and the media are likely to be more cautious in pursuing such relationships in the future. It is in the public interest for politicians and the media to have a vigorous dialogue and good relationships. But it is not in the public interest for them to be too close.

Media influence over parties' policies

35. Political journalism has always combined reporting with trying to influence events. As a reporter, I focus on the former.
36. The influence of the media on political parties' policies can be overstated. On the one hand, all political parties want favourable headlines, particularly at election time. But the vastly improved methods of assessing public opinion means they are more likely to pay attention to the results of a survey or focus group, than a leader in a newspaper.

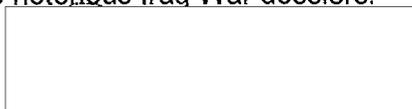
Media influence over public and political appointments, tenure and termination of appointments

37. The media's ability to influence events and political appointments is limited by their ability accurately to reflect public opinion. For example, the recent resignation of former Climate Change Secretary Chris Huhne followed disclosures in the media concerning his private conduct. But his decision to resign over the consequence of those disclosures was taken by Mr Huhne and his political masters.
38. The media often publishes calls for people in public life to resign. These calls can be, and often are, ignored unless the individual or his or her political masters believe that such a move is appropriate or unavoidable as a result of public opinion as reflected by the media.

Future regulation

39. The current system of regulating the press may be flawed, but I do not think state regulation is the answer. I have witnessed the lengths to which government officials are prepared to go to obtain favourable coverage and suppress negative publicity.
40. As I reported in November 2000, the very first thing Tony Blair told his ministers at his first Cabinet meeting was the need to channel all information through the Number 10 press office. Downing St did not disclose that at the time.
41. It is natural for politicians to seek more power over the media, because the media is the intermediary between politicians and the voters. It is important to avoid setting up any new kind of body which transfers more power to politicians.
42. The power of the Downing St media machine was formidable in the early years of the Blair government and was exercised even in seemingly trivial matters.
43. For example in 2002, I filed a report describing how Downing St had sought a bigger role for Mr Blair in the Queen Mother's Lying in State in Westminster Hall. Downing St said it was untrue and the Prime Minister complained to the Press Complaints Commission. It was only when a senior official with personal knowledge of what happened threatened to state publicly that the Mail on Sunday report was accurate, that Downing St relented and the PM withdrew his complaint.
44. Had the official not been prepared to take this step, it would have had serious consequences for my newspaper and for me professionally. In itself, the incident was of little consequence.
45. But it was symptomatic of the excessive power exercised at that time by the Government media machine in its determination to dominate every aspect of political coverage.
46. Had this been dealt with by a body answerable to the state I am less certain the outcome would have been the same. This excessive power, and ability to manipulate the truth, manifested itself again, with far more grave consequences, a few months later in the notorious Iraq War dossiers.

Signed



Date

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