

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 3

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF CLAIRE WARD

I, CLAIRE WARD co Bindmans LLP, 236 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X8HB, WILL SAY as follows:

1. I was born on 9th May 1972 and elected to Parliament on 1st May 1997 at the age of 24. I served as the MP for Watford for 13 years and was a minister for 5 years.
2. When elected in 1997, I became a member of the Culture, Media and Sports Committee. Even then it had a high profile amongst the select committees. Although there were frequent discussions about undertaking a report on the need for privacy legislation, most members believed that such a challenge to the media would have repercussions for our personal lives. During my four years on this Committee, we refrained from any such inquiry. I believe that the majority of members felt intimidated by the implicit threat that their personal lives would be exposed in the media if the Committee dealt with this issue.
3. As the youngest woman MP In the first Parliament, I received a lot of attention from the media. This revealed a great deal about the approach of non-broadsheet media to women in positions of responsibility. I received numerous invitations to take part in features and 'soft' interviews. These would often take the form of makeovers, fashion pieces and similar. I believed that alternative media - that was not focussed on broadsheets and the political pages - might help to connect young people and young women in particular to the new politics of the Labour Government. I eventually realised that this was not working effectively. One example was following a question I had at Prime Minister's Question Time, I was called by a journalist. I had hoped it would be to discuss the subject of my question but instead it was to ask if I had cut my hair at the instruction of the Labour Party.
4. Unfortunately I was also subjected to false and intrusive reporting, much of which involved untrue allegations based on gossip and rumour. I was elected at the same

time as a male colleague who, at 24, was the same age as me. He suffered none of the same attention. In my view, the tabloid media were operating a misogynistic agenda. Although I challenged the false stories as often as possible, It was at times very difficult to deal with and highly intimidating.

5. My first introduction to the News of the World was within the first two months of being elected. I was called by a reporter and told that they had photos of me modelling lingerie as a teenager. I told them that this was not possible as I had never modelled and they had obviously been sold photos of someone who looked like me. I told them that I would obviously take action if they pursued this, which fortunately they did not. But I sensed then that the pressure of such media attention was the risk that articles would be printed and I would then have to spend time and money restoring my reputation.
6. During 1998, I received a call from my mobile phone provider Vodafone to advise me that they had received a call from a male indicating that he was calling on my behalf to check my account and the numbers I was calling. I advised Vodafone that this was not with my authority. They decided to monitor the account and to place a password on it. I had never had an itemised telephone bill and therefore knew that any detailed information on call data could not come from anywhere other than through unauthorised access to my Vodafone account.
7. Sometime in 1999, I received a call from British Telecom to ask whether I had been checking my telephone record. They advised me that a male had called, claiming to do so on my behalf, to check which numbers I had been calling and when. I advised them that I had not and they placed a password on my account. A few weeks later BT called again to say that they had evidence that the password had been breached internally and that inquiries were once again being made of my telephone records. They were no longer confident that they could protect my privacy. They advised me that there was special unit, DAP, that held the telephone accounts for senior cabinet members and other key persons such as those in the security services. They advised me that they proposed to add my account to the protection of this unit, given the interest and breach of security. This was done immediately (I understand that it required the support of the Home Office). From then until 2010, my accounts were held in DAP which meant that no BT operator or call centre had any record of the number or account.
8. On Friday 2 February 2001 I received a phone call on my mobile phone from a senior journalist and reporter at the News of the World (whose name has been provided to the Inquiry). He told me that the News of the World intended to run a story that I had behaved inappropriately with a captain in the Royal Marines during a trip to Kosovo.

9. I had recently returned from an all-party trip to Kosovo as part of the Parliamentary Armed Forces Scheme. This scheme involved MPs joining up with one of the armed services and spending approximately 12 days with them over a 12 month period, to shadow them and understand what they did. I joined the scheme in 2000 and as part of it we went to Kosovo in January 2001. I was just coming to the end of my 12 months with the scheme.
10. The journalist said he intended to run a story that I had shared a bed and shower with a captain in the Royal Marines and that I had had a long term relationship with him. I told him this was all complete nonsense and asked where he got the story from. He told me it had been confirmed to him by others who had been on the all-party trip.
11. I was horrified. I immediately called my training partner at Pattison & Brewer solicitors where I did my training contract from 1995 to 1997. They kindly prepared a legal letter for me which I sent to the News of the World that evening. I spent a considerable amount of time that evening, during my constituency advice surgery, trying to track down the sources of these allegations.
12. On the morning of Saturday 3 February 2001 the journalist called me again on my mobile telephone. He told me I had to admit the story was true and he verbally threatened me. He told me he was never wrong about these things and I recall him saying "I brought Robin Cook down and I am going to bring you down too". I repeated that there was absolutely no truth to the allegations he was putting to me. He told me that if I challenged the story he would make things much worse for me. I repeated my denials and ended the phone call and went to attend a constituency engagement.
13. I received a second telephone call from the journalist later that morning. He said that as I was challenging the truth of the story, the News of the World were prepared to give me one last chance before they went to press. He said that I would be contacted by Rebekah Wade (now Brooks) who was the editor of the News of the World at the time.
14. On the afternoon of Saturday 3 February 2001 I spoke to Rebekah Wade. She asked me to explain in detail what had happened and I went through the whole story with her. She asked why I was seen coming out of the block of showers. I explained that the Royal Marines are male-only and it was the only place to shower and I did not expect to receive any special treatment. I couldn't expect everyone to completely clear the place though I certainly did not compromise my own privacy or anyone else's. Rebekah Wade asked me why people were saying these allegations about me. I explained that I was a young woman in a very male environment and just because they say something doesn't mean that it's true. I recall saying to her that she is a

young woman in a very male environment and I bet that people have said to her that she has slept with people to get to the top. I recall there being a long pause and then Rebekah Wade saying "OK, point taken" or something along those lines.

15. She asked me about the allegation that I had moved into a separate bunk room. I explained that I was one of two women on the all-party trip, the other being Jane Griffiths the Labour MP for Reading. Jane Griffiths was just starting her 12 month stint with the armed services whereas I was just about to finish mine. Jane Griffiths snored and I could not sleep so after the first night I asked whether I could be moved into an empty room across the hall. I didn't tell Jane Griffiths why I was moving because I did not want to offend her and the next night I slept in the other room. Rebekah Wade said she would put that in the story to try to reduce the impact.
16. Rebekah Wade said that the journalist was one of her top reporters. She gave me the impression that any amendments made to the story would be a bonus for me. She said that the main headline was going to be on the right hand side published early in the newspaper, but that she would agree to print it on the left hand side and on a later page. Rebekah Wade added that they would be reporting an allegation, not a statement of fact that I had actually done something. I was given the impression that this was the best I could possibly achieve.
17. On 4 February 2001 the story was published in the News of the World. I left home very early that morning and went to stay with my family for the day because I wanted to keep a low profile. I understand that there were reporters outside my house that day and when I got back a reporter had left a note under my door.
18. The story was republished in a number of other national newspapers and the allegations were widely repeated. Jane Griffiths gave an interview to the Mail on Sunday in which she also repeated the allegations in the story. It was at that point that I instructed solicitors. I was advised that the story had been written in such a way that it would make it very difficult for me to challenge and that if I did take action the News of the World would never leave me alone after this. I was only 28 at the time and wanted to concentrate on my political career.
19. I was still in my first term of parliament. But the impact of these events, had a long lasting effect on my relationship with the press. I became very conscious that challenging them in any way would bring retribution. Once the story had been published, I was aware of reporters seeking further information around Westminster for several months afterwards. For many weeks afterwards, I anticipated further Friday phone calls and the sense of relief when a Saturday deadline had passed. I was not aware at this point that they published articles of this type without prior notice

20. On Friday 16 March 2001 a story was published in The Sun referring to correspondence I had written in 1995 regarding Keith Vaz, the former Minister for Europe. It followed a front page story in the Guardian the previous day. The correspondence resurfaced during an investigation into allegations against Mr Vaz by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I remember there was daily media of the story coverage at this time for a period of some weeks.
21. I had in my possession paperwork relating to previous allegations against Keith Vaz which I had retained since 1995 when I was appointed to a Labour Party executive inquiry into allegations made in Leicester East by members of the Labour Party.
22. Following my involvement in the inquiry I had a great deal of paperwork in my possession of allegations predominantly made by Labour Party members. The inquiry was brought to an end, prematurely in my view, with the release of a statement from the Labour Party Regional Secretary Roy Maddox that the inquiry was over and the matter settled. I did not agree as there had been no consideration of the allegations and I wrote to the Labour Party General Secretary and entered into a long exchange of acrimonious correspondence with Keith Vaz. I finally put together a bundle of my correspondence with Keith Vaz and gave photocopies to all other members of the regional Labour Party board.
23. Following the 1995 inquiry, Newsnight broadcast a piece on the allegations made against Keith Vaz referring to this correspondence and it was clear they had obtained a copy of the bundle of correspondence.
24. In the 16 March 2001 article The Sun printed headlines describing Vaz as 'disgraceful and contemptuous' a reference to comments I had made in 1995 and praised me for them in their editorial.
25. On 19th March 2001 I attended a Culture Media and Sport Select Committee meeting in Manchester. It was part of a well publicised inquiry that the committee were undertaking and involved a series of visits, staying overnight and holding our committee session at Manchester Town Hall on the following day. We checked out from the hotel and took our bags to the town hall. The MPs' bags were kept in a room adjacent to the meeting behind a glass divider. At the end of the meeting my bag containing my laptop and house keys had been stolen. I thought this very strange because my bag was not an obvious laptop bag, unlike many others in the room. No other bag had been touched.
26. The council investigated and advised me that one of the security guards had been asked to open the door by an unnamed individual but he has never been identified and the police did not follow it up. I understand that the security guard was

- disciplined though I am not certain to what extent. I do not know whether he had been paid or whether the unnamed individual had blagged his way into the room.
27. By this stage there had been several weeks of media coverage and I decided not to take this any further. I believe that whoever stole my bag was targeting the bundle of correspondence regarding Keith Vaz believing that I may have references or copies with me. It was not there and there was nothing particularly interesting on my laptop. I did however have to get the locks changed on my home.
 28. I was weary of the press attention and the constant intrusion into my personal life. At this time, I was also subject to some strange calls on my home landline. Given the previous interference with my phone and that it was ex directory, I was surprised and concerned that I should receive calls supposedly from the Royal Mail checking my details. On one such occasion a number left on my answer phone for me to return the call turned out to be an adult sex chat line.
 29. During one of my regular constituency meetings with the local chief inspector, I mentioned in passing, some of these concerns. He suggested that this was probably the work of the media. Given that I lived alone in a private estate with hidden walkways, he suggested a visit from the local security officer. The police were concerned about my personal safety as the local MP and fitted a panic alarm system to my home. I eventually replaced this with my own personal alarm system.
 30. Following the most recent investigation into the activities of the News of the World, I was informed by the Metropolitan Police that there were several references to me in the notebooks of Glen Mulcaire. I have since seen these and received a settlement from News International for invasion of privacy. It was clear from the notes that my concerns of intrusion during the period in early 2001 were borne out by the evidence in the Mulcaire notes.
 31. In April 2003, my husband and I were engaged. I told close colleagues in Westminster and within 2 days I was approached by a reporter from the Mail on Sunday. I was asked for a picture of my fiancé and me. I told the reporter that we would not agree to this as my fiancé was not interested in publicity. I was advised that if I did not agree to a photo that the papers would get one. I was told they would sit outside my house until they obtained one and that I would then have no control over the photos. My fiancé (who was not a public figure) was forced to agree to photos being made available to all newspapers as they had decided our relationship was a story (MP marries plumber). We did not deliberately court the press. In fact, we turned down an offer from Hello! They were keen to interview us too and cover the wedding, once the papers covered our story and picture.

32. I was still very wary of national media attention and for this reason was particularly keen not to get involved in providing them with stories about my private life.
33. On 30 December 2004 I recall I was contacted by a journalist. I have since seen the notes from Glen Mulcaire files with evidence that he was seeking to gain access to my voicemail on this date.
34. I was in Riga with my husband at the time, as we were spending the new year on holiday. The journalist from the News of the World was calling to make further entirely false allegations.
35. I had a number of telephone calls with my solicitors that weekend while I was in Riga and I fielded a number of calls from journalists. Given the holiday period and my presence outside the UK, it was a difficult time to deal with a story that the News of the World were threatening to publish just days later. This was a very stressful period and it re-opened the scars from my dealings with the media three years previously, which I had hoped were behind me and during which I had taken a real emotional battering. My solicitors eventually managed to obtain agreement that the story was not published.
36. I was pregnant at this time and this stress whilst we were away had an impact on my health. For a number of weeks at the start of 2005, I feared that the News of the World would return to the story again, as they had in 2001. I was under enormous stress from this threat. Following the general election in May 2005, my baby was stillborn. I cannot help but think that the stress I was placed under in the early stages of my pregnancy, particularly during my stay in Riga, may have contributed to the eventual loss of my baby.
37. It is not the political stories in the media that I would complain of. This is a necessary part of being a politician, being held to public account. In my case, it was the intense and repeated interest in my personal life and the serious and untrue allegations which the media pursued. The media fail to recognise that once they print a story, the damage is done. It is not enough to be able to seek redress through the courts or any other legal action. The story has been published and it remains on the internet and in people's minds forever. Even if a libel action is won and an apology gained, it will never attract the same prominence as the original story. Nor can one be sure that all the people who read the original story will see the correction.
38. For a politician, seeking public confidence, this power to destroy is the most dangerous of any that the media have. During my 13 years in Parliament, News International in particular held an iron grip over our politics. In all the difficulties that I had, I knew that I could not rely upon my party or my colleagues to take on News International and I was in no position to do so. Yet, I also knew from my

experiences shortly after I was elected that media activities were far beyond acceptable or legal.

39. The Leveson inquiry and all that has been revealed in the last 2 years, has developed 'collective courage' from politicians to be able to expose these unacceptable activities by the media. I welcome this and it is in the spirit of being part of that collective courage that I have participated in this inquiry. I believe that we have to have a much clearer set of rules for the conduct of the media. If we want our politics to be clean but also to be open to people from all walks of life then much change needs to take place. My concern is that the intimidation and threatening by reporters did a huge amount of damage to many MPs during the last 20 years in particular. We now need to restore confidence in the relationships. The public are entitled to have elected politicians who have nothing to fear from good journalism.

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



Claire Ward

31.5.12