

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 3

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRIS BRYANT MP

I, **CHRIS BRYANT** of the House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA, **WILL SAY** as follows:

1. My name is Christopher John Bryant and I have been the Member of Parliament for the Rhondda since the General Election in 2001. I am also the Shadow Immigration Minister and I have written a weekly column in the *Independent* since September 2011.
2. After reading English at Oxford I prepared for ordination in the Church of England at Ripon College Cuddesdon and in a nine months placement in Comas, then a shantytown in Lima, and a human rights organisation in Buenos Aires. I was ordained deacon in 1986 and priest in 1987, serving as curate at All Saints High Wycombe and youth chaplain for the diocese of Peterborough. In 1991 I decided to leave the employ of the church and worked as agent for the Holborn and St Pancras Labour Party (1991-3) and Local Government Development officer at Labour Party headquarters (1993-4). I then ran the London office of the educational charity Common Purpose (1994-6) before setting up my own writing and training company. Having been a councillor in the London Borough of Hackney from 1993-1998, I stood unsuccessfully in the 1997 General Election in High Wycombe. From 1998-2000 I was Head of European Affairs at the BBC, running the Corporation's lobbying in Brussels. I have published *Possible Dreams: a personal history of the Christian Socialist*, *Stafford Cripps: the first modern Chancellor* and *Glenda*

Jackson, the biography (the latter with HarperCollins) as well as many pamphlets and books of essays.

3. Since my election as MP for Rhondda in 2001 I have served in the following capacities: member of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee 2001-2005; member of the bill committee on (amongst many others) the Communications Bill (2002 – 2003), the Sexual Offences Bill (2002 – 2003), on the Mental Health Bill (2006 – 2007); member of the joint committee on lords reform; Parliamentary Private Secretary to Lord Falconer of Thoroton (2005 – 2006) and Harriet Harman (2007-2008); Deputy Leader of the House (2008-2009); Minister for Europe (2009-2010); Shadow Minister for Constitutional Reform (2010-2011).

The Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

4. The Culture Media and Sport Select Committee that I joined in 2001 had an extremely influential role to play in a series of different policy areas, including the law on privacy, press and media standards, copyright, sports rights, the bundling of television channels, the development of pay TV, the drive towards digital, the funding of the BBC, the structure of ITV and Channel 4, the state of the British film industry and the regulation of broadcasting. Many of these issues had direct commercial implications for a wide range of organisations and members of the committee were very heavily lobbied all the time.
5. Most notably the government had published a Communications White Paper on 12 December 2000, which envisaged overhauling the regulation of broadcasting through the creation of OFCOM, which it did through a short Act entitled the Office of Communications 2002. It then published a draft Communications Bill in May 2002, which was considered by a joint committee of both houses before being introduced in the 2002-03 parliamentary session and being committed to a standing committee for

line by line consideration. The Act received royal assent on 17 July 2003. In addition to implementing many of the communications directives from the European Union the Act had a direct impact on such matters as the bundling of channels, the allocation of sports rights and the use of the electronic programme guide. It also enabled Carlton and Granada to merge into a single ITV entity.

6. At the same time, following the outcry over the way in which the media had treated the ordinary villagers of Soham (where my fellow ordinand the Revd Tim Alban-Jones was the vicar) and the concerns over the death of Princess Diana, there was significant pressure to introduce a new privacy law and better regulation of the press.
7. Against this background the select committee decided, amongst other things, to conduct enquiries into press standards and the regulation of the media and produced reports entitled, respectively *Privacy and Media Intrusion* (published May 2003) and *Broadcasting in Transition* (published March 2004). Both reports entailed significant number of evidence sessions, including representatives of all the major broadcasters and newspapers. Although we invited Rupert Murdoch to attend, he declined. Until 2011 neither he nor any of the Murdoch family had ever given evidence to the commons select committee, despite being by far the most significant media proprietor and player in the United Kingdom. I suggested that he should be forced to attend on three occasions, but had no support from other members of the committee.

Privacy and Media Intrusion Inquiry

8. As part of the enquiry into privacy intrusion, we took evidence from all the major newspaper editors. On several occasions I asked pointed questions.
9. On 25 February I put to Paul Dacre the instance of a family, constituents of mine, who had been very upset by the way a local newspaper had run a story about them but had

received no redress from the PCC. 'Let me give you a very specific instance. It is slightly conflated between two stories just to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned and it is a case that I put to another witness earlier of a family who have a child with a particular emotional and physical illness which is of interest to the newspaper. The news people turn up at the door. They have heard about the child, a young child, a seven year old child. The parents consent to the newspaper doing an interview on the understanding that the child will not be named nor where they live, except to say in South Wales, and that no photo will be used although a photograph is taken at the time just for the internal purposes of the newspaper they are told. All of this does appear in the newspaper, the name of the child, a photograph of the child, the school that the child goes to and the town where they live, all of these details. How would you make sure that that did not happen or do you think that it is legitimate for that to happen because it is of public interest?' In the subsequent months I had substantial correspondence with Mr Dacre on this issue, which indicated that he was angry that I had raised this matter in the way that I did.

10. On 11 March 2003, after a tough session with Piers Morgan, the then editor of the *Mirror*, I asked the following question of Ms Rebekah Wade, Mr Andy Coulson and Mr Stuart Kuttner: 'Do either of your newspapers ever use private detectives, ever bug or pay the police?' After a long response from Ms Wade, there was the following exchange: Mr Bryant: And on the element of whether you ever pay the police for information? (*Ms Wade*) We have paid the police for information in the past. Mr Bryant: And will you do it in the future? (*Ms Wade*) It depends— (*Mr Coulson*) We operate within the code and within the law and if there is a clear public interest then we will. The same holds for private detectives, subterfuge, a video bag—whatever you want to talk about. Mr Bryant: It is illegal for police officers to receive payments. (*Mr Coulson*) No. I just said, within the law.
11. I was not asking this question out of the blue as a friend, Kevin Brennan MP, had been

mugged and lost his phone and wallet a few weeks earlier in central London. He had reported the incident to the police and was surprised not only to get a phone call from a journalist who clearly knew the details of his statement but also to see an article in the *News of the World* about it days later. This is a practice that continues today. A colleague was recently contacted by the police to be told that their house in their constituency had been burgled – and was then rung by [redacted] half an hour later to be asked about the burglary.

12. Although there was some comment in a couple of the national newspapers the following day, and it was reported on the evening news as a major embarrassment for Ms Wade and Mr Coulson, I was surprised how little follow up there was in the national media. I tried to raise the matter with successive Home Secretaries and on the anniversary of Ms Wade's comments, on 11 March 2004, I raised it again in the Commons.

Media attacks

13. On Thursday 13 November 2003 the *Sun* ran a piece attacking me, alleging that I had said that British voters were 'too stupid to vote' [see CJB 1] in a referendum on the EU treaty, together with an editorial piece entitled 'the big lie' [see CJB 2] which attacked me for supposedly saying, 'the public can't be trusted to vote on such a big issue as the European constitution' because 'only MPs are clever enough to understand a treaty'. Although I had opposed a ten minute bill the previous day which would have required holding a referendum, I had said no such thing and the quotations attributed to me were simply invented, but the *Sun* refused to apologise. Indeed three days later they ran a series of letters compounding the mistake [see CJB 3]. The PCC advised me that they could not help. In the end I made do with them carrying a letter from me [see CJB 4] later in the paper, which they accompanied by a series of other letters.

14. On Friday 28 November 2003 I was approached outside my constituency office by a journalist from the *Mail on Sunday*, Louisa Pritchard, who wanted me to comment on a couple of photos the paper had obtained of me. That Sunday the *Mail on Sunday* published a photograph of me dressed in my underpants, which they said I had emailed to someone via a gay dating web-site known as gaydar several months earlier [see CJB 5]. I do not know how they obtained the photograph, which they ran alongside a series of extremely private messages. The *Mail on Sunday* never claimed that either these messages or the photo had been publicly available on any web-site.

15. The *News of the World* also ran the story that same day, as did the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* on Monday 1 December [see CJB 6 and 7]. On Tuesday Richard Littlejohn in the *Sun* devoted most of his column to an attack on me [see CJB 8] and Quentin Letts in the *Daily Mail* wrote an article suggesting that I was wearing make-up in the Commons the previous day (I wasn't). On Wednesday the *Daily Mail* maintained that I was being threatened with deselection [see CJB 9] by the Labour Party (I wasn't). On Thursday Quentin Letts contributed another full page article attacking me [see CJB 10]. Richard Littlejohn returned to the matter in his *Sun* column on Friday, and again the following Tuesday, and the following Friday (12 December), and again on Tuesday 20 January 2004 [see CJB 11, 12, 13 and 14]. On Sunday 7 December *The Sunday Times* carried a very aggressively critical profile of me by Geoffrey Levy [see CJB 15], one of the journalists who had managed to contact my father. Several years later, on Thursday 21 May 2009, Kelvin MacKenzie added in the *Sun* that 'voters must give Bryant a Rhondda rogering'.

16. Diary stories appeared in several national newspapers throughout December and January – most of them entirely inaccurate.

17. In the week after their initial story, as well as running a set of extremely lurid and inaccurate new allegations on 7 December, the *Mail on Sunday* commissioned a YouGov

survey regarding me [see CJB 16]. The results showed that 69 per cent of people thought that an MP in such a situation had a right to privacy and just 25 per cent believed that the paper had the right to publish the story. Only nine per cent of people believed this was a resigning issue, 31 per cent did not disapprove of what I was alleged to have done and a further 55 per cent felt that whilst they disapproved, they would not want me to resign.

18. During this time there were photographers outside my flat in London and journalists tried to establish my whereabouts via a series of means, some of them illegal. My partner at the time was a doctor. He was visited twice at the hospital where he worked. His parents were telephoned. My father, who had only just moved and whose telephone number was unobtainable legally, was telephoned. A former partner was offered several thousand pounds to tell his story about me and was threatened with negative publicity about him if he did not comply. These offers and threats were first made at his home address which had been obtained by ringing his office and pretending to have a parcel to deliver to his home. Further offers and threats were subsequently made at his office.
19. As the *Mail on Sunday* had published my address, I also acquired a stalker who followed me home from the tube and sent me a series of lurid letters. On one occasion he called my landline (which was ex-directory) at 2 in the morning and told me he was standing outside the front door to my flat. I rang the police and had him removed.
20. In addition I received a series of emails, all purportedly from a journalist at [redacted] [redacted] threatening me with further wild allegations and detailing how I have been tailed by the newspaper. As these were aggressive and seemed to be building up to blackmail, after more than six weeks of such messages I eventually handed these over to Commander John Yates of the Metropolitan Police on 4 February 2004. He told me that forensics would check the package and trace the source of the emails. I never heard any

more.

21. At the time, [redacted] [redacted] told me, 'we're all betting and hoping that you'll be dead by Christmas'. Whether he anticipated my actual or political death, I increased my majority at the subsequent General Election.
22. Around this time John Birt, my former employer at the BBC, approached me and told me that Tony Blair had asked him to speak to me, to get me to 'calm down'.

Relationship with News Corp/News International/BSkyB

23. This was not the end of my relationship with News International. My experience of the organization – and of BSkyB – is that it ensures that politicians are compliant with the company's commercial interests by the twin use of fear and favour. Not only did News International host extravagant parties at the political parties' annual conference. It also held events in Westminster, it invited MPs and ministers to cultural and sporting events in which it had an interest – and engaged in a wide range of lobbying activities.
24. Although I have not normally been invited to News International events, I was taken to one on Wednesday 29 September 2004 at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton by Andrew Pierce, who was then a journalist on *The Times*. I had just come from speaking at a fringe meeting at which I argued that Rupert Murdoch should not be allowed a monopoly in the UK, which attracted barbed comments from both Adam Boulton and Jon Craig of Sky News. As Andrew Pierce and I arrived at the News International reception Rebekah Wade approached me and said, 'Ah, Mr Bryant. It's dark, isn't it? Shouldn't you be out of Clapham Common by now?' Her husband, the actor Ross Kemp, said, 'shut up, you homophobic cow'.

25. Similarly, Sky Arts, who sponsored the Hay-on-Wye literary festival, hosted several MPs at a house in Hay throughout the weekend of the festival. To my surprise, Lucy Aitkens, who worked for BSkyB, invited me in 2007 – and then three days later disinvited me, citing James Murdoch’s personal objection to my presence. I gather Ed Vaizey MP, who is now Arts minister, took my place. On another occasion I joined an MP friend at a Sky Arts reception in the House of Lords, to which I had not been invited. BSkyB’s head of public affairs, Martin Lejeune demanded that I leave. At a lunch two weeks later he told me that ‘Rupert wouldn’t like it’ and that ‘Rupert doesn’t forget, you know’.

My investigations into Phone Hacking

26. Although I had worried that my flat, my computer and my phone had been compromised in 2003, it was not until July 2009, when I read the *Guardian* story about the Gordon Taylor settlement with the *News of the World* and the hoard of material the Met had gathered from Glenn Mulcaire that I wrote to the Metropolitan Police to ask whether they had gathered any material regarding me. They replied in March 2010, suggesting that whilst my name did appear in the material, there was ‘no evidence that my phone had been hacked’. They did none the less suggest that I should contact my mobile phone company, Orange.
27. Orange confirmed to me that in fact there had been several attempts to obtain my pin number on 3 December 2003 (in the middle of the gaydar saga) as a man pretending first to be me and then pretending to be someone from the Orange technical department had tried to gain access to my voicemail.
28. I then pursued the Metropolitan Police to establish exactly what material they had gathered relating to me as I believed that whilst the wrong-doing might not be evident to them, it might to me. When they refused point-blank to do so I resorted to the

courts, launching a request for Judicial Review of the Met's refusal to show me the material. The initial review was rejected, but a subsequent application was accepted by Justice Foskett on 23 May 2011 and on 19 January 2012 the court allowed a negotiated settlement in which the Metropolitan Police accepted that they had failed in their duty to inform me.

29. I could not have taken this action without relying on a conditional fee agreement with Bindmans.

30. In the meantime the Metropolitan Police were still maintaining that there was no reason to reopen the original investigation into the criminality at the *News of the World*. Asst. Commissioner John Yates expressly said that '...potential targets may have run into hundreds of people, but our inquiries showed that they only used the tactic against a far smaller number of individuals...in the majority of cases there was insufficient evidence to show that tapping had actually been achieved...I therefore consider that no further investigation is required'. My argument, however, was that the material they had gathered might not look like evidence to someone who did not know what the different numbers, names and hieroglyphics meant, but might be extremely incriminating in the hands of the victim. In my case, when I was eventually shown the material by the Metropolitan Police in January 2011, consisting of two facing sheets of an A4 notepad, I instantly recognized the list of twenty three other telephone numbers, the personal details, the names and addresses of people close to me and the references to so many minutes and the top left hand corner name of the person who had commissioned the surveillance as clear evidence of phone hacking.

31. Because of the Metropolitan Police's intransigent refusal to show me the material pertaining to me, and conscious of Rebekah Wade and Andy Coulson's admission in 2003 that they had paid police for information, I now formed the opinion that there was a real possibility that the Metropolitan Police and News International were effectively so

close as it be colluding one with another.

32. On 9 September 2010 I led a special debate on whether 'the matter of hacking of honourable and right honourable Members' mobile phones be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges'. The Commons did then refer the matter to the Committee, which subsequently decided that in certain circumstances such activity could indeed be considered a contempt of parliament. I hoped that the debate would also focus the police's attention on the fact that many MPs who I believe had been subject to surveillance and had had their phone hacked had not been notified by the police even though the police still maintained that all politicians had been notified (and continued to maintain this well into 2011).
33. That night a friend, Craig Fraser, rang me to tell me that he had been told that two friends of his, both of them close to Rupert Murdoch, had been saying that I would be wise to desist from my campaign. One was called [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] who apparently thought that Rupert Murdoch 'will get me, in time for this'. I do not know the name of the second person.
34. On 10 March 2011 I led a further debate in the Commons on mobile interception. By this time a new police investigation had been opened and I had been shown a redacted version of the Mulcaire material relating to me. I said, 'This has been a many layered scandal, but at the heart of the issue is the rationale behind the whole *modus operandi* at the *News of the World* and other newspapers. As one police officer put it to me, the newspapers involved deliberately sought to harass, intimidate and bully people for their own commercial interests. In the pursuit of their victims they were reckless about the innocent bystanders whose personal messages were intercepted, transcribed and relayed to others. Almost as bad as the original activity – only the tip of which we have yet seen – has been the cover up. Other Members and former Members of the House have said they were warned off pushing the issue in the House and in select

committees. When I raised the question of parliamentary privilege in the House last September, my friends were told by a senior figure allied to Rupert Murdoch and a former executive of News International to warn me that it would not be forgotten'.

35. On 6 July 2011 I led a third, emergency, commons debate on phone hacking. I said, 'These are not just the amoral actions of some lone private investigator tied to a rogue *News of the World* reporter; they are the immoral and almost certainly criminal deeds of an organization that was appallingly led and had completely lost sight of any idea of decency or shared humanity'.
36. In 2012 I settled a claim against the *News of the World* for hacking my phone and received my costs plus £30,000. Like many other claimants I would not have been able to take legal action if it had not been for the Conditional Fee Agreement, but I would also argue that if it had not been for the civil actions taken, both against the *News of the World* and in the Judicial Review of the Metropolitan Police, the full truth would not have come to light. The evidence unearthed through Norwich Pharmacal disclosures in both cases, the majority of which was already in the possession of either the Metropolitan Police or News International or their lawyers, has been central to forcing the police to open the new investigation.
37. I would therefore urge very strongly the need to make redress in privacy cases financially possible for people on ordinary incomes. As the issues are complex but damages small victims of the invasion of privacy can run up £250,000 of costs very easily with the prospect of no more than £60,000 damages. This clearly puts justice beyond the reach of most people unless either a new small claims court style system of arbitration can be established or the old system of conditional fee agreements is restored for privacy and libel cases.
38. I have been asked how I arrive at the conclusion that 'we have let the Press Complaints

Commission delude us into thinking that it is genuinely independent and has a bite that everybody is frightened of'. Although my personal dealings with the PCC have been limited, I would cite the PCC's stout (and wholly inaccurate) defence of the *News of the World*, its chairman's libeling of the lawyer Mark Lewis, its inability to enforce its decisions on newspapers, its refusal to remove editors with adverse judgments against them from its committee, as evidence that it is a toothless body. True, it had no power to investigate allegations about hacking or the illegal payment of police, but I believe that no body will have the full confidence of the public – or indeed sufficient confidence to provide an effective and cheap arbitration system – while it remains an entirely self-regulating body. That is why I would prefer minimal state intervention in the industry, but a new body constituted in law with certain limited statutory powers at two arms lengths from parliament.

39. I also believe that the so-called 'editors' code of practice' is a mirage. Having lived under dictatorship in Spain and known the horror of press repression in Argentina and Chile I certainly believe in the freedom of the press. Indeed I would argue that on occasion a journalist might knowingly choose to break the law in the pursuit of a greater good. That is why it is right that the Crown Prosecution Service has the power to decline to prosecute where to do so would not be in the public interest. However, the concept of the 'public interest' is willfully misused in some journalism and the PCC editors' code of practice provides a circular definition, which assumes that anything that the public finds interesting is in the public interest. That is why I prefer the concept of the 'public good' as the benchmark for any invasion of privacy. Prurience and fierce 1950s style judgmentalism are mutually contradictory. The public may be prurient but they are rarely as judgmental as the tabloid press.
40. At the heart of the hacking at the *News of the World* has been the activity of a private investigator. Many law firms and others use such private investigators quite legitimately, but when newspapers have done so it seems they have done so in order to

maintain a degree of plausible deniability. It would help if private investigators were licensed and properly regulated by an independent body. There is already legislation on the statute book to enable this, but it has yet to be implemented.

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

Signed



Date

2 May 2012