

## **PRESS STANDARDS AND CITIZENS' RIGHTS**

The press has seized on tumbling election turn-outs as evidence of a public disengagement from politics for which, it claims, politicians are largely to blame.

What then are we to make of the free-falling circulations of our national newspapers? They are selling 1.75 million fewer copies a day than just five years ago. It seems that those in search of the news no longer look for it in their daily paper.

A recent survey commissioned by the Committee for Standards in Public Life provides more uncomfortable insight. It concludes that newspapers do still influence their readers' opinions. But it also finds that while only 27% of the public trust MPs, far fewer, just 7%, trust the red-top journalists who have done so much to undermine them.

So in a few weeks time, when citizens decide who should run the country, they will be basing their judgements about politicians they do not trust on newspapers they do not believe.

That is a serious problem for us all. If citizens lose the capacity to believe what they are told by those in power or in the know, how do we sustain a system of democracy which is based ultimately on our trust in the good faith of governments?

When politicians abuse that trust they can rightly expect little mercy from the press. But how can we know when the press fails us? To whom is it accountable?

The answer is certainly not to curtail the freedom of journalists to seek and tell the truth. But if a free press is the pre-requisite for democracy, it is no guarantee of its health or strength. A press which misinforms or worse deceives, serves its public no better than a government which does the same.

The Committee for Standards' findings suggest that the public does increasingly feel deceived and unless we do something to arrest the decline, things will get worse. The demands of 24 hour news, global media corporations and competition from the internet are imposing irresistible pressures on newspapers to out-scoop, out-sensationalise and out-sell each other.

Creating perceptions and reflecting prejudices is much less demanding than ferreting out the facts. The blurring of report and comment has become

commonplace, debate has given way to denunciation, stories based on unattributed and often fabricated quotes can set the week's political agenda.

Politicians respond with spin and sound-bites. Lobby groups heighten the drama with ever more extreme positions or attention-grabbing stunts. The world is painted black and white even if the truth is in the dull grey area between.

Serious journalists admit their concerns about the downward spiral in both their profession's standards and its standing. But there are few signs that things will change of their own accord. Fifteen years after David Mellor's warning that journalists were drinking in the last chance saloon the bingeing has continued unabated.

But when newspapers get it wrong, it isn't just trust which is undermined. Reputations can be destroyed and lives and livelihoods irreparably damaged. Politicians and showbiz celebrities are a small minority of those who suffer. According to the Press Complaints Commission, 94% of the complaints it receives come from those it regards as "ordinary". These are people who could never contemplate mounting a libel action to defend their names. They turn to the PCC as their only option and it fails the vast majority.

The Commission claims that its service is "fast, free and fair". But it's also futile. Of the 3,649 complaints it received in 2003 (up 39% on the previous year), only 23 were adjudicated and of them only 11 (0.3%) were upheld. 56% of those complaints were about accuracy.

No wonder the papers support and fund the PCC: self-regulation does not work and is not meant to. It is simply not going to stop the rot.

That is why I have introduced my Right of Reply and Press Standards Bill. It is very limited in scope. It is not concerned about what journalists write or how they write it so long as it is not untrue. It does not seek to constrain press freedom other than its license to misinform, misrepresent and mislead.

It simply establishes a statutory right for the victims of inaccurate reporting to set the record straight quickly and with due prominence. If a newspaper refuses to cooperate, the complainant may apply to an independent Adjudicator beyond whom both parties may appeal to the Press Standards Board which can seek enforcement of its rulings through the courts.

This is not punitive legislation. Similar rights exist in at least ten other European democracies. The French have had one since 1881, the Finns since 1919. Both have a vigorous free press and vibrant public life.

My Bill does not abridge newspapers' rights to probe and expose. It simply demands of them a greater commitment to the facts and a less casual indifference to the rights of others. No journalist need fear it. Only the worst will be inconvenienced by it. Most, I believe, will welcome it because as well as protecting the reputations of others it will help to restore their own.

The press plays a crucial role in keeping those in authority honest. But it surely has a duty to meet the high standards it demands of others. Journalists are not the only ones whose rights must be protected. Individuals have a right not to be misrepresented and the public has a right not to be misled. Those rights are important and my Bill seeks to guarantee them.