

John Redwood MP v Daily Mirror

Clauses noted: 1

John Redwood MP complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the Daily Mirror on 2 April 2005 headlined "He's not human...don't vote for him" was inaccurate in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code.

The complaint was not upheld.

The article reported that the complainant's wife had written an open letter to a local newspaper criticising her husband in advance of the general election. A leading article repeated the allegations.

The complainant considered that a number of the allegations were untrue. In particular, he rejected three claims: that he had never given time or money to charity; that he had had an affair with Nikki Page starting in 1999; and that a judge had found against him in the divorce proceedings. He provided details from bank statements to show he made a regular donation to an educational charity at his former Oxford College and that he paid an annual cheque to the British Legion. He also regularly helped local charities with time and money, he said. Regarding the divorce proceedings, he claimed that an initial settlement was changed to reduce the payment of cash/savings to his wife, following the transfer of assets. Other alleged inaccuracies in the article included the claim that he made disparaging comments about Shadow Cabinet members; that he did not care about the birth of his children; that he bamboozled his ex-wife into accepting a cut-price divorce; and that Mrs Redwood had given up her job to be with him. The complainant made clear that he did not have the time or opportunity to read or review the allegations prior to publication.

The newspaper said that the article was a legitimate news story, reporting that the ex-wife of a leading politician had written open letters criticising him. The claims in those letters – and all the points under contention – were clearly distinguished in the article as the personal views of the complainant's former wife, something that would have been clear to readers. Moreover, the newspaper had taken care to contact the complainant, through Conservative Central Office, in advance of the story being published, and had published the general comments he had made in response.

In defence of the claims that appeared in the article, the newspaper said that Mrs Redwood had petitioned for divorce citing the complainant's unreasonable behaviour, which included adultery and failure to support his wife during her illness. An initial settlement in 2003 was later amended to give Mrs Redwood a greater share of assets. It had been Mrs Redwood's belief – from examining bank statements – that her husband had made no regular charitable donations. However, the complainant had provided some evidence of charitable donations, and the newspaper said that it was prepared to publish a clarification on this point.

It was also Mrs Redwood's view that her husband had had an affair with Ms Page in 1999, something she was entitled to express. The newspaper also thought it relevant to point out that the complainant had sought a mortgage to make a considerable investment in Ms Page's home, 6 days before his alleged first date with her. Nonetheless, his denial of any romantic involvement with anyone else before his marriage broke down was included in the article.

The newspaper did not consider that, in the context of the article, any of the further points raised were particularly significant, although it was also prepared to annotate its records to reflect the complainant's denials that he had had an affair with Ms Page from 1999 and that he had made disparaging comments about members of the Shadow Cabinet.

Although she said she had not co-operated with the newspaper before publication of the piece, the complainant's ex-wife wrote to the Commission in support of it.

Adjudication

Although the claims regarding the complainant's charitable donations had very clearly been presented as the allegations of his ex-wife, the complainant had provided documentary evidence to the contrary during the course of the Commission's investigation. The Commission was therefore pleased to note that the newspaper had offered to clarify this point. Given the manner in which the claims had been presented, and the attempts by the newspaper to put the matter to the complainant for comment, the Commission did not consider that an apology was necessary. The Commission was also pleased that the newspaper had offered to annotate its records to make the complainant's position clear on when his relationship with Ms Page began and to record his denial that he had made disparaging remarks about members of the Shadow Cabinet. In the circumstances outlined above, and given the fact that this part of the dispute concerned a straightforward conflict of assertion between Mr and Mrs Redwood, the Commission considered that this was an appropriate response and that no further action was necessary.

The Commission then turned to the remaining points of dispute. It was inevitable that following the marriage breakdown there would be contrasting views and interpretations about the respective behaviour of the two parties. It was important for the Commission to record that its task was not to adjudicate on which (if any) of the versions of events was correct, but rather on whether the newspaper had acted in accordance with the Code's rules on accuracy when reporting one of those versions.

It was clear that throughout the article the newspaper had taken care to present the allegations about the complainant as those of his former wife. She had wanted her views to be put into the public domain through an open letter and in a book that she was apparently writing about the marriage. As the complainant had recognised, his former wife had a right to express her views on their marriage breakdown publicly. These had been repeated by the Daily Mirror, and Mrs Redwood had written to the Commission to indicate that she did not believe that she had been inaccurately quoted in its article.

The newspaper had also taken care to put the allegations to the complainant for his comments before publication, by providing Conservative Central Office with the details of the story and requesting a response from the complainant. Although his response was not afforded the same amount of space as his former wife's claims (something that is not required by the Code), his contrary position had been published in the article. In these circumstances, and given the manner in which the rest of the piece had been presented, the Commission did not consider that readers of the newspaper would have been misled in breach of Clause 1 of the Code into believing that Mrs Redwood's version of events was the definitive one.

Finally, regarding the suggestion that a judge had overturned the initial settlement at a divorce hearing, the Commission noted that it seemed to be accepted that the initial settlement had not been adhered to in the following year's proceedings. Any discrepancy in the way in this was reported was not, in the Commission's view, of such significance as to raise a breach of the Code.

Relevant Ruling

Feltz v Sunday Mirror & Daily Mirror, 2001

Adjudication issued 2005