



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

20 May 2010

Stephen Abell
Director
Press Complaints Commission
Halton House
20/23 Holborn
London
EC1N 2 JD

Dear Stephen

HOUSE OF COMMONS ADJOURNMENT DEBATE – 27 APRIL 2011
SELF REGULATION OF THE PRESS

I promoted an adjournment debate on 27 April in the House of Commons on the subject of the self regulation of the press.

I thought it was an interesting debate and it was clear from the contributions made by other MPs that my concerns about the definition of 'prominence' and the inability of the PCC editor's code to properly police the letters pages of newspapers are matters of concern.

The editor's code of practice committee is able to make changes to the code and it was specifically mentioned both by me and the Minister who responded in the debate that the code had been amended no less than 30 times since its creation.

I would therefore be grateful if the two issues that I raised could be formally considered by the committee.

The first one is simple; that when an error is made then equal prominence is given to the adjudication or correction. Equal prominence would only need to be enforced if negotiations could not produce an amicable agreement on where an adjudication/correction should be placed. My own case, which I referred to in the debate, is, in my opinion, an illustration of where 'equal prominence' would have been effective.

As you know what transpired was a set of circumstances where a trail on page one took the reader to erroneous information on page nine but the PCC ruled that the correction/adjudication could not be dealt with in the same way, why? Why couldn't a page one trail be used to guide readers to the PCC adjudication on page nine?

The second point that I made in the debate is that the PCC contends that newspaper letters pages are covered by the code.

However, when the scope of that coverage is analysed you find that it is weak.

All that a newspaper editor has to do to avoid scrutiny is to put forward the defence that the person who wrote the letter wants to remain anonymous and that prevents any further investigation.

The process is neutered before any investigation starts. That cannot be acceptable.

Editors have to accept that they must diligently scrutinise the letters that they receive to ensure that the person who claims to have authored the correspondence is who they say they are. In addition I also believe that if letters are of a political nature the question has to arise about whether the anonymity of correspondents needs further examination. For example, should a political opponent be given anonymity?

Again, using my case as an example, I was attacked in an article (about my expenses) in a local newspaper and in the same edition I was attacked in the letters page with the same conjecture that appeared in the article.

Even a casual analysis of that edition would have led an innocent bystander to the conclusion that, at the very least, something unusual was going on.

Yet the PCC code prevented a proper investigation being carried out.

How are the public to have confidence? If what we say the code is designed to achieve, is thwarted so easily.

It is not good enough to put forward a defence that the problem is too difficult to solve and I hope that the editor's code of practice committee can put its wealth of experience to good use and come up with some solutions.

I look forward to hearing from you.

I have copied this letter to all the Members of Parliament who participated in the debate.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael McCann', written in a cursive style.

Michael McCann MP