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*From the Chairman*

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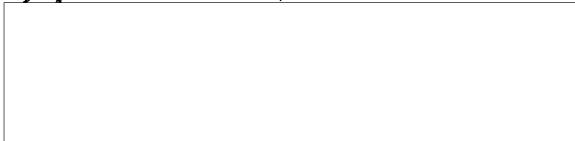
*Dear Donald,*

I think the lay members of the PCC, who include, of course, myself, would be stunned to learn that we are bullied by editors. If there is any caucus at Commission meetings, it tends to be formed by groups of lay members, not by editors, who have greater difficulty agreeing among themselves than outsiders assume.

You will have noticed, of course, that one of our Commissioners, Peter Hill of the Daily Express, took a double hit recently from the Commission: firstly, when he was required to publish an apology; secondly, when he was censured for not publishing it with sufficient prominence.

Finally, you touch on media convergence. It's a pity you had not read my speech last Friday at the Scottish Society of Editors on regulation in the digital age. It deals precisely with your point. I enclose a copy.

*Yours etc,*



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# When editors wield such power, can the PCC be truly impartial?

## ON THE PRESS

## Donald Treford

When Sir Christopher Meyer, formerly our man in Washington, became chairman of the Press Complaints Commission in 2003, he coined the phrase "permanent evolution" as his working policy. He has been true to his word in several respects. The number of lay members on the PCC has been raised to 10, a clear majority over seven journalists. There is an annual audit of the editors' Code of Practice, with a committee considering amendments, some from outside the profession: the Samaritans, for example, succeeded in amending the code on copycat suicides. The PCC is much more proactive, operating a 24-hour service for complaints and an effective conciliation procedure. It has achieved greater prominence for its adjudications and has now taken over the regulation of online journalism.

These are all praiseworthy developments, and the PCC's annual review makes impressive reading. Yet, Tony Blair's lament about the "feral beasts" of the press, for all its sententiousness, struck a chord with many people, including some journalists. One senses that it would only take another major scandal, like the News of the World's phone tapping or the BBC's phone-in deceptions, to bring back calls for tougher regulation.

With all due respect to Les Hinton, the public may find it hard to understand why the executive chairman of Murdoch's News International, the man who effectively controls *The Sun* and the *News of the World*, should be chairman of the Code Committee, apparently acting as poacher and gamekeeper at once.

One senses also that code changes are rubber-stamped by the lay members of the Commission without much, if any, debate. The figure of Ofcom looms. Separate regulation of

broadcasting and written media no longer makes sense to many people at a time of closer media convergence; the fact that the Advertising Standards Authority now covers both (broadcast advertising is regulated under contract from Ofcom) makes the distinction harder to defend.

So Sir Christopher's "permanent evolution" needs to keep up the pace. Here are a few suggestions. One is to make more use of retired senior journalists and media academics as a consultation court (this is not a job application). I believe that the PCC should also actively engage in promoting press freedom, as did the old Press Council. It should consider commissioning an annual audit of press performance, as Sir Louis Blom-Cooper, a former Press Council chairman, has proposed.

Although the lay jobs on the commission are now widely advertised, the people appointed do seem to be regular quango

kings and queens, rather than typical newspaper readers. I can understand why actual working editors were appointed to the PCC, because they had to demonstrate their commitment to the new system in the so-called "last chance saloon". But the presence of national newspaper editors – Roger Alton of *The Observer* and Peter Hill of *The Daily Express*, and especially a giant like Paul Dacre, editor-in-chief of Associated Newspapers – can be intimidating. These are people used to getting their own way, and a lay member would need to be very brave to take them on.

If the commission upholds a complaint against a national paper, it is by definition against one of the working editors' rivals (otherwise they would have to excuse themselves). If it fails to uphold such a complaint, it can look like Fleet Street solidarity. After 12 years, the PCC should have enough confidence in itself to move on to the next stage.



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