

From: Matthew Parris

4th May 2012

I have received your letter of the 5th April, and my replies to your questions on Module 3 of Part 1 of your Inquiry follow.

I hope you will understand that these answers are often brief, not out of any intended discourtesy but because much of the area of questioning lies outside my area of knowledge. I would point out to the Inquiry that I am a freelance columnist, self-employed, e-mailing work to *The Times* and the *Spectator* and, (ad hoc) others too, but working from neither publication's premises. I go into *The Times* at most once in a week for a meeting of the politics team with the Editor that I occasionally attend, do not keep a desk there; am not on the staff and have never been. I have never worked in a newspaper's headquarters, or kept regular company with the employees of a newspaper. I am in no sense an insider.

There is a second reason for the apparent terseness of some of my responses. I take this area of questioning to be substantially governed by the preamble of Question 1, concerning a developing dynamic in the relationship between politicians and the media. I do not believe such a developing dynamic exists, and therefore cannot offer much by way of reflection upon it.

I have prefixed to each of my answers the numerals and/or letters that identify the question it addresses.

1. (Answered, I believe, in my response to your earlier enquiries under Module 1)
2. I am aware of no such developing dynamic. I believe there has been little change. The only dynamic I have observed is a relatively recent intense growth of media interest in the relationship.
 - a) This is a very large and general question indeed. In summary, my answer is that the condition necessary for a free press is freedom; that with freedom will always come abuse; and that constraints on that freedom should be, in general, restricted to the aim of discouraging departures from the truth, encouraging the publication of corrections and, if necessary, the provision of damages when damage has been caused. The examples you ask for - of the press fulfilling its role in holding politicians and the powerful to account - are too numerous to collect, and comprise a large part of the body of every newspaper's daily political reporting. As to the scrutiny of the press itself, this is best provided by vigorous competition between journals themselves.

2.

2. b) (i) I know little about this but am not aware of a change.
(ii) (ditto)
(iii) Neither the measure nor the balance seems to me to shift much
(iv) (ditto) Plainly better and closer relations exist between some parties/politicians and some newspapers than others.
- c) Beyond my area of expertises. I am not aware of any recent change.
d) This has not altered much, in my view, in the last century.
e) I have observed no important new dynamic. I suppose that newspapers have always lobbied hard when their own commercial interests are at stake.
f) I cannot comment on the extent of the perception. The reality is that the press has never restricted itself to reporting and always tried hard to set agendas and to influence politics. I doubt whether this is lost on readers.
g) Beyond my area of expertise. As a backbench M.P. thirty years ago I used to believe the press were very influential. I now think this belief was exaggerated.
h) I am not a politician and hardly know much about this. My impression is that politicians have a genuine belief in the importance of press freedom but are occasionally upset at some of its consequences; and struggle in their minds to decide whether, or how much, constraint should be applied.

3. I see no new problem or opportunities here; but a continuing appreciation of the importance, and difficulty, of striking the right balance between a cosy and an arm's length relationship. There are gains and losses from each. The balance is best struck case by case, by individual politicians and journalists. When journalists get the balance wrong their work suffers, and in a competitive environment, this tells.

4. No.

5. Elections only intensify friendly or hostile relations. Elections being the palpable manifestations of democracy, whether imminent or distant, politicians and those who report and comment on them always bear them in mind – in a more concentrated way as an election approaches. I see no new problems and have no recommendations for change.

6. No important lessons: no important changes. We should be very wary indeed about trying to define the public interest.

7. The press, much more diverse, have always been more freewheeling. The broadcast media are dominated by a state broadcasting corporation whose predominance, and whose dependence on the State, have been believed to necessitate stricter rules on balance etc. I believe this variance is well understood by readers, viewers and listeners.

3.

8. I would recommend a period of silence on all sides, for the mood to settle down.
9.
 - a) Outside my area of expertise.
 - b) Commercial competition, and unstable revenues, make newspapers more anxious to win and keep their audiences. Their efforts to do so are very obvious. The B.B.C's desire to keep and enlarge the revenue from its licence fee makes government and politicians a very select audience within their audience: and one to which great, though less visible attention must be paid, and I believe is paid.
 - c) Rather outside my knowledge, but (pace d) I have not generally observed that politicians and government dance much to the media's tune, in their media policies. They listen and consult, as they should.
 - d) Parts of the media do seem, unusually, to be currently influencing politicians in the direction of new regulations: of which your Inquiry is an example.
 - e) Outside my area of expertise.
 - f) ditto
10.
 - a) By reporting facts and stories, the media influence policy. By both reporting and expressing opinion they may try to do so; but, I suspect, with less success.
 - b) The media encounter great difficulty in running against the tide of public opinion. And difficulty too in arousing public opinion where there is no pre-existing interest. I am perplexed by your counter-posing "public opinion" on the one hand, with "the interests of the media themselves", on the other. Do you perhaps mean "editorial opinion" rather than "the interests of the media themselves"? If so, my answer is that editorial opinion will sometimes differ from the opinion of some, or even most of the public. I do not see that as something to be regretted, or that it is necessarily wrong for newspapers to try to lead or change public opinion; but (see 9 d) above) their power to do this is limited. If by "the interests of the media themselves" you mean interests in the commercial sense, my response is that it occasionally happens that a newspaper's editorial policy or opinion is influenced by its commercial interests – but not very often – and usually in circumstances when rival commercial interests are able to publicise this, and do.
 - c) The public interest is hard, perhaps impossible, to define. On the whole I think the public interest is best served by the publication of what is true, leaving the public themselves to decide what is worthwhile or interesting.

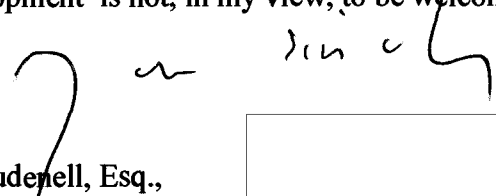
4.

10. d) My impression is that the media have, for the most part, responded rather than led. They do sometimes try to lead, however. One might cite the campaigns against slavery, child labour and many other great abuses throughout history. One might also cite campaigns for things of which one disapproves, or against things of which one approves. In all these things I think we would be better advised to debate the merits of the campaigns, rather than the right of those who publish opinions to try to influence those who read the publications.

11. I have observed little ability to secure appointments and a greater ability to discourage appointments or influence the termination of appointments. Whether or not "the public interest" was served in any of these cases would depend, most importantly, on whether or not one approved of the appointment/sacking in question. Opinions are likely to differ, and opinions as to whether the public interest was served would differ accordingly.

12. I cannot recall devoting a column to such topics, but having written nearly 5,000 columns, may have forgotten doing so. I seem to think I have sometimes observed that for a political journalist, affection, respect or sympathy for a politician is more likely to corrupt your journalistic judgement than the provision of hospitality or the existence of any commercial inducement to please him or her. The most important and enduring influence on a journalist's (or anybody else's) judgement are things we cannot measure, record, adjudicate or regulate.

Concluding, may I offer your Inquiry a final thought? The concept of the public interest is not, of course, a new one, and something like it, in many manifestations and interpreted by a range of authorities in a range of circumstances, has floated through our jurisprudence for a long time. It is certainly not unknown to journalists and those who may adjudicate their work. I think there is a danger, however, that recommendations your Inquiry may consider may seek to repose in a statutory body, the function of determining the public interest, as it relates to the pursuit or a publication of news or commentary. This, I believe, would be the beginning of a very slippery slope. Not much further down the slope would come the idea of pre-submission of drafts or plans for pursuing stories for what would become tantamount to official clearance. Such a development is not, in my view, to be welcomed


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