

IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY

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WITNESS STATEMENT OF  
ANDREW MARR

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I, **ANDREW MARR**, of BBC Television Centre, Wood Lane, London, W12 7RJ, **WILL SAY:-**

- A. Insofar as the matters set out in this statement derive from my own knowledge, they are true. Where matters are not within my personal knowledge, they are true to the best of my information and belief and derive from the sources stated.
- B. In order to assist the Leveson Inquiry I have set out the questions asked of me in the letter dated 5 April 2012 and provided my answers beneath them.
- C. As the questions asked of me by the Leveson Inquiry require me to give my personal opinion on a number of matters, I wish to make clear that the views expressed in this statement are entirely my own and not those of the BBC.
1. **Who you are and a brief summary of your career history**

I am a 52-year-old journalist, currently working for the BBC, and have spent the bulk of the past 25 years reporting or commentating on politics. I have been a political correspondent or editor at Westminster for *The Scotsman*, *The Independent*, *The Economist*, a political commentator for *The Observer* and *The Express*, political editor of the BBC (from 2000-2005) and host the Sunday morning *Andrew Marr Show* which generally features prominent politicians being interviewed on current topics.

Most of my contact with politicians has therefore been of a straightforward reporting nature, rather than from a proprietorial or commercial angle. I was however, briefly, editor of *The Independent* during 1996-8, when the paper felt badly threatened by price-cutting by Mr Murdoch's *Times* and I spoke to ministers during the Major government – I can no longer remember which ones – complaining about predatory pricing. We had no satisfaction and after Tony Blair's incoming New Labour team

visited Mr Murdoch in Australia, we expected none from that side either. I have not lobbied ministers about BBC matters, either the licence fee or any other.

2. **Please describe, from your perspective, how the dynamic of the relationship between politicians and the media has developed over recent years, what effect you consider that to have had on public life, and how far that has been beneficial or detrimental to the public interest. The Inquiry is particularly interested in the following themes – some of which are developed in further questions below – but you may identify others:**

Addressing the general question about the effects of media-political relationships on public life, I should first say that as a weekly interviewer, I do not any longer have the first-hand knowledge of current play. I see politicians over breakfast after the Sunday show, but very rarely socially, or at Westminster. Whereas a reporter needs to be close to daily politics to pick up stories, hints and analysis, interviewers are better off with a more distant relationship. Their job, as I see it, is to ask questions informed members of the public might want to put, rather than to have an 'inside track'.

That said, I spent a long time as a political reporter, and have the following reflections.

- 2a **The conditions necessary for a free press in a democracy to fulfil its role in holding politicians and the powerful to account – and the appropriate legal and ethical duties and public scrutiny of the press itself when doing so. The Inquiry would like the best examples – large or small – of the press fulfilling this role in the public interest.**

Non-journalists often fail to appreciate the intense competition for stories. Reporters rise or sink, prosper or are shown the door, based on their ability to deliver fresh information others cannot. Journalists are interested in the general good or public interest; but many of us are human and tend to be at least as interested in our own careers. The public good is also served if an ambitious journalist exploits personal contacts to obtain a significant story which would otherwise have stayed secret.

Not all story-breaking depends on personal contacts with MPs or officials. Many stories are printed in the appendices of official reports, or are revealed an hour and a half into a slow-seeming, stuffy select committee hearing. Shortage of cash has cut

the number of reporters employed to sit for long hours listening carefully, or to read thick reports closely. The availability of more material online helps support the public's right to know; but it still needs someone who understands the subjects to trudge through the verbiage and tables.

Most stories, of course, emerge from entirely open sources – the floor of either House, press conferences, broadcast interviews and select committee hearings. These, I imagine, are uncontroversial so far as your inquiry is concerned.

Most ambitious reporters, however, will try to cultivate political sources. For most of my time reporting, I was desperate to know what had been decided in cabinet, in ministerial offices, and in cabinet committees, since the big decisions would flow from there; and in private meetings of policy groups of opposition parties. It could be argued that none of this was particularly in the public interest, since all decisions would become public eventually, and leaks might inhibit mutual trust in the cabinet and elsewhere. Yet getting stories from cabinet can make clear arguments going on inside government, since one minister leaks against another. Overall, this is good for the public because if we know the options cast aside - the alternatives dismissed - alongside the final, carefully-presented decision, we are better placed to judge it.

Let me give two examples. During the Thatcher governments, one of my best sources was the late Alan Clark MP, who would slip me confidential documents from time to time, and pass on gossip. Beyond buying him lunch – and at that time I probably lunched an MP three times a week or more – all I provided in return was gossip about other Tory Ministers. I never wrote articles predicting his promotion or declaring his genius; nor did he seem to expect me to. At one lunch in about 1987 he gleefully described how, as trade minister, he was circumventing an official ban on arms exports to Iraq – he being broadly in favour of Saddam Hussein in his fight with Iran. Had I reported the contents of the lunch it would have been an early exposure of what became known as the "arms for Iraq scandal" and certainly a public service. However, it was a long day, and I confess I missed that story till later.

More successful was a report I did for the BBC about the deal being struck between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown over the conditions under which Britain might eventually enter the Euro. This was a significant story at the time. By pretending to Number Ten that I was being quietly briefed by the Chancellor's office, while letting Mr Brown's team think I was being briefed by Mr Blair's, I was able to persuade both

sides I knew much more than I did and get enough "corrective" briefing over the course of a day to put the whole story together. This depended on a certain amount of bluff, though no lies, and seems to me entirely in the public interest in that it revealed the bones of an important agreement which would otherwise have remained secret until it was revealed in the government's words and at its timetable.

**2b The nature of professional and personal relationships between individual senior politicians on the one hand, and the proprietors, senior executives and senior editorial staff of national newspapers on the other; including matters such as**

- (i) Frequency and context of contacts;**
- (ii) Hospitality given and received, and any social dimension to the relationship;**
- (iii) The perceived balance of advantages, including the ability of politicians and journalists to promote or damage each other's fortunes and reputation at a personal level;**

Getting stories, and getting politicians or officials to answer their phones to you, requires the journalist to foster a personal relationship. One may develop a good relationship simply by being an admired reporter, or through fellow ideological belief, but this seems rare. The relationship traditionally developed through private lunches, drinks and occasionally weekend visits. As I understand it, during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s leading commentators would often spend leisure time with cabinet ministers.

It was less so by the 1980s, but still happened. I visited politicians' homes on only perhaps eight or nine occasions during the 1990s – for a lunch or a dinner – and am not a personal friend of any of them now. The problem is that friendship either corrupts the journalist, so he or she is in danger of becoming a PR officer for the politician; or else required the journalist to eventually 'betray' the politician by reporting something disobliging. Many apparent friendships soured, and rightly so. Yet the political reporter who has no contacts finds it impossible to test the truth of a rumoured story, or watch a developing row blow up inside Whitehall. Reporting limited to official announcements would lose most of the internal argument and debate, which is essential to understanding political decisions. Even now, the public gets little more than a whiff of what is really happening.

Much less of the socializing goes on than once did. FoI requests mean that most weekend stays, lunches or hosted visits abroad are likely to become known; as a political editor I was invited very rarely to Chequers and Downing Street, and this was not reported. Today, Mr Cameron is expected to reveal guest-lists. Though it makes it harder for political reporters to get deep insights I think this change is to be welcomed: if the public wants to know about subterranean business contacts with politicians, or lobby groups, they ought to know about journalistic meetings too.

But friendly relationships are going to continue between reporters, who can influence the public through their stories or columns; and politicians, who have privileged information and want publicity, even in a time of austerity and FoI. If not dinners, there will be sandwiches; if not Sunday lunches, Monday sandwiches. Most experienced political reporters have a shrewd idea of who their colleagues have as political contacts, often simply by reading their stories.

In the tight world of Westminster, where unsocial hours and sociability collide, these contacts are bound to happen. Pure journalists are often also free of the taint of coming up with news stories. The best way for a journalist to square the circle of contact and corruption, is to be determined to publish any real story, even if this loses a contact. Most will do so because stories, and career, come first. Anyway, the best reporters will be cultivating back-ups all the time.

**(iv) Selectivity and discrimination – as between titles on the one hand, and as between political parties on the other;**

There is always a hierarchy of media contacts. For a Conservative minister, contacts at *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *The Spectator* and blogs like Conservativehome are particularly valuable, and likely to be closer; Liberal Democrats will more likely turn to papers and blogs read by their activists, and Labour, ditto. Throughout the Thatcher, Major and Blair governments, the Murdoch stable was always perceived by its rivals to have a privileged position.

This was because of its spread and power as a publishing group, and Mr Murdoch's readiness to use papers such as the *Sun* to intervene aggressively. But it made close social relationships, at Murdoch parties or Oxfordshire get-togethers, peculiarly disheartening for press rivals.

**2c the economic context within which the media operate, and politician's ability to influence that;**

I do not believe that politicians' ability to influence the general economic environment for media companies is particularly relevant; though proposals to impose VAT, or some special media tax, would change that. Papers want their readers to be prosperous; they are likely to campaign for economic policies which they think will have that effect.

**2d media influence on public policy in general, including how that influence is exercised, with what effect, how far the process is transparent and how far it is in the public interest;**

**2e media influence on public policy having a direct bearing on their own interest, and the effectiveness of the media as lobbyists;**

All newspapers campaign and lobby for particular causes, mostly overtly but occasionally by slanting the choice of news stories. I suspect almost every reader understands this and spots it at once. This has always been a part of newspaper journalism and always will be. The only recent case of a general and mostly covert media lobbying against a perceived threat, I can think of, concerns a certain inquiry currently going on in central London.

**2f the extent and accuracy of the perception that political journalism has moved from reporting to seeking to make or influence political events, including by stepping into the role of political opposition from time to time,**

I agree that there has been a move away from 'straight' news reporting to more campaigning or politically-edged reporting, in many papers. Partly this reflects a change in what the public is prepared to pay money to read. I began as a parliamentary correspondent, contributing to a full broadsheet page of verbatim quotes from debates; no paper carries such a page now, and the usual response is that it is all available online. More generally, there has been a blurring between reporting and commentary, led by papers which like the *Daily Mail* have been the most successful commercially. Controversy and emotion sell papers; papers on the centre-left like the *Guardian* and *Independent* try to rouse their readers too. Overall, I would argue that the plain-vanilla, straight-news model was a historical anomaly.

emerging only after the more scandalous papers of the nineteenth century gave way to imperial high seriousness. We may be reverting to type.

**2g politicians' perception of the benefits and risks of their relationships with the press and how they seek to manage them, including collectively at party level, through No 10 and other government communications organisations, and in the operation of the Lobby system;**

As an original campaigner against the lobby system, I was pleased to see the extremes of its secrecy and self-policing go; but politicians today think far too much about the media, and too constantly. We are ubiquitous and beyond mere deadlines now, and headlines can be deadly, and media storms appear from a clear blue sky. But the amount of energy spent on presentation has surely become self-defeating. Politicians who try to solve problems and worry less about how they're seen – it would be invidious to name names – tend to do at least as well, or better in the end.

**2h the extent and limitation of politicians' willingness and ability to constrain the media to conduct, practices and ethics which are in the public interest, whether by legislation, by regulatory means or otherwise.**

I think it is abundantly clear that politicians are terrified of being seen to impose any new controls whatever on journalism. It may be a slightly pathetic spectacle but it is probably a good thing, certainly for journalism.

3. **In your view, what are the specific benefits to the public to be secured from a relationship between senior politicians at a national level and the media? What are the risks to the public interest inherent in such a relationship? In your view, how should the former be maximised, and the latter minimised and managed? Please give examples.**

Though I have answered some of this already, I would sum the situation up like this. Politicians need journalists to help advance their ideas and careers. Journalists need politicians to help them get stories. This can lead to politicians spinning and distorting information and to gullible journalists reporting it, which is not in the public interest. But serially unreliable and untrustworthy political sources are quickly spotted and journalists who report mere 'spin' are also fingered, by their editors and colleagues.

So while the relationship is always open to abuse, the Inquiry should not be too fastidious or worried. Tony Blair quickly became famous in Fleet Street for inviting in one group of newspaper people and telling them how sceptical he was about Europe; and then inviting in another lot and telling them how keen he was on Europe. But the different groups compared notes, and his reputation was not hugely enhanced. Nor does political bias in general trump 'a good story' which will sell papers. The *Daily Telegraph* may have aimed its first blasts in the MPs' expenses scandal story at Labour cabinet ministers; but it then tore its way through the Conservative front bench. The system is more able to self-correct than it seems. The public, in general, is best served when as much fresh information emerges as possible from the shadowy and fast-moving world of politics. Relationships between politicians and hacks mostly help that happen.

4. **Would you distinguish between the position of a senior politician in government and a senior politician in opposition for these purposes? If so, please explain how, and why.**

No, except that government politicians know more.

5. **What the specific benefits and risks to the public interest of interaction between the media and politicians in the run up to general elections and other national polls? Do you have any concerns about the nature and effect of such interaction, or the legal, regulatory or transparency framework within which they currently take place, and do you have any recommendations or suggestions for the future in this regard? In your response, please include your views on how you think the relationship between the media and politicians changes in the run up to elections, the extent to which a title's endorsement is related to particular policies, and whether the public interest is well-served as a result.**

During sensitive pre-polling periods, there is no doubt that a paper's political allegiances are sharper and that politicians try harder to get a hearing from them. Rupert Murdoch's evidence to the Inquiry clearly demonstrates that. And of course the policies favoured by a paper and its proprietor are particularly important. But at the same time, any sentient reader observes this. None of it is exactly a secret and the effects are obvious day by day.



6. **What lessons do you think can be learned from the recent history of relations between the politicians and the media, from the perspective of the public interest? What changes, voluntary or otherwise, would you suggest for the future, in relation to the conduct and governance of relationships between politicians and the media, in order that the public interest should be best served?**

It has always been an uneasy relationship, ought to be uneasy and probably always will be uneasy. Friendships cannot be banned; coffee shops can hardly be closed; and betrayal is part of the Westminster weather. What would be gravely serious would be evidence of a secret pact or private bargain in which one particular media group sought and got specific changes to laws, or a fair wind for its commercial ambitions, in return for supporting a political leader. There have been many allegations about this sort of thing but until now, no firm evidence. It is clearly in the public interest for meetings between leading politicians and editors and proprietors, and the content of those meetings, to be logged, minuted and published.

7. **Would you distinguish between the press and other media for these purposes? If so, please explain how, and why.**

No.

8. **In the light of what has now transpired about the culture, practices and ethics of the press, and the conduct of the relationship between the press and the public, the police, and politicians, is there anything further you would identify by way of the reforms that would be the most effective in addressing public concerns and restoring confidence?**

Other than to say that I hope non-legislative action can restore public confidence, I have no suggestions.

9. **In your experience, what influence do the media have on the content or timing of the formulation of a party's or a government's media policies? The Inquiry is particularly interested in this context in influence on the content and time of decision-making on policies, legislation and operational questions relating to matters such as:**

9a **media ownership and regulation;**

9b **the economic context of media operations, including the BBC licence fee;**

- 9c legal rights in areas such as freedom of expression, privacy, defamation and libel, freedom of information and data protection;
- 9d any relevant aspects of the substantive criminal law, for example relating to any aspect of unlawfully obtaining information (including hacking, blagging and bribery) and the availability of public interest defences;
- 9e any relevant aspects of legal procedure, such as injunctions, the reporting of proceedings, the disclosure of journalists' sources and the availability of public funding for defamation and privacy cases;
- 9f any aspects of policing policy or operations relating to the relationship between the police and the media.

Please provide some examples.

It is no secret that the largest media organisations able to campaign robustly have a strong influence on policy possibilities. Fear of the Murdoch empire was endemic during the Labour years; as editor of *The Independent* I got the impression that no inquiry into predatory pricing allegations would be possible; and the close relationship between senior Murdoch lieutenants and Conservative politicians is a matter of record. The media market is an odd one, because there is a clear public interest in plurality of ownership, and politically disinterested ownership; yet most newspapers are heavy loss-makers. We may yet come to look back on today's proprietors with rueful nostalgia. I have no knowledge of lobbying on BBC licence fee matters and think it would be highly inappropriate to be involved. I have always believed privacy law is something for parliament to take a clear stand on. Public funding of defamation and privacy cases should be limited to a very few particularly serious examples where claimants are effectively penniless.

- 10. From your perspective, what influence have the media had on the formulation and delivery of government policy more generally? Your answer should cover at least the following, with examples as appropriate:
  - 10a the nature of this influence, in particular whether exerted through editorial content, by direct contact with politicians, or in other way;
  - 10b the extent to which this influence is represented as, or is regarded as, representative of public opinion more generally or of the interest of the media themselves;

**10c the extent to which that influence has in your view advanced or inhibited the public interest.**

**10d The Inquiry is interested in areas such as criminal justice, European and immigration policy, where the media has on occasion run direct campaigns to influence policy, but you may be aware of others.**

This question really requires a book to answer it. Newspapers respond to their perception of their readers' interest. Polling suggests there is, for instance, a more punitive and Euro-sceptical attitude among the public than among MPs in general. Papers which try to run against the readership-constituency which they have accumulated quickly run into circulation trouble: the *Daily Express* under Clive Hollick, which I wrote for, is a good example. Nor can I imagine editors actually telling politicians they want this or that because it is good for their business; even when that is the case, it will always be couched as the public interest. Views are passed over informally, at meetings in ministers' offices, over lunch or dinner, often by leading columnists – editors themselves tend to prefer to shun Westminster life, and are anyway generally too busy. Reporters tend to concentrate on their immediate job of story-getting and rarely lobby for policies themselves. Given the multiplicity of pressures on politicians in an advanced democracy – the lobby groups, the industry bodies, the constituency activists, online campaigns and the rest – the effect of mainstream newspapers on policy hardly stands out as a particular problem. Robust politicians, secure in their facts, can see off most newspaper campaigns.

**11. In your experience, what influence have the media had on public and political appointments, including the tenure and termination of those appointments? Please give examples, including of cases in which in your view the public interest was, and was not, well served by such influence.**

As to political and public appointments, newspapers certainly campaign against individuals, either because – as with the recent Metropolitan police battles – they have taken one side against another in a factional fight, or because they have taken against an individual. A minister might have offended the editor, or ridiculed the paper, or rubbished a policy it favours... or simply look a little vulnerable. Much of the campaigning against individuals is in the nature of a speculative hunting trip, when it is not clear whether someone is politically badly wounded or not, and papers compete to see who can bring him, or her, down. Once the "pack" groups and attacks day after day the sheer pressure can destroy careers which would otherwise survive.

This is perhaps unedifying and is certainly cruel, but greatly entertains the public... or I suspect it does. Parliamentary performances no longer destroy careers and the party machines are slickly efficient so it might be argued that some aggressive system of testing is needed. There are huge numbers of examples of newspaper campaigns – one is running now in the Daily Mail on internet pornography – which are perceived by journalists and many readers to be in the public interest; the key question is whether they win the support of enough MPs and get enough parliamentary time for legislation to follow. A successful campaign thus has to be one which chimes with voters and politicians.

I confirm that the contents of this statement are true.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Andrew Marr