Witness Statement

to

The Leveson Inquiry

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Career History of Andrew Ferguson Neil

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Preamble: Rather than attempt to answer the long list of questions and issues sent to me by the Inquiry -- some I am not competent to answer and to others I can bring no particular expertise or insight -- I have endeavoured to tell the Inquiry what I do know, having learned either first hand or from reliable sources. I hope the Inquiry might find this useful in its deliberations and perhaps even illuminate some areas that remain dark and dusty. I would be delighted to amplify or elucidate any of the points made here under cross-examination; though I'm sure the Inquiry has more important matters to attend to. I have largely avoided being prescriptive because these are issues that I must cover as a BBC presenter and my BBC contract precludes me from taking public positions on matters of debate or controversy.

1. The seminal development in relations between British politicians and the media in my journalistic career was the treatment of Neil Kinnock as leader of the Labour party by News International newspapers in the 1980s and early 1990s. This seared into the minds of a future generation of Labour leaders, especially Tony Blair and those

closest to him, what could happen if they ended up on the wrong side of the Murdoch press. They vowed to themselves not to let it happen again, if they possibly could. With Mr Blair as leader from 1994, Labour attempted to establish a new relation with Rupert Murdoch and his newspapers. They quickly discovered they were pushing at an open door: Mr Murdoch and his newspapers, in the aftermath of Mrs Thatcher's demise (which was followed by a growing disillusion with John Major), were falling out of love with the Tories. Thus began a new relationship between New Labour and the Murdoch press whose influence and impact is still felt in British politics today – a relationship which subsequent political leaders have, until the hacking scandal broke in its full gory detail in the summer of 2011, tried to emulate.

2. The British press has always been partisan – it is what gives it its energy and appeal beyond the chattering classes; and it has always been more Tory then Labour. Labour politicians do not expect to get a fair hearing in what they regard as the dominant "Tory Press" and Tory politicians do not

expect fairness or sympathetic treatment from Labour and left-leaning papers. Neither Labour nor Tory tabloids make much pretence of reporting politics impartiality; even the reporting of the more partisan quality papers is regularly skewed. Politicians have generally accepted that is just the way it is; and concentrated their efforts on making sure the broadcasters live up to their legal obligations to be balanced and impartial in their reporting of politics.

3. The partisan nature of the British press reached its modern zenith in the ideologically-charged 1980s, when the Left-Right divide was at its deepest, sharpest and bitterest in both domestic and foreign affairs. This was a brutal time in British politics, reflected in a partisan press which became personal, uncouth and vicious in pursuit of whom it perceived to be its political enemies. All leading politicians found themselves incurring the wrath of this partisan media; but none more so than Neil Kinnock (partly because most newspapers were pro-Thatcher) – and his most virulent tormentors were the News International tabloids.

4. Politicians put an unwarranted store in getting the editorial endorsements of newspapers in the run up to a general election. In fact, editorials are read by only a fraction of a paper's readership and rarely swing anything. In 2010 David Cameron won the unanimous endorsement of the right-leaning press – including all the Murdoch papers – and was up against an unpopular incumbent who had the unqualified support of only the declining Mirror Group. Yet he failed to win an overall majority. Far more important in shaping political attitudes is the regular coverage in the news and feature pages over a prolonged period: if, day in, day out, in a relentless and sustained manner, you consistently and constantly demean one political leader while praising and promoting his/her rival, then over time you can sway your readership by the drip, drip, drip of negative coverage, not just in the opinion columns but, much more important, in the far more widely read news and features columns. Neil Kinnock learned the hard way what it was like to be on the wrong end of a press out to get you, day in, day out.

5. Academic analysis and opinion poll data is inconclusive on whether the Sun really did cost Neil Kinnock the 1992 election. My own instinct – this was an election I covered closely – is that whereas the country had fallen out of love with the Tories, especially now the economy had turned down, in the secrecy of the polling booth voters (despite what they had told pollsters) could not quite bring themselves to vote for a Kinnock-led Labour party. I think it a fair (if not provable) assumption that relentlessly negative coverage in the Tory Press in general and the Murdoch papers in particular over the preceding nine years (Neil Kinnock became Labour leader in 1983) played a part in encouraging that point of view.
Newspapers do not have the power to change people's minds: it didn't matter who the Sun supported in 1997 or 2001, the British people were not going to be talked out of giving Mr Blair's New Labour substantial majorities. But in the much more closely fought 1992 election I believe the Tory-inclined press – and especially the Murdoch Sun (read by millions of the C1/C2 swing

voters Labour needed to win) – did have an influence in denying Labour victory. As polling day approached, voters were having second thoughts about Neil Kinnock. The Sun encouraged these doubts. It did not have the power to change their minds; but it could nudge them in a direction they were already inclined to travel.

6. Whether it was *the* crucial influence in shaping the 1992 result, of course, is impossible to say. But whatever the reality, the more significant fact is this: it is what many Labour politicians and strategists, especially those coalescing around Mr Blair's New Labour Project, believed. Never again, they concluded, should Labour be so much on the wrong end of a hostile press. It was time, the Blairites believed, to see if the Labour lamb could really lie down with the Murdoch lion – and not be eaten.

7. The story of how the Murdoch hostility of the Kinnock years turned into a rapprochement with Mr Blair, culminating in close to a full blown alliance, has been told in various first and second

hand accounts, including in the book of my Murdoch years, Full Disclosure, which the Inquiry has and to which it has already referred in its deliberations. The extent and depth of this rapprochement/alliance, however, has never been fully revealed, even though it was one of the guiding forces at the heart of British politics for over a decade. I will comment on significant features of relevance to an inquiry into relations between politicians, proprietors and editors/journalists.

8. The relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch was simple: they were ideological soul mates. Mr Murdoch would have supported her whether he got favours in return (for his newspapers or other businesses) or not. He was a cheerleader for Thatcherism (always defining himself as a Thatcherite rather than a Tory). The only time he was ever critical of her was when she parted company with President Reagan (for Mr Murdoch, the President was even more of an ideological soul mate) e.g. over the US invasion of Grenada. Relations between the Murdoch

organisation and Mrs Thatcher were not extensive: Mr Murdoch saw her only intermittently, his senior managers almost never, his editors rarely. I saw the Prime Minister only once during the seven years her premiership coincided with my Sunday Times editorship. I am not aware of any business quid pro quo for his support. Recently-released correspondence suggests she gave his bid for Times Newspapers a fair hearing and perhaps even a fair backing wind. On the other hand, the Thatcher government refused to grant Sky the official British direct-broadcast satellite licence in 1988, giving it instead to a consortium of rival media interests called BSB. The Murdoch-owned Sky was forced to seek an alternative route into British homes via a Luxembourg-based satellite system.

9. There was at least one time, however, when Mr Murdoch's support for Mrs Thatcher paid business dividends and undermines the accuracy of his claim to the Inquiry that he has never asked politicians for anything. In the run up to the Wapping dispute he made it clear to me one night

in late 1985 in my office that he had gone to Mrs Thatcher to get her assurance – to "square Thatcher" in his words -- that enough police would be made available to allow him to get his papers out past the massed pickets at Wapping once the dispute got underway. She was fully "squared", he reported: she had given him assurances on the grounds that she was doing no more than upholding the right of his company to go about its lawful business. I remember this because he added that he could never have got the same assurances from the Mayor of New York or the NYPD, which was why, he told me, he could not "do a Wapping" on his US newspapers, despite the grip of the print unions there too.

10. Unlike the relationship with the Thatcher government, the relationship between New Labour and the Murdoch press was not one of kindred spirits: this was a centre-left political movement trying to make an arrangement with a radical-right newspaper group for their mutual interest. A unique confluence of events allowed it to happen: Mr Murdoch became increasingly

bored and disillusioned with the Major government post-1992; the rise of Mr Blair and his New Labour project was not completely anathema to Mr Murdoch's way of thinking; and Mr Murdoch, who likes to back winners, could see that Mr Blair was a winner and the Tories were about to become generation-long losers. New Labour wanted at least to neutralise the Murdoch press to avoid a repeat of what happened to Neil Kinnock; at best to co-opt it in the New Labour cause. Perversely, even though, unlike the Murdoch-Thatcher relationship, it was hardly a marriage made in heaven, the Murdoch-New Labour relationship became closer, more extensive and deeper than anything that existed during the Thatcher years. New Labour was prepared to pay a high price, in terms of access and influence, for the support of the Murdoch papers.

9. There was no deal, as such. Nothing as unsophisticated as Mr Murdoch saying to Mr Blair: "We will back you in return for the following …". But there was, in my view, undoubtedly an understanding. "How we treat Rupert Murdoch's

media interests when in power," Mr Blair told me in 1996, a year before he became Prime Minister "will depend on how his newspapers treat the Labour party in the run up to the election." That is exactly how it panned out. The Sun and the News of the World fell in line behind New Labour in the run up to the 1997 election, The Times stayed broadly neutral and the Sunday Times unenthusiastically Tory. After the election, The Times quickly fell in line as the New Labour house journal, its chief scribe in that role Tom Baldwin, now chief spin-doctor to Ed Miliband (just one example of the Downing Street/Wapping revolving door). In return, New Labour in power did nothing to undermine or threaten Mr Murdoch's British media interests, despite a deep desire among many in the Labour party, especially (but not exclusively) on the Left, to "cut him down to size". Demands for a privacy law (which Mr Murdoch abhors) were kicked into the long grass. Control of 37% of national newspaper circulation was tolerated (indeed supported now most of the 37% was rooting for Labour). BSkyB was allowed to grow unhindered and light-touch media regulation became the consensus of the day. There

was a strong body of opinion that wanted tougher cross-ownership rules to stop powerful newspaper groups becoming powerful broadcast groups (and vice versa). New Labour resolutely repelled tougher cross-ownership then went further: the Labour 2003 Communications Act ended the ban on foreign ownership of TV licences, paving the way, in the years to come, for the Murdoch News Corp to attempt to buy the 60% of BskyB it did not own. This was something Mr Murdoch's people lobbied hard for, with his support, and they had unique and extensive access to the levers of power at the heart of the Blair government to make this lobbying effective. When Mr Murdoch testified before this Inquiry that he had never asked government for anything it gave me cause to wonder if he had forgotten this – or forgotten he was testifying under oath.

10. So Mr Blair had neutralised Murdoch hostility. And Mr Murdoch enjoyed a benign media environment for his media properties. Indeed Mr Blair did more than neutralise the Murdoch press: he managed to get most of it to be cheerleaders for

New Labour for over 12 years (1997 – 2009). And Mr Murdoch enjoyed more than a friendly climate for his businesses: he had a virtual ringside seat at the cabinet on two of the issues of public policy that mattered most to him, Europe and Iraq. A Labour minister once said to me that when it came to these issues "Rupert Murdoch was the 24th member of the Blair cabinet."

11. Europe threatened to upset the cosy Blair-Murdoch love-in. Mr Blair was anxious to join the euro and for Britain to be at the heart of Europe; Mr Murdoch is an arch Eurosceptic. This had a major influence on government policy. Chancellor Gordon Brown, who had his own extensive contacts with the Murdoch Empire, was encouraged to resist euro-membership – and reckoned that was a good way to ingratiate himself with Murdoch's people. In the run up to the 2005 election, when ratifying the EU Constitutional Treaty threatened to destabilise the Blair-Murdoch compact, a deal between 10 Downing Street and the Murdoch Empire was explicitly but secretly negotiated. Through various emissaries, including Irwin Stelzer (his confidant and

economic guru), Mr Murdoch let it be known in Downing Street that his papers could not support New Labour's re-election for a third time if the government was going ahead with the Lisbon Treaty. So a confidential agreement was made to "ring-fence" the Treaty by making it subject to a post-election referendum. As one senior News International source told me at the time: "That way we can still say vote Labour come the election and campaign against Lisbon come the referendum." Thus did Mr Murdoch not only enjoy a benign environment for his media businesses but considerable influence on a key area of government policy.

12. The same was true over Iraq. Mr Murdoch and those closest to him are far more pro-American than they are pro-British. He has always seen it as axiomatic that London should be a close, even unquestioning, ally of Washington. In the prolonged run up to the Second Gulf War, Mr Murdoch was a regular and consistently hawkish voice in Mr Blair's ear, as were his newspapers. He would share inside information with the Prime Minister from his

extensive Washington contacts. Mr Blair was almost certainly inclined to war anyway; but Mr Murdoch was a powerful voice propelling him in that direction and overcoming any doubts. I understand that in the last days before the Iraq invasion began Mr Blair spoke to Mr Murdoch more often than he spoke to his defence or foreign secretaries. All Mr Murdoch's British papers supported the PM's pro-war stance. Indeed Murdoch papers across the globe spoke with one voice on this contentious matter: on war with Iraq the Murdoch organisation was more united and more disciplined than either the Bush or Blair administrations.

13. Proprietors using press power to influence government policy is nothing new: it has existed since newspapers began and politicians took them seriously. But the Blair-Murdoch relationship was on an entirely different scale, unique I believe in political-press relationships. This was not a case of Mr Murdoch sitting down periodically with the Prime Minister of the day to urge his views, as, for example, Lord Beaverbrook had done with Winston Churchill or Hugh Cudlipp with Harold Wilson. Mr

Murdoch certainly did that with Mr Blair (and Mr Brown) but this was far more than a personal relationship between proprietor and politician. Much of the upper echelon of the Murdoch organisation was involved at the heart of the New Labour government, a vortex of relationships which permeated the Blair government and included not just Prime Minister and proprietor but their senior lieutenants, from Alastair Campbell (and other spin doctors), Jonathan Powell and senior cabinet ministers, such as Gordon Brown (who had his own agenda), Peter Mandleson and David Blunkett, on the government side, to Gus Fischer, Irwin Stelzer, Les Hinton, Rebecca Brookes, James, Lachlan and Elisabeth Murdoch and various editors who acted on behalf of Mr Murdoch and were regularly embraced by the Blair government because they were regarded as their master's voice – and a route to it. This nexus of relationships infiltrated and influence the Blair government, took place behind closed doors, unrecorded in official minutes and unseen by the public. It has never been fully revealed or exposed and, I believe, is unprecedented in the history of press

proprietor/government relationships. It permeated the Blair government in ways that we still only vaguely understand. Barely a week went by when there was not some high level discourse between senior government and Murdoch representatives. It was close, persistent, and politically incestuous. It involved not just professional relationships but friendships and family ties, with wives and even children dragooned in the cause of interlinking the personal with the political, which manifested itself in slumber parties, checking diaries to make sure children could play together while wives met, duties as a godfather and even extra-marital affairs.

14. There is, of course, nothing unusual about big business, including big media businesses, lobbying government to put its case across and trying to influence policy. But when BAe or RBS or BP or even the BBC lobby government they do not bring the same tools and pressure to bear as newspaper proprietors. They cannot offer to campaign for the government's re-election or publicly back its policies. They do not have millions of readers to offer in support of government or a hotline to public

opinion. That is why proprietors find more of a ready ear from, and access to, government than others and why their potential influence is all the more powerful. It is also why, many will concluded, the relationship should be more transparent and documented.

15. News International, of course, is not alone among media in trying to influence government, though the extent of its relationships during the Blair years was unprecedented. Other newspapers and media companies also lobby government and can even be close to it. But the newspapers of News International, unlike most of its rivals, are part of a media conglomerate whose business interests span much more than newspapers, including areas such as satellite TV which are regulated by government. It is here that influence has the potential to be insidious.

16. News International is the most politically powerful media group not just because it is the biggest but because it is prepared to be politically promiscuous. Most British newspapers don't change sides: the

Mirror Group will stay with Labour down to its last reader which, if its current decline continues, might not be far off; the Mail and Telegraph newspapers always stay loyal to the Tories, whatever their (often outspoken) reservations; Express Newspapers are such a shadow of their former power that politicians no longer bother trying to woo them; the Guardian and the Independent are consistently left-leaning; the Financial Times is prepared to change sides but its political influence is negligible (it backed Neil Kinnock in 1992 and much good did it do him – or the FT). But News International is up for grabs, depending on the circumstances. In the 1970s the Sun was pro-Labour. It became the praetorian guard of Thatcherism in the 1980s and stuck with the Tories in the early 1990s. Then it changed to New Labour. This willingness to go with the flow, adapt to changing political tides and leaders, abandon old loyalties, show an open mind to previously closed possibilities – call it what you will – is what makes News International the most sought after group among those who would govern us: in certain

circumstances, unlike most of its rivals, it is up for grabs.

17. Gordon Brown attempted to pick up with the Murdoch organisation where Tony Blair left off. He had cultivated his links with News International, from Rupert Murdoch down and especially through Irwin Stelzer, an American economist then close to Mr Murdoch who enjoyed proximity to power and the cut and thrust of policy debate with the Chancellor, throughout the Blair years. Both Mr Murdoch and Mr Brown claimed a bond in their common Scottish Presbyterian roots and devotion to hard work. So the extensive Government-Murdoch nexus of the Blair years survived, for a while, the Blair-to-Brown transition. The reasons why this nexus broke down in the autumn of 2009 need not detain us: suffice to say it was most probably the joint view of Rupert and James Murdoch that New Labour was past its sell-by date, that Mr Brown increasingly looked like a loser and Mr Cameron the first Tory since Margaret Thatcher they thought had the makings of a winner.

18. It is one of the ironies of the current state of relations between press and politicians that Mr Cameron did not set out to replicate a Blair/Brown-style relationship with the Murdoch press. He told me not long after becoming Tory leader in 2005 that he would not go cap-in-hand seeking Mr Murdoch's blessing, denigrating Mr Blair's decision to fly to the other side of the world in 1995 to parade before Mr Murdoch and his lieutenants. Rather he would transform the Tory party as he saw fit and, if Mr Murdoch liked what he saw, would happily accept his endorsement. But he would not seek to ingratiate himself with the media tycoon or recreate the extensive and close nexus that existed between the Murdoch Empire and New Labour. This strategy lasted until the summer of 2007, by which time Mr Brown was the new Prime Minister and enjoying an (albeit brief) honeymoon with the British people so advantageous that there was a widespread expectation that he would go to the country in the autumn and win. Mr Cameron, for his part, found himself friendless: the left-leaning press were rallying to Mr Brown while right-leaning newspapers were becoming increasingly critical of

the Tory leader and his modernising agenda. It was in this predicament – with a fourth defeat for the Tories staring them in the face – that Mr Cameron reached out for Mr Murdoch and his newspapers, with consequences that are now being revealed and documented. A whole new nexus was created, culminating in the Sun ditching Labour for the Tories in 2009 and all the Murdoch papers backing Mr Cameron in the 2010 general election. Again, the relationship went well beyond party leader and proprietor, involving senior lieutenants on both sides, enhanced by a series of personal relationships involving Mr Cameron, James Murdoch, Rebecca Brooks, George Osborne and Andy Coulson, who at the height of Tory panic in the summer of 2007 had been appointed Mr Cameron's spin-doctor as part of his new strategy to get closer to the Murdoch organisation. I do not think the Cameron-Murdoch nexus was quite as ubiquitous as it had been in the Blair-Brown years or permeated as far into the policy process; but it was extensive and quotidian nevertheless

19. That Mr Cameron should think that part of his escape route from the difficult summer of 2007 had to involve abandoning his previous policy of distance for a more cosy relationship with Mr Murdoch and his papers illustrates the inordinate importance senior politicians still assign to newspapers, even as they decline in reach and influence in the age of the internet. Even though today's new generation of politicians like to think of themselves being at the cutting edge in these digital times, they remain stuck in an analogue time warp when it comes to newspapers. They think their support and endorsement still essential to their political well-being, which gives proprietors and editors continued influence even as their real power wanes. Of course newspapers retain importance in getting a message across and having views validated and endorsed. They also help to set the agenda for broadcasters. But, increasingly, so do blogs, social media, twitter, the news channels, network news and the new breed of news and opinion-based websites. These now help to create the political weather too, at the expense of newspapers, whose influence is well passed its heyday but who continue

to enjoy disproportionate influence, despite the new cacophony of media voices, because they are accorded it by politicians. If proprietors and editors still matter more than most to politicians in the 21st century it is largely because politicians have made it so.

20. I have already referred (para 4) to the fact that, despite the overwhelming endorsement of what we still refer to as Fleet Street, Mr Cameron was unable to win an overall majority in 2010, even though the circumstances were widely regarded as propitious for the Tories. The Sun is a shadow of the political influence it enjoyed in the 1980s, peaking in the close-run election of 1992. In the 1997 and 2001 elections it largely piggy-backed on the Blair landslides: it needed to back Mr Blair to show it was in touch with its readers much more than Mr Blair needed its backing (though he did not realise that at the time since he was still obsessed with what had happened to Neil Kinnock). The Sun was following the crowd rather than telling it what to think. In 2005 the Sun was largely irrelevant because it took so long to make up its mind and by then had

become half-hearted in its support of New Labour. In 2010 it backed Mr Cameron, though only in the autumn before a spring election, which did not give it time to get strongly behind him. Mr Cameron's hopes of an overall majority faded the more the Sun cheer-led for him; he did not win. Like other newspapers the Sun was overshadowed by the leaders' debates on prime-time TV and unfolding events on the news channels, replayed every night to much larger audiences on network news. The Guardian and other left-leaning papers backed the Liberal Democrats: they lost seats. Newspapers and their proprietors still have what many regard as an inordinate influence on our politics because politicians chose to confer it on them, despite increasing evidence it is not merited. Press-proprietor-politician relationships will be transformed, many would say for the better, when the political elite realise that the emperors have no clothes, or are at most scantily clad.

21. There are those, of course, who say proprietors should have no influence at all, not just on politicians but on their newspapers. This seems to

me to be unrealistic and unnecessary. Some write as if proprietors – who pay the wages and carry the capital costs and risks – should be the only people *no*t allowed to have any say on what goes into their papers. People own newspapers in this country, sometimes sustaining them at great loss, because of the political influence and social status it gives them in our society – as well as the opportunity, sometimes, to make money. That is as true of Mr Murdoch and The Times as it is of the Scott Trust and the Guardian. It is also unrealistic to expect owners to publish newspapers whose tone and line is contrary to theirs. Editors must be allowed to edit without daily proprietorial influence or they will end up being edited by dummies; readers will soon sense that and the market will penalise them. Newspapers edited by dummies tend not to prosper. It is in the nature of the creative enterprise that lies behind the editorial process that the best editors are those of an independent bent who do not take kindly to direction, even from owners. But proprietors will always pick editors with whom they are in broad agreement – who are on the same planet as them if not necessarily the same country

or even continent. It is why the Scott Trust is unlikely ever to ask Simon Heffer to be editor of the Guardian or the Mail to approach Polly Toynbee for the editor's chair. Editor and proprietor should agree the general editorial and business strategy of the newspaper then leave the editors to get on with it, subject to periodic review. Nobody is forced to pay for or read a newspaper. If readers sense a heavy proprietorial hand they will vote with their pockets. They will be particularly punishing if they suspect the paper is positioned to give support to the proprietor's own business interests. There are those who would like to regulate such matters but it is probably best left to the market and readers' discretion. Where a proprietor uses the power of his/her press to buy or parley political favours, however, is a matter of acute public interest which certainly requires transparency and perhaps even regulation. Our current press codes are strong on journalistic standards but silent on proprietorial obligations and conduct.

22. I have nothing useful to say about the BBC's relations with politicians. They exist at both a

corporate and operational level but I am not involved. There is a complicated and extensive set of relationships between programme editors and the political parties as to who comes on to what programme and I understand it involves much horse-trading and (often) disagreement; but as a presenter I am not involved in that process. My job is simply to interview whoever is provided, usually by establishing what they believe then taking the exact opposite position. Sometimes it's indicated that we should avoid a certain topic or only go in a certain direction – the price of the politician coming on. Since I do only live programmes it is easy to ignore such strictures and there is never (or rarely) any come back. Politicians do, however, have different expectations about broadcasters from newspapers: they expect newspapers to be partisan; they expect broadcasters to be non-partisan, in the sense of being tough on everybody, without fear or favour. They are right to do so and British broadcasting broadly meets that expectation, which makes us very different from newspapers. A largely partisan press and impartial

broadcasters might be regarded by some as the optimal media mix in a democracy.

23. It is often said political journalists are too close to politicians and that we are two sides of the same coin in the Westminster Village, which inhibits our ability to cover matters independently. There is some truth in this. Political journalists too often end up best friends with various politicians because they work with them day in, day out. This is a mistake: journalists should keep a friendly distance because we are not on the same side. I have many political acquaintances but in a long career in political journalism only two real political friends: one my oldest friend from university who became a politician, the other a politician who mentored me when I first came to London. Other than that I have eschewed political friendships because they interfere with a journalist's judgement and independence: you never know when you will have to turn on them.

24. The Westminster lobby system throws journalists together in a mutual interest, which makes it

incestuous because it feeds journalists stories or lines the politicians want to get out. Critics complain about its off-the-record briefings, which give the politicians deniability. But I have served as both an off-the-record Westminster lobby correspondent and a White House on-the-record lobby correspondent. The only real difference was that after the public White House briefing we gathered behind the lectern with the President's spin-doctors to get a more intimate off-the-record steer. Lobby briefings are useful because they tell journalists how government and opposition are thinking and make their stories better informed. But political journalists are rarely a conduit for scoops. In a lifetime of wining and dining politicians I cannot remember ever coming away with anything sensational. Politicians rarely give you stories, just nuance, gossip and opinion. If you do get an exclusive it is because the politicians have decided to release it on their terms, for their purposes. Scoops, in the sense of stories that powerful people do not want to see given the light of day, rarely come from political journalists, whose main purpose is to report, inform and analyse. The big political

scoops come from outside the lobby journalists, whether it is cash for questions, cash for access or MPs expenses. Even Watergate was the work not of the Washington Post's political team but of two local reporters.

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