

IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF  
JOHN HUMPHRYS**

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I, **JOHN HUMPHRYS**, care 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. 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 my own and not those of the BBC.

**1. Who you are and a brief summary of your career history**

I summarise my career history as follows:

- Newspaper journalist from 1958 to 1964.
- Reporter for TWW/HTV 64-66.
- BBC 1966 to present: reporter; foreign correspondent; presenter Nine 'Clock News; presenter Today programme since 1987.
- Columnist for Sunday Times for five years and occasional contributor to newspapers and magazines.
- Author of seven books.

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:**

I am not qualified to comment on the dynamic of the relationship between politicians and the media except as it relates to my own role. I have no executive responsibility. I am also inhibited by the nature of my job on Today from commenting on ANY matters of current controversy. I could not do my job if I were to be seen as less than impartial. I could not, for instance, offer my thoughts on the regulation of newspapers and then conduct interviews on that subject.

There have been occasions when I have stated my views publicly but I have told the BBC beforehand and agreed that I would take no part in interviews on that subject. The best example is the question of assisted suicide. I wrote a book on the subject in 2008 and since then have conducted no interviews on it. BBC guidelines are (rightly in my view) clear on this.

**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.**

In more general terms, my response to 2a is that the conditions already exist for the press to operate freely in this country and have done for a very long time. Broadly speaking, if a newspaper or broadcaster behaves in an illegal or unethical manner mechanisms exist for them to be brought back into line and, in exceptional circumstances, punished. It may well be that self regulation has been shown to be inadequate in some cases over the years but I'm not prepared to express an opinion.

You raise the question of whether the press is fulfilling its role in the public interest. We need first to define that role. It is:

1. To inform
2. To interpret
3. To comment

Of those three, it's obvious that delivering accurate, unbiased information is overwhelmingly the most important. If the electorate is not informed it cannot exercise its democratic responsibility.

You ask for examples of the press fulfilling its role in the public interest. At the risk of appearing flippant I would direct you to almost any edition of almost every newspaper or news broadcast every day of the week. Quite simply, they contain the information we need to make informed choices. It can be argued that The Guardian, for instance, will present the "facts" in a different light from the Mail. I believe the readers of those newspapers are probably able to make their own adjustments.

The Telegraph's exposure of the parliamentary expenses scandal was an obvious example of a newspaper holding politicians to account in the public interest. The Guardian's persistence in exposing the hacking scandal was another. In a different field, the Mail's campaign on behalf of Stephen Lawrence was another.

As for media ownership, clearly it is in the public interest that there is not a monopoly. I am not prepared to comment on whether News International, for instance, is too powerful. Nor whether the BBC is.

The essential difference between the job of newspapers and the BBC is that the BBC does not have a view or is seen to have a view. We allow (encourage) others to comment in our programmes. We do not comment ourselves. There is no "editorial line".

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

My own relationships with politicians have always been conducted strictly at arm's length. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I have had lunch or dinner with them over the past couple of decades. I do not attend parties or receptions thrown by politicians. I have never given, sought or received any inducements of any kind from politicians.

This should not be seen as an attack on those of my colleagues who have much closer relationships with politicians. Lobby correspondents and political editors inhabit their village and breathe the same air as them and it's their job to find out what's going on and where the tensions lie.

I can see no professional benefit in an interviewer like me winning the confidence of a politician over a boozy dinner. It might conceivably yield interesting information, but almost certainly nothing that I haven't already read in the paper or been told by our own political staff if the political correspondents are doing their jobs properly. And it risks creating a relationship in which I might feel beholden to the politician when we meet across the microphones. If I have been told something "in confidence" which I subsequently learn from other sources I might feel inhibited. I'm more than happy to have a coffee after the interview, but I don't want a relationship.

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

**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,**

**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;**

**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 will deal with questions 2c to h together. It's perfectly obvious that politicians seek the support of the media for their policies. And perfectly proper. If a policy is savaged by every outlet it's unlikely that policy will survive. Examples are legion. The poll tax is probably the best known. Newspapers have a direct influence. I suspect most politicians fear the Daily Mail or Sun campaigns. These are entirely transparent and I believe an important part of what the papers should do.

It's different with the BBC. Clearly we don't campaign, but equally obviously the way we cover a story might well influence its outcome. The way Nick Robinson, Robert Peston, Stephanie Flanders et al analyse a policy may well influence the public's view of it. So will the way the responsible ministers conduct themselves in interviews with me and my colleagues.

Contrary to popular mythology, it is not my intention to flay politicians alive. My job is to hold them to account, to ask the questions I believe (hope) the listener would ask given the chance. And to insist on an answer. I do NOT seek to make or influence political events. As to "stepping into the role of political opposition from time to time"... yes, of course I do. All the time. That's part of the purpose of the interview: to confront the politician with the opposing viewpoint. I make no apology for that.

You'd have to ask the politicians how they perceive the "benefits and risks" of their relationships with us. How can I answer that? But if I had to guess I'd say they wanted to get the best coverage possible. Hardly a controversial observation. I've no doubt many would like to use a Today interview as an opportunity to deliver a

party political broadcast and some bridle at tough questioning. Others appear to relish the cut and thrust. But it's not so much a question of how they perceive the benefits ... more a question of whether they can avoid a relationship with us. In my view, they can't. Politicians do not like being "empty chaired".

- 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.**

Doesn't this rather depend on what's meant by a "relationship between senior politicians at a national level and the media"? Frankly, I've no idea what you're driving at. If it's the kind of relationship that once existed between certain senior politicians and certain senior figures in News International then there is clearly no benefit to the public. Precisely the opposite. That's self evident. So are the risks. I can see no reason why senior politicians should have any relationship with the media apart from the obvious. How should the benefits be "maximised"? God knows.

- 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.

- 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.**

I can speak only of my own and my programme's relationship with the political parties. It clearly changes in the run-up to the election. It is determined by statute (the Representation of the People Act and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act) to an extent, in addition to the BBC's Editorial and Election Guidelines.

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?**

I've already explained why I'm not prepared to give my views on this. But may I say how puzzled I am by the frequent use in the letter of "public interest" and its underlining. I take it as read that the public interest in this context is the ONLY interest. The BBC exists to serve the public interest. Full stop. What other interest is there?

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

Newspapers must turn a profit or, eventually, they will go under or be sold to someone with very deep pockets. The BBC has the luxury of a guaranteed income.

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?**

I'm not prepared to recommend reforms for reasons I've already explained.

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.

Despite my experience, this is not my field and I simply don't know.

- 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.

I have never seen any evidence that the BBC seeks to influence government policy except when it has a direct impact on the BBC. The Board was concerned about



certain proposals that were advanced during the last licence fee negotiations and said so publicly. That's right and proper. The BBC can only operate on the assumption that it has the support of the public. If it loses that support it has no reason to exist.

The BBC does not conduct campaigns but it has been accused often enough of holding views that may or may not be harmful to the nation's wellbeing. The EU and immigration are often cited. I can only say that I have never been directed by any of my bosses to peddle a particular view. Ever. If I were I would resign.

There is, obviously, a danger that the BBC is seen to represent a consensus (a cosy liberal consensus if you prefer) that reflects the nature of its recruitment policies. It's certainly true that BBC journalists do not represent a perfect cross section of society. They are generally better educated, more likely to be middle class and probably more likely to hold "liberal" views than the average. I was personally uneasy with the tone of some of our EU coverage at a time when the UK's membership of the EU was at its most controversial. I believe that's changed since. And I don't share the view that we were "pro" immigration – whatever that may mean in practise. But the BBC is not monolithic and I do NOT believe those views were handed down from on high.

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.**

I can't give examples but the question answers itself. Politicians are more likely to appoint someone to a high profile job if they think the media will approve.

I confirm that the contents of this statement are true.

Signature

John Humphrys

Date

1/5/2012