

## WITNESS STATEMENT OF LANCE PRICE TO THE LEVESON INQUIRY

### 1. Who you are and a brief summary of your career in politics.

My name is Lance Price. I am a freelance journalist and political commentator. From 1989 – 1998 I was a BBC Political Correspondent. From June 1998 – June 2000 I was a special adviser at 10 Downing Street, deputising for Alastair Campbell on the political side of his work as the Prime Minister's official spokesman. From June 2000 – June 2001 I was the Labour Party's Director of Communications.

### *Questions about the relationship between politicians and the media*

### 2. 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.

Properly conducted, a relationship between senior politicians and the media is entirely healthy and a positive contribution to a well-informed democratic debate in the country. The public interest is put at risk only when either side – the politicians or the senior journalists – abuse that relationship to their own ends. In the case of politicians that is most likely to be through off-the-record briefings that use the cloak of anonymity to disseminate inaccurate information, attempts to malign others within their own party or elsewhere including the civil service, or the release of information that should properly be withheld. An important caveat is that off-the-record briefings may result in wholly accurate information entering the public domain that could not become known by any other means and it may be in the public interest for such a disclosure to take place. The public interest is also put at risk when journalists abuse such a relationship to help further the interests of an individual politician or political party or collude in the publication of information they know to be false or unreliable in order to compete with their rivals or pursue an agenda that is not public.

These pros and cons have been a fact of political life for as long as we have had a democratic system of government and a free press. The public interest is best served when both politicians and journalists act with personal and professional integrity. The risk of reputational damage can be a valuable constraint. The advent of the internet,

blogs, the use of Twitter etc has increased the risk of such reputational damage by making the traffic between politicians and journalists somewhat more transparent. This, and the increased public awareness of 'spin' and the consequences of an unhealthy relationship between the media and politics, is likely to have a deterrent effect, at least in the short term.

Because the risks arise principally from off-the-record conversations, examples are always hard to give or to prove. Politicians, political professionals and journalists, however, would all claim to know what happens and to be able to spot stories that appear in the media as a result.

3. 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.

The principle distinction is the obvious one that a senior politician in government has access to much more sensitive information. He/she may reveal information to a journalist that cannot be made public in an official manner for a variety of reasons. He/she may also 'fly a kite' to assess public reaction to an idea that is not yet government policy. This may mislead the public into thinking that the government is intending to do something when no decision has been made. It could be argued that this serves a democratic interest by allowing an assessment to be made of the public reaction to an idea, however this objective is better served by an open consultation process. Opposition politicians may behave in a similar fashion but only in terms of party policy, which it might fairly be argued poses less risk to the public interest.

4. What are the specific benefits and risks to the public interest of interaction between the media and politicians in the run up to the general elections and other national polls? Do you have any concerns about the nature and effect of such interactions, 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?

The public benefits from a well-informed discussion in the media in the run-up to elections and other polls. The benefits and risks above are simply magnified. If the information that finds its way into the public domain is reliable then voters may well find themselves better informed and better able to make a choice. If it is misleading they could find themselves voting in a different way than they would otherwise have done. I am not aware of any practical proposals to alter the legal, regulatory or transparency framework for such interactions and would be highly cautious about the desirability or efficacy of any. I tend to the rather unscientific view that voters are able to get the measure of competing parties and political leaders at election times despite any attempts by

politicians to use the media to their advantage. For "Where Power Lies" I found no evidence that the 'power' of the media had ever determined who became prime minister.

5. In "Where Power Lies", you note that prior to the 1997 election Tony Blair had reached an arrangement with Rupert Murdoch that *"if Murdoch was left to pursue his business interests in peace he would give Labour a fair wind"*. Please explain the source of this information, the context in which you learned the information, and the extent to which – to your knowledge – the Blair government allowed or facilitated Mr Murdoch's pursuit of his business interests.

As a result of working at Number 10 shortly after Tony Blair's election as prime minister I had a number of conversations with those closest to him, including people who had accompanied him on his visit to address the senior staff of News Corporation in Australia in 1995. These were private, unminuted conversations. While the nature of any 'deal' was never discussed explicitly in my hearing, the quotation referred to is a close approximation to the words used by one of these people to me and was confirmed in less direct language in a number of other discussions. I would describe knowledge of this arrangement as being part of the 'background noise' to the Blair government. The existence of such an arrangement was confirmed in many small ways referred to in my books, "The Spin Doctor's Diary" and "Where Power Lies". I think it is significant that in my three years working for the Blair government I can recall no conversation that contradicted the impression that an arrangement had been made. The question as to whether any arrangement led Mr Blair to adopt any policy that he was not otherwise inclined to pursue may be impossible to resolve. Mr Murdoch benefited from New Labour's approach of encouraging enterprise and avoiding unnecessary interference in business decisions, but he was not the author of the policy. As a journalist pre-1997 I was, however, aware that all discussion on limiting cross-media ownership ceased within Labour party policy circles and that those who supported restrictions believed that this was a direct consequence of the party leadership courting Mr Murdoch. The Romano Prodi incident ("Where Power Lies" 2010, p.336) preceded my arrival in Number 10 and I have no first-hand evidence about it. I was aware during my time in Downing Street of an extremely close relationship with News International editors and journalists, which was of indirect benefit to Mr Murdoch's business interests. However, I was also aware of Tony Blair's enthusiasm for the Euro, which Mr Murdoch would have regarded as inimical to his business interests. Tony Blair was very concerned that the MMC decision to block the proposed purchase of Manchester United Football Club by Sky shouldn't be interpreted as government hostility to News Corporation, but the sale did not go ahead. So while I included a cartoon of Mr Blair as Rupert Murdoch's puppet in "Where Power Lies" this was not my personal view of a relationship that was, in fact, far more complex.

6. You have written that Rupert Murdoch was *"like the 24th*

*member of the [Blair] cabinet. His voice was rarely heard but his presence was always felt. No big decision could ever be made inside No. 10 without taking account of the likely reaction of three men – Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Rupert Murdoch”* Please amplify this comment, giving examples of specific decisions where, to your knowledge, the likely reaction of Rupert Murdoch was a contributing factor to the decision taken. Without prejudice to the generality of the question, your answer should cover at least your suggestion that the Labour government under Tony Blair had promised News International not to make any changes to European policy without talking to them.

This is further evidence of the ‘background noise’ of a close relationship with Rupert Murdoch referred to in my previous answer. My area of direct responsibility was media relations. Because of the belief that good communications was an essential component of good policy-making I did also find myself involved in policy discussions with ministers. The likely reaction of the tabloid press and, in particular, the News International titles, was a common feature of those discussions. While causality is impossible to establish with certainty, it was then and remains my impression that policy towards, *inter alia*, ‘welfare cheats’, asylum seekers, drug abusers and the European Union were influenced by what was perceived to be Rupert Murdoch’s views as reflected by his titles.

I was told in terms by a person close to Tony Blair’s thinking that “we’ve promised News International we won’t make changes to our Europe policy without talking to them.” (“The Spin Doctor’s Diary”, 2006, p. xiii). I felt that the enormous sensitivity within Number 10 towards any announcements concerning the EU confirmed the truth of this remark. Stories hostile to the EU or the Euro, for example the announcement in October 1997 ruling out British membership of the single currency during Blair’s first term, were routinely given to News International titles first. Discussions concerning events that might have had a bearing on policy towards like Europe, for example the establishment of the ‘Britain in Europe’ group, invariably included consideration of how they might be received by Mr Murdoch’s newspapers. Tony Blair insisted that at the launch of BiE on 14 October 1999 it should not be presented as ‘just a pro-euro campaign’ (“The Spin Doctor’s Diary”, *op. cit.*, p. 122) whereas that was very much what it was.

7. You have written that Downing Street under Tony Blair’s leadership was “touchy” about Rupert Murdoch, and your diaries reveal a reluctance to make public the meetings between Tony Blair and Rupert Murdoch. To your knowledge, why did Downing Street seek to keep discreet the relationship between Tony Blair and Rupert Murdoch?

I believe Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell were concerned about both public opinion and opinion within the Labour Party. At the time that my diary was first published I was aware that the Cabinet Office was resisting requests under the Freedom of Information Act to reveal how frequently Tony Blair had met Rupert Murdoch. Although Mr Blair told Parliament "As for the newspaper proprietors, I meet all of them regularly," (Hansard, 1 April 1998) it was my clear impression that more weight was placed on his meetings with Mr Murdoch than with other proprietors. This may, in part, have been because Mr Murdoch was not based in the UK and so fitting meetings with him into the diary required greater attention. The fact that he was non-resident was likely to raise more questions in the public mind about the propriety of regular contacts. And the history of poor relations between News International and the Labour Party is likely to have led Mr Blair to prefer that his own party, up to and including its Deputy Leader, were unaware of the closeness of the relationship. However, for New Labour, the fact that readers of News International titles were perceived to be more likely to be swing voters than readers of the Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph or Daily Mirror, for example, justified the degree of contact.

8. What lessons do you think can be learned from the recent history of relations between politicians and the media, from the perspective of the public interest? What issues should the Inquiry consider when making recommendations 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?

The clearest lesson is that the emergence of news that prime ministers have had secret meetings with proprietors or senior executives arouses suspicion in the public mind and reduces trust in the democratic process. This is true whether the nature of the meetings was benign or otherwise because the public has no way of knowing what was actually discussed. When the truth about meetings, whether social or otherwise, has to be forced out of political leaders it inevitably makes it look as if they have something to hide. And in this case perceptions are as important as reality. It would be wrong to ask that the full contents of every meeting be disclosed, but the number and dates of them should be. The Inquiry might consider recommending that a register of meetings between proprietors or their senior executives and the prime minister or members of the Downing Street staff be made public on a monthly basis. The Inquiry might suggest that, in cases of doubt over which meetings should be declared, the government should err on the side of maximum disclosure. It might recommend that the same requirement apply to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Leader of the Opposition.

*Influence of the media on public policy*

9. In your experience in government, what influence did the media have on the formulation and delivery of government policy generally? Your answer should cover at least the following, with examples as appropriate:
- a) the nature of this influence, in particular whether exerted through editorial content, by direct contact with politicians, or in other ways;
  - b) the extent to which this influence is represented as, or is regarded as, representative of public opinion more generally or of the interests of the media themselves;
  - c) the extent to which the extent to which that influence has advanced or inhibited the public interest;
  - d) the extent to which you agree with the leaked memo quoted in your book "Where Power Lies" which said: "*This is the Number 10 problem: they are asking for announcements before we have a policy*".

I have no evidence of the direct influence of the media on government policy. During my time working for the government I can recall no example when a policy was formulated or announced in direct response to a demand published in the media or made by any member of the media, up to and including proprietors. I do, however, believe that the cumulative tenor of media reporting, and in particular that of the tabloid press, did influence government policy. This would be true, for example, of policy towards asylum seekers and welfare claimants and towards the European Union. This was usually because the media were perceived to be in tune with public opinion or because ministers had no evidence to the contrary. In some cases (Europe) the government sought intermittently to alter opinion within the media in order to influence public opinion. In other cases (equality for gays and lesbians) ministers took the view that attitudes in the tabloid media did not accurately reflect public opinion and could be challenged. 'Public opinion' is not, of course, a universal and definable quantity. One's view of 'the public interest' is likely to be influenced by one's political views. It is my personal view that the public interest would be better served by a more positive attitude towards the European Union, and I could produce evidence that supports that view. But I am aware that somebody with a different opinion could produce a persuasive argument that the public interest lies elsewhere. The case for greater transparency in policy making is, I believe, easier to assert as a verifiable fact, but there will still be those who believe public policy is better formulated by those with expertise away from any outside influences including

that of public opinion.

I do agree with the author of the leaked memo that Number 10 would ask for announcements before departments had a policy that was ready to announce. I was part of that process myself on a number of occasions. At its worst this happened when Number 10 wanted to distract attention from another story running in the media. I give an example of this concerning the announcement of a 'war on drugs' ('The Spin Doctor's Diary', *op. cit.* pp. 146-147). The Home Office and the Department of Health came under particular pressure in this regard because of the perceived public sensitivity of the policies for which they were responsible.

10. In your experience within government, what influence did the media have on the content or timing of the formulation of the government's media policies? Please describe, insofar as you are able, with examples from your time in government, the government's approach to consultation with, and the handling of representations by, media interests in the formulation of policies directly affecting the media.

There were no major announcements on media policy during my time in government to which I could ascribe influence from the media itself.

#### *Number 10 communications*

11. Please set out in full your understanding of your role, remit and job specification in relation to communications at Number 10, what you considered to be your key priorities and how you went about delivering on those priorities.

As a special adviser I understood my role to be to explain government policy and the views of the Prime Minister in a political context. It was my responsibility to brief the media, to address the lobby occasionally in Alastair Campbell's absence, and to answer questions from journalists. I would advise the Prime Minister directly, in particular with regard to the broadcast media based on my previous experience as a BBC correspondent. I would assist members of the cabinet and other ministers when requested on the formulation of their communications strategies. I would liaise with other ministerial special advisers to try to ensure a consistency of message throughout government. My priorities were to show that the government was meeting its manifesto commitments and, where possible, going beyond what it had promised at the previous election. I attempted to demonstrate that the government was competent, united, had a clear sense of direction and was on course to deliver on its mandate. I did this by encouraging ministers throughout government to show how their policies and actions were consistent with the government's aims and objectives and by advising the Prime Minister on how he could

best use the media to deliver his message.

12. During your time within government, the Number 10 press office was subject to strong criticism for engaging in 'spin', and subsequent administrations have sought to distance themselves from that approach. The Inquiry would be interested in your thoughts, in retrospect, on the extent to which this criticism properly identified elements in the mediation of the relationship between the politicians and the press which were, and were not, in the public interest, and what lessons can be learned for the future?

Number 10 was aware of the political damage being inflicted by accusations of 'spin' from very early in my time working there. By mid to late 1998 the Prime Minister and Alistair Campbell were consciously seeking to demonstrate that these accusations were unfounded. It was clear to me however that habits learned in opposition and found to be very successful had been continued in government when they were no longer appropriate. They were driven by a belief that it was essential to dominate the political and media agenda or risk losing control of it and allowing space for your opponents to advance their agenda at your expense. This led to the heavy pre-announcement of policies, the granting of special access to favoured members of the media, the frequent re-announcement of news and a tendency to exaggerate the significance or likely impact of new policies. For a considerable period of time the Downing Street press office found that many journalists were more than willing to be a party to this process. We were the monopoly supplier of news about the Prime Minister and while journalist might complain about spin and special favours, many concluded that they could not afford to alienate us. Opinion polls and by-election results consistently suggested that the government was popular and almost certain to be reelected. Editors were encouraged to believe that their readers supported Tony Blair and that it was not, therefore, in the newspapers' interests to treat him unfairly. This politically benign environment had encouraged Number 10 to believe it could get away with a much more pro-active and aggressive approach to the media than any previous government had ever attempted. Some senior journalists were willing to allow Downing Street to influence their coverage to a remarkable degree, up to and including the wording of headlines and opening paragraphs. Such intimacy between Downing Street and elements of the media can only be unhealthy for the public, who were unaware of its consequences, but also unhealthy for both journalism and democracy. Despite the short-term political benefits, the long-term damage to the Labour Party was considerable. It seems improbable that any party will enjoy such political dominance for a long time in the future, if ever. It may be that the experience of Tony Blair's first term will prove to have been unique. However, international comparisons suggest that governments with overwhelming majorities often behave in ways that are both against the public interest and detrimental to their own longer-term political interests. It is for the politicians themselves, as well as journalists, to learn the lessons for the future. So much focus has been concentrated on the impact of 'spin' from 1997 that those lessons are not



lost on the present generation of political leaders, but it is hard to legislate against the pitfalls of political success in the future.

13. Please respond to criticisms from rival newspapers that your press office preferred News International titles in briefing out stories, for example in relation to:
- a) advance briefing of the date of the 2001 election to *The Sun*;
  - b) release of information about Cherie Blair's pregnancy to *The Sun* ahead of publication in *The Mirror*;
  - c) the transfer of a Barnardo's campaign allegedly set up by *The Mirror* to *The Sun*;
  - d) your perception of and response to the political stance of *The Daily Mail*.

I am on record as confirming that the planned election date in 2001, and its subsequent postponement because of the Foot and Mouth crisis, were given to News International before anybody else. The case of Cherie Blair's pregnancy is more complex and was not unrelated to Mrs Blair's personal friendship with Rebekah Wade (as she then was) and her antipathy to the then Mirror editor, Piers Morgan. As this was not a story in which I was directly involved, I am unable to elucidate further. I have no recollection at all about the Barnardo's campaign. The Daily Mail was considered to be implacably hostile to the government and to the Prime Minister by the time I started work in Downing Street. For a time we published a 'Mail Watch' detailing where we believed the paper was wrong and how it was distorting the news. This was circulated to other members of the lobby and was a form of retribution meted out to no other newspaper. We remained concerned about the Mail readership, many of whom had presumably voted for New Labour, but considered the paper itself beyond influence. When the 2001 election result was almost as good as that in 1997 there was a perception that Labour could prosper politically no matter how hostile the Mail might be.

14. In your view, to what extent did changes to the lobby system made by the Blair government in 2002 improve the transparency and openness of Downing Street?

The changes took place after my departure but I supported them. I always regarded the lobby system as detrimental to the public interest by its perpetuation of a cosy club of privileged insiders that, by its very nature, excluded both the public and much of the rest of the media and resisted scrutiny. It was right to open up participation of lobby meetings

and to put them on the record. I would have gone further and allowed them to be televised. Downing Street's relations with the media were undoubtedly more transparent as a result. I am unable to comment from direct experience on whether, as critics alleged, it forced even more of the meaningful discourse between senior journalists and Number 10 even further from public view and into wholly off-the-record one-on-one briefings. As an informed consumer of political news I regarded the changes as beneficial.

15. In "Where Power Lies" you refer to an episode in which a "well respected political editor" offered to report information provided by you as coming from "senior Tory sources" in order to hide the actual source of the information. The inquiry would be grateful if you would provide further detail on that episode and explain the extent to which that kind of practice was commonplace.

I have no more detail to add on the specific incident other than to say that it was a one-off during my time in Downing Street. I regarded it at the time as an exceptional occurrence that did not reflect common practice. It is common for journalists to quote "senior Whitehall sources", an almost meaningless phrase that could have been employed on this occasion. However, when "Where Power Lies" was about to be published a number of journalists rang me to ask what 'good stories' it contained and when I related this incident two other political editors responded with comments to the effect that it was no surprise and they had done something similar. This led me to conclude that printing a dishonest attribution rather than just a vague one was not so exceptional.

16. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of civil servants as opposed to political appointees conducting press briefings on behalf of the government?

I think that, on balance, it is better if briefings on behalf of the government are conducted by civil servants. Clearly this is not appropriate for political briefings, especially in the run-up to elections. Journalists often complain that civil servants are less well able to offer guidance on what the prime minister feels personally on certain issues. During my time at Number 10 they preferred to hear from Alastair Campbell, or on occasions me, because we had been present during political meetings with the Prime Minister and others from which civil servants were excluded. However, civil servants are more likely to be trusted to deliver information in a straightforward and reliable manner. It is not a guarantee against 'spin' or over-zealous briefing attributable to personal or political loyalty. As a journalist I attended many briefings given by Bernard Ingham on behalf of Margaret Thatcher and was left in no doubt where his personal loyalties lay. It may be

that voluntarily limiting the tenure of the prime minister's spokesman to one parliamentary term would be in both the public interest and the interests of prime ministers themselves.

17. In "Where Power Lies" you argue that Downing Street's approach to the media in successive governments has had a corrosive effect on political life. You write:

*"By indulging the whims of popular journalism Downing Street has squandered its greatest asset – the authority of the office of the prime minister. Where once the prime minister's words had scarcity value and were listened to with care, they have been devalued to such an extent that they jostle for attention alongside those of anybody else with access to the media. Worse. When they are heard they are often treated as toxic, never to be taken at face value, only to be handled as one, almost certainly unreliable, version of the truth"*

Please explain why you take this view and why, in your assessment, the authority of the prime minister has been devalued. What measures do you consider could be taken to address the problems you have identified?

The specific problem I refer to here is the tendency in recent years for prime ministers to try to appear 'normal' or in touch with ordinary voters by commenting on subjects that would previously have been considered too trivial or insignificant for prime ministerial comment. At times there is a confusion between the public interest and what is of interest to the public. Once prime ministers start to give commentaries on sports events or popular TV shows they become just another voice in the crowd. There can also be a tendency to associate the PM with too many governmental announcements rather than just the key, strategic ones. This creates tensions within government and suspicions within departments when Number 10 appears to want to 'steal' the most popular announcements. Once the threshold for prime ministerial statements is lowered in this way there is an attendant risk of the public switching off. If the prime minister is also associated in the public's mind with announcements that have proved premature, unreliable or inconsistent then the risk is increased. A self-denying ordinance on behalf of Downing Street would be the most effective remedy. No other authority could

realistically be expected to impose restraint from outside. Once again, the peak of bad practice may have been passed but that can be no guarantee for the future.

I believe the facts stated in this statement are true.

Signed: .....  
Lance Price



Dated: ..... 12 April 2012 .....