

IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY

**SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF
NICHOLAS ANTHONY ROBINSON**

I, **NICHOLAS ANTHONY ROBINSON**, 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. The questions asked of me by the Leveson Inquiry in its letter dated 5 April 2012 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.
- C. Save for question 1, I have approached and answered the questions together as a whole based around particular themes.

Q1. Who you are and a brief summary of your career history

I am the BBC's Political Editor. I was appointed to this position in October 2005. Based at Westminster, my role is to provide high quality analysis, and an overview to our coverage, placing political events and the workings of Parliament and the devolved institutions into a broad context. In addition to reacting to events, I advise programmes across the BBC in terms of suggested coverage and stories, portrayal of political events and appropriate programme interviewees, helping to ensure a full diversity of voices. I provide analysis and advice across the whole range of the BBC's television, radio and online output and I have a particular responsibility for the BBC News flagship programmes, including BBC One's Ten O'clock News and Today

on Radio 4. I report to the Head of Political Programmes and work closely with the Editor of Political Newsgathering on a day-to-day basis. Though I am an Editor and am responsible for my own editorial output, I do not manage any staff.

In terms of my career history, I joined the BBC as a production trainee in 1986 and worked on Brass Tacks, This Week, Next Week, Newsround, the Pamela Armstrong Show and Crimewatch. I then joined On the Record as an Assistant Producer and worked my way up to Deputy Editor until 1992. From 1992 to 1995 I worked as Deputy Editor of Panorama (alongside another Deputy Editor). I then moved in front of the camera and became a political correspondent for the BBC from 1996 to 1997. From 1997 to 1998 I was a presenter on BBC Radio 5 Live and from 1999 to 2002, I was the Chief Political Correspondent for BBC News 24. I then moved to ITV for three years to be its Political Editor before returning to the BBC in 2005 to take up my current position.

Q2. to Q11.

Summary of themes

In my view, close relations between the press and politicians are nothing new. Nor are attempts by newspapers to influence public policy, affect the outcome of elections or to have politicians or public servants removed from office. However, in my lifetime, politicians have learnt that it is impossible to win elections or to govern successfully if confronted by an overtly hostile press. This has led the leaderships of the Conservative and Labour parties as well as others, for example the SNP, to seek to maintain close and friendly relations with the proprietors, management and senior executives of major newspapers.

I don't think that politicians have comparable relationships with broadcasters. There is some virtue in transparency, ie publishing contacts between the media and politicians but it is not without its flaws. The "free press" which once asked for no regulatory or legislative favours from politicians now does so thanks to the decline in newspapers sales, media convergence and the expansion of their interests into others parts of the media such as the web and TV. Press influence is about much more than endorsing a party before an election. There is no ideal model of media regulation in my view.

Close relations between the press and politicians are nothing new.

Lord Palmerston seduced the press with the same enthusiasm as he tried to seduce women. He invited those who'd once been seen as grubby hacks to grand parties thrown by his wife where they were made to feel part of the social circle of the ruling class. The Prime Minister took them to one side to show them drafts of speeches he proposed to make and to invite them to make suggestions about how to re-write them to make them more interesting. Stanley Baldwin's famous warning that press magnates wanted "power without responsibility - the prerogative of the harlot" followed the creation by Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere of their own political parties whose express aim was to change government policy on free trade and to topple the leader of the Opposition.

However, in my lifetime politicians have learnt that it is impossible to win elections or to govern successfully if confronted by an overtly hostile press.

Mrs Thatcher secured the consistent personal and political backing of what became known as the "Tory press". Her Labour opponents, Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock were ridiculed by them. So too, her successor, John Major, who lost the support of the Tory press over Europe, the ERM and tax rises.

As a consequence, New Labour concluded that they could only be elected and govern successfully with the support of the press – in particular *The Sun* & the *Daily Mail*. Tony Blair went to huge lengths to woo Rupert Murdoch, his executives and his editors. Blair's press team gave them access and exclusives. So, too did Gordon Brown. These relationships were based on close personal connections, for example, Tony Blair became godfather to one of Rupert Murdoch's children who played with Gordon Brown's children. The Mail's Paul Dacre was invited to the funeral of Gordon and Sarah Brown's child.

David Cameron and George Osborne followed that lead. David Cameron was a friend of Rebekah Brooks. George Osborne was close to James Murdoch. Both men hired Andy Coulson – in part because of his connection to News Corporation.

Sources tell me that senior politicians who have considered running to be party leader have either been warned of the consequences by newspapers or have feared them.

I don't think that politicians have comparable relationships with broadcasters.

Politicians believe, with some justification, that the press often sets the news agenda even though it is trusted less than broadcasters and has a much smaller "audience".

In my experience, ITV Executives, the BBC's Director General and Chairman have occasional formal meetings with politicians and meet them at social occasions but I would be surprised if they thought it appropriate to have close relationships with politicians like some press proprietors and executives.

As Political Editor of BBC News and, previously, ITV News I would expect regular background chats with the Prime Minister and senior ministers sometimes over a meal. I occasionally socialize with leading politicians but usually in the company of other journalists who are being entertained.

There is some virtue in transparency ie publishing contacts between the media and politicians but it is not without its flaws.

When Downing Street published a log of media contacts it included one meeting between the Prime Minister and a News International executive. The meeting in question was a background briefing on the government's NHS reforms attended by three journalists. My presence was not listed or publicised since I am not regarded as a BBC executive. Another newspaper journalist who was there was also not listed. All three of us were, however, attending in the same capacity and News Corporation and media policy were never discussed.

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For decades the "free press" did not need government regulatory or legislative favours for their businesses as they had mass readerships and/or wealthy proprietors and faced no government regulation. In contrast, broadcasters had their revenue and expansion controlled by government and parliament – for example, the licence fee, licensing of new channels, regulation of TV advertising, Public Service Broadcasting obligations regulations.

However, the decline in newspaper readership and revenues and media convergence has meant that newspaper groups now also have interests in TV and the web. News Corporation and the Daily Mail's concerns in recent years have therefore focused on competition from BBC online and local news. This became clearest in 2009 when James Murdoch's MacTaggart lecture argued the BBC had a "chilling effect" on other competitors. He argued for the scrapping of the regulator, OFCOM, the downsizing of BBC and an end to impartiality rules. The Conservative Party went on to promise to curb OFCOM.

Politicians down the ages have sought to use competition to put broadcasters "in their place", for example, Churchill created ITV in 1955, Wilson considered forcing parts of the BBC to take advertising in the 60s, and Thatcher legislated for auctions of ITV licences after her row with ITV over "Death on the Rock".

Press influence is about much more than endorsing a party before an election.

The value of pre-election endorsements is overstated in my view. Few readers read their paper's leader columns. Once an endorsement is made it colours the way any other expression of opinion is seen.

I think that what matters more to politicians is whether they are ridiculed or personally attacked, for example, Neil Kinnock was portrayed for many months as a lightweight and extreme left winger and Gordon Brown was consistently attacked personally.

What also has a much more dramatic impact on politicians than any party endorsement is campaigns on particular causes, for example press attacks on Tory sleaze when John Major was Prime Minister or *The Sun's* campaign over Gordon Brown's alleged "neglect" of the armed forces ("Don't you know there's a bloody war on").

Some argue that newspaper pressure has ensured that British public opinion is Eurosceptic, anti-immigration and takes a hard line on criminal justice. It is certainly true that successive governments fear criticism on these issues and press pressure may have helped persuade all major political parties to embrace the idea of a referendum on Europe and of hardening party policy on prison policy and immigration. However, this causal link is often overdone. New Labour was elected three times with widespread press support even though it was committed to membership of the Euro and presided over a period of significant increases in immigration. William Hague's Conservative Party, which was hard line on all the above issues, did not get elected. Polling shows that significant numbers of the public are in favour of withdrawal from the EU, curbing immigration and tougher criminal justice policies, so newspapers are partly representing readers and not simply telling them what to think.

Examples of good press campaigns


Examples of good press campaigns include the Daily Telegraph's expose of the MPs expenses fraud; the Daily Mail's pursuit of justice for Stephen Lawrence; and the Guardian's expose of hacking.

TV current affairs programmes have a proud history of investigative journalism and even, campaigning, but tougher broadcasting regulation (including the BBC's own Editorial Guidelines) limits what even they can do. For example, as stated in my first statement to the Inquiry, if the BBC had been offered the disc of information about MPs expenses (which the Telegraph broke stories about), I would have tried to persuade the source to pass it to the BBC for no fee on the basis that it was in the public interest to do so, but I could not have and would not have paid for the information.

There is no ideal model of media regulation

Broadcasters are legally obliged to be impartial. In my view, the regulation they are under could not simply be transferred to newspapers and would have a detrimental impact if it was.

I confirm that the contents of this statement are true.



Date 09/05/12

Nicholas Anthony Robinson