

# Blair and Murdoch defend Bush over Hurricane Katrina

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Rupert Murdoch inadvertently performed a public service when he cited an attack by Prime Minister Tony Blair on the BBC's coverage of Hurricane Katrina in which Blair described the network's reporting as "full of hate" for America.

Not only did he once more expose the hand-in-glove relationship between Blair and Murdoch's News Corp.—a relationship that at any other time in history would amount to a political scandal great enough to topple governments. But he also shed light on Blair's fear of the political consequences of Hurricane Katrina for his main political ally, the Bush administration.

Murdoch was speaking at a New York seminar hosted by former US President Bill Clinton, as part of his Clinton Global Initiative, a forum billed as a discussion on how business leaders can help resolve the world's problems.

Murdoch is not much bothered about the world's problems, least of all the suffering caused by Katrina. What he is interested in is scoring blows against the state-owned and publicly funded BBC, which he views as an obstacle to the consolidation of his own dominance over British broadcasting and an affront to his free-market principles.

Murdoch, who owns the satellite Sky Television, as well as the *Sun*, the *Times* and *News of the World* newspapers, denounced the BBC as a "government-owned thing."

He continued, chuckling like a man who knew he was being deliberately naughty, "Perhaps I shouldn't repeat this conversation." He then explained that he had met Blair earlier in New York, who told him that he had watched BBC World's coverage of Hurricane Katrina: "And he said it was just full of hate for America and gloating about our troubles."

People around the world were jealous of the US, and

anti-Americanism was common throughout Europe, he added.

The fact that the conversation took place at all is worthy of note. Blair confides in Murdoch because his government is politically in thrall to him. Not only does he share Murdoch's right-wing economic and social nostrums, but he believes that he would never have won office without convincing News Corp.'s British titles to back him.

In return, Blair is more than ready to carry through measures that Murdoch welcomes and even to tailor official policy to what is acceptable to the press lord. The serialisation of the diaries of former Labour spin doctor Lance Price in the September 18 *Mail on Sunday* comes at an unfortunate time for Blair in this regard. At one point, Price wrote in his diary, "We've promised News International [Murdoch's UK subsidiary] we won't make any changes to our Europe policy without talking to them."

The *Mail* reports that Blair's office insisted on the right to censor Price's diaries and had this passage changed to the slightly more innocuous, "News International are under the impression that we won't make any changes without asking them."

Attacks on the BBC by Blair will inevitably place him in Murdoch's good graces. Moreover, the prime minister shares his hostility towards the BBC.

The government has been conducting an open feud with the BBC ever since Radio Four's "Today" programme reported the comments of weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly regarding disquiet within the security services that an intelligence dossier on Iraq had been "sexed up."

Kelly was found dead on July 17, 2003, after he was outed as a whistle-blower by the government and questioned by two parliamentary committees. During

the subsequent judicial inquiry by Lord Hutton, the government diverted attention away from its lies over Iraq and its own role in Kelly's death by attacking the BBC. Hutton went along with this, and his report in January 2004 led to the resignation of "Today" reporter Andrew Gilligan, BBC director general Greg Dyke and chairman of the board of governors Gavyn Davies.

The feud continues to this day, primarily because the government would like nothing better than to have a situation like America where right-wing Fox News-type coverage dominates. Murdoch knows this very well. It is hardly an accident that he let slip the prime minister's views a month before the BBC is due to submit its claim for funding from 2007 to 2016.

Naturally, much media coverage in Britain has focused on the issue of Blair's relationship with Murdoch. But most commentators have ignored his even more important relationship with President George W. Bush.

Perhaps the most perceptive and pertinent question about the affair was raised by Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian*.

He wrote on September 19, "The fact that BBC bias was on Blair's mind at all is the second striking aspect of Murdoch's indiscretion. What does it say about Blair that his prime reaction to seeing the images of despair and suffering from New Orleans was not to wonder about the state of modern America but to rage against the BBC? How refreshing it would have been if Blair had shared with Murdoch, privately of course, his concern that a society so rich had done so little for its poor. Or his shock that a technological and military superpower could be so slow to save its own. Or his disappointment that Hurricane Katrina's victims seemed to have been colour-coded, that those who managed to get away were white, while those left waving from rooftops or floating, lifeless, in the floodwater were black.

"But no. This was not what made Blair shake his head in fury in his Delhi hotel room. What he saw on the BBC appalled him all right, but his ire was stirred by the messenger, not the message."

Well said. But it is necessary to ask why this is so. When Katrina struck on August 29, Blair was on a luxury holiday in the Caribbean. But he came back to Britain on August 31, as the full impact of the disaster and the failure of the Bush administration to respond

was becoming clear—provoking shock and outrage in the US and internationally.

Blair's response was to remain silent on what was unfolding—a stance also taken by his cabinet. He found time to announce the setting up of a special unit to tackle the issue of school discipline and antisocial behaviour. And to go to China, where he spoke of "a genuine sense of engagement" and "understanding" on the part of the ruling elite of the need for "greater political freedom" and "progress on human rights." But on the devastation of New Orleans—complete silence.

Blair's concern regarding Katrina was not only the political damage it was inflicting on his key strategic ally, but its role in exposing the real impact of the right-wing economic nostrums he too advocates in Britain. The BBC's crime as far as Blair is concerned is that it reported both the terrible social inequalities created by the untrammelled operation of the so-called free market and the supreme indifference towards the suffering of the poor demonstrated by Bush and company. He is not so stupid that he does not understand that the political conclusions drawn by millions in Britain from these events could have dangerous repercussions not only for Bush, but for his own government.

That is why, behind the scenes, he joined with Bush and Murdoch, the two archetypal representatives of the financial oligarchy that Blair's government represents on the opposite side of the Atlantic, in an attempt to conceal the real lessons of Hurricane Katrina.



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