

Murdoch phone hacking scandal engulfs all Britain's major parties

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A desperate damage control operation is underway as further allegations emerge about the extent of the illegal phone hacking at the Rupert Murdoch-owned *News of the World*. The paper's royal editor and a private investigator were found guilty of hacking into the voice mail of members of the Royal family and their aides in 2007.

It is now alleged that the practice was much more prevalent than was revealed at the time and that the Metropolitan Police failed to investigate all the cases known to them.

Journalist Clive Goodman and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire were found guilty at the Old Bailey in January 2007 after they admitted hacking into phones. Goodman was jailed for four months and Mulcaire for six months. *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson resigned following the case. He denied knowing about the hacking, but he accepted ultimate responsibility as editor of the paper. Prime Minister Gordon Brown immediately phoned to offer his commiserations. He assured the journalist that he had acted honourably in resigning and expressed his confidence that Coulson would soon have another job.

Coulson is now Prime Minister David Cameron's director of communications and at the centre of the new allegations. His presence in the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition administration implicates all three major political parties in the affair. It is now suggested that under the previous Labour government, the police and parliamentary investigations were cut short. The Liberal Democrats, who challenged Coulson's claims that he was ignorant of the phone hacking, are now part of an administration in which Coulson plays a key role and must, as deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg did in the House of Commons earlier this month, defend him.

A network of relationships has been exposed which reveal the incestuous nature of the British political elite and its ties to global corporate interests, in particular to Rupert Murdoch's News International Corporation. A coalition government has just come to power that supposedly represents a new chapter in British political life after 13

years of Labour rule. But the Murdoch empire has slipped seamlessly from one government to the next. Even if Coulson is never charged with any crime and never found guilty of any crime, this affair will have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that official politics in Britain is entirely divorced from the interests of ordinary people and in the hands of a criminal oligarchy who act outside the law.

Real political power lies with this plutocratic layer and not with elected representatives in Parliament. Allegations have emerged this month that the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee held back from pursuing its investigation into phone hacking at the *News of the World*. Adam Price, a former Plaid Cymru MP who retired from Parliament in May, claims that MPs were afraid that their private lives would come under investigation if they called on News International Chief Executive Rebekah Brooks to testify. Members of the committee discussed getting the sergeant-at-arms to issue a subpoena for Mrs. Brooks.

"We could have used the nuclear option. We decided not to, I think to some extent because of what I was told at the time by a senior Conservative member of the committee, who I know was in direct contact with NI execs, that if we went for her, called her back, subpoenaed her, they would go for us—which meant effectively that they would delve into our personal lives in order to punish them and I think that's part of the reason we didn't do it. In retrospect I think that's regrettable." Price told Channel 4 News.

Price made his claim as the Standards and Privileges Committee, which is the most powerful of the cross-party parliamentary committees, considered launching its own inquiry into the phone hacking allegations. Speaking in support of an emergency motion backing the call for an inquiry, Tom Watson MP, who is often regarded as a left, although he was a loyal supporter of Tony Blair until recently, set out the situation in rather too candid terms.

"The truth is that all of us in this House, in our own way, are scared of the Rebekah Brooks of this world. If you fear passing this resolution, think of this: it's almost laughable, here we sit in Parliament, the central institution of our sacred

democracy, between us some of the most powerful people in the land and we are scared of the power she wields without a jot of responsibility or accountability. They, the barons of the media, with their red topped assassins, are the biggest beasts in the modern jungle. They have no predators.”

Watson’s words proved to be rather more correct than he might have imagined. The emergency motion was passed, but the Standards and Privileges Committee immediately made it clear that their investigation was not about to take on News International. The committee hurriedly issued a statement pointing out that it was only authorised to act in cases of contempt of Parliament and it was not sure if hacking into phones could be regarded as contempt.

“The Committee has agreed to start its inquiry by seeking evidence from the Clerk of the House and from outside experts on the law of Parliament on whether, and if so in what circumstances, hacking of MPs’ phones could be a contempt of Parliament.”

So not only are the front benches of the parliamentary parties powerless to act against News International, but the backbenchers are equally caught up in Murdoch’s trawls. The British Parliament is entirely subservient to Murdoch.

Nor do matters stop with Parliament. Many of the most recent allegations have been published in the *New York Times*, which is involved in a circulation battle with the Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal*. It suits the *New York Times* to expose the alleged misdeeds of its competitor in London, since across the Atlantic it is safe from both the notorious English libel laws and the political repercussions. Journalists at the *Times* have spoken to more than a dozen former reporters and editors of *News of the World* who have painted a picture of widespread hacking.

“Scotland Yard’s narrow focus has allowed *News of the World* and its parent company, News International, to continue to assert that the hacking was limited to one reporter,” the *New York Times* wrote.

“Scotland Yard had chosen to notify only a fraction of the hundreds of people whose messages may have been illegally accessed—effectively shielding *News of the World* from a barrage of civil lawsuits.”

That barrage is now being unleashed. As a result of the *Times*’s revelations, a growing number of prominent public figures have decided to bring lawsuits against News International and, in the case of former Labour Party deputy leader Lord John Prescott, against the Metropolitan Police. The response of the police has been to intimidate possible witnesses by interviewing them under caution as suspects and warning them that anything they say may be used as evidence against them in court.

Former *News of the World* journalist Paul McMullan has alleged that Andy Coulson must have known about phone

hacking as editor. Sean Hoare, who worked as a reporter for the paper, has claimed that Coulson encouraged him to engage in phone hacking. The Metropolitan Police have interviewed both men under caution.

“All this seems very strange. I can well understand that those who thought they could put their part of what happened, may now say to themselves they do not want to find themselves being questioned by police under caution,” Labour MP David Winnick commented.

Close relations exist between the Metropolitan Police and the British-based Murdoch papers. Andy Hayman, who, as Assistant Commissioner for Specialist Operations, led the investigation into phone hacking at *News of the World*, is now a columnist for the Murdoch-owned *Times* of London. A practice of collaboration has been developed between the Metropolitan Police and the *News of the World* in the investigation of high-profile criminal cases. Journalists and police made their careers in this way and in the process boosted the circulation of the paper, which is Britain’s top-selling Sunday and the second-largest-selling English language newspaper in the world.

Assistant Metropolitan Commissioner John Yates has opened a new police inquiry following the recent allegations. Yates has stuck firmly to the line that the phone hacking was small scale. He told the Home Affairs Select committee earlier this month that he thought there might be “10 to 12” cases involved at the maximum. He denied that there was any evidence that any other phones had been hacked. Scotland Yard would interview Andy Coulson, Yates said. The prime minister’s director of communications issued a statement saying that he would talk to the police. An unnamed Whitehall source told reporters that this should “put the matter to bed, once and for all”.

The political establishment has pulled out all the stops in an attempt to draw a line under the phone hacking affair, but the coalition government is becoming increasingly unstable, and it may not be possible for them to prevent more damaging revelations from coming out.



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