

Murdoch's News of the World phone hacking forces resignation of Andy Coulson

Dave Hyland
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Last week, it was announced that Andy Coulson had resigned from his job as Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's director of communications. His departure is a result of the latest revelations in the scandal swirling around the growing number of *News of the World* phone hacking court cases.

The *News of the World* is part of the Rupert Murdoch publishing empire, News Corp., which runs it through its News International subsidiary. It has the largest Sunday circulation figures in Britain, based on articles sensationalising the private lives of celebrities and politicians.

Coulson's forced resignation represents a blow for the Tory/Liberal Democrat government, particularly the Conservative Prime Minister. David Cameron had defended his communications director for months against accusations that he knew about the widespread use of phone hacking when editor of the *News of the World*. Further revelations threatened to strike at the very centre of power and the entire political system in Britain.

When Coulson left the *News of the World* in 2007, he was recommended by the present chancellor, George Osborne, to Cameron—who had just become leader of the opposition. Cameron took him on, hoping that Coulson could provide him with the same service that Alistair Campbell had previously preformed as “spin doctor” for Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Coulson had risen through the ranks at the *News of the World* and could use the experiences and connections he had made to help cover up any political mistakes Cameron might make, bully the press pack into writing stories the way they wanted them written, and generally present a vote-winning portrait of Cameron for public consumption.

As prime minister, Cameron leaned on Coulson even more heavily to make an arrogant multi-millionaire Eton-educated toff seem more human, caring and in touch with ordinary people. Cameron was desperate to keep him as a close collaborator because he believed he was doing a great job in blunting the public's perception of the Tories being the

same “nasty party” of the Thatcher era.

Cameron was well aware that his political opponents would use Coulson's resignation to claim once again that his appointment had shown a “lack of judgement”. That's why news of the letter of resignation was held back until Friday, in the hope it would be overshadowed by the reports of Blair's second appearance in front of the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war. Instead, Coulson overshadowed Blair and became headline news.

His position had become untenable. A growing list of celebrities, sportsmen and politicians have queued-up to sue the *News of the World*, including the former deputy leader of the Labour Party, John Prescott. This rendered null and void efforts to suppress the scandal by paying off others such as publicist Max Clifford. Clifford was reportedly paid £1 million and Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers Association, £700,000. Taylor's lawyers are said to have evidence of two journalists involved in phone hacking.

The sheer scale of the *News of the World*'s operation made Coulson's insistence that he had no knowledge of it ridiculous. In court, under witness cross examination, some critical details have begun to emerge. It is now beyond question that the hacking went far beyond the *News of the World*'s former Royal editor, Charles Goodman, the “rogue reporter” previously blamed by the *News of the World* and whose sole guilt was accepted as good coin by the Metropolitan Police investigation.

Goodman and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire were jailed in 2007 for hacking into voicemails of members of the Royal Family. But this was a huge spying operation on thousands of unsuspecting individuals, involving an international conglomerate.

Once Mulcaire named suspended *News of the World* executive Ian Edmondson as having ordered him to hack into mobile phones, Coulson's fate was sealed. If Edmondson knew about these illegal practices, it is inconceivable that his editor didn't know they were taking place.

What began as one or two cases has mushroomed. As the cover-up continued to unravel, the ultimate responsibility for ordering the hacking was climbing further and further up the chain of command. And who knows where this could end? If Coulson remained as Cameron's director of communications, it could lead back to the seat of government itself—upsetting the carefully cultivated relationship between the Murdoch press and Britain's leading politicians.

The decision that Coulson should resign was probably taken at a three-day event organised last week to discuss the future of the publishing company. Held in a private members club in Somerset, it was attended by Rebekah Wade, *News of the World's* chief executive, editor Colin Myler and the editors of the Murdoch papers, the *Sunday Times* and *Times*. The meeting took place before Murdoch's visit yesterday to the UK.

This takes place against the background of a ferocious struggle over the ownership of media outlets in Britain. In a £7.5 billion deal, News Corp is attempting to buy the remaining 61 percent of satellite broadcaster BSkyB. Murdoch already owns 33 percent and his media competitors are desperate to prevent him controlling any more.

The stage reached in this fight can be gauged by the rash remarks made by Business Secretary Vince Cable, when he boasted to two undercover journalists that Murdoch would win the right to buy BSkyB over "my dead body". Cable's indiscretion was used to prevent him having the last word on who should be awarded the franchise, which has passed to Jeremy Hunt, the culture secretary. Hunt was on record, before he was put in charge of making the decision, as stating it would not result in a "substantive change" in media plurality.

In the face of mounting criticism, however, Hunt has said he intends to refer the merger to the Competition Commission, as it "may be the case that the merger may operate against the public interest in media plurality."

He nevertheless offered Murdoch a final chance to avoid a prolonged investigation into its buyout, stating that he is considering unspecified News Corp proposals meant to alleviate competition concerns.

There is nothing progressive about the group opposing Murdoch. His rivals want their share of the media profits, of course. But in addition, particularly given the extent of the phone hacking operation and its targets, there are others who understand the dangers of Murdoch dominating the news output in Britain in order to push his political agenda.

By deciding that Coulson should tender his resignation the government and News International are both hoping to draw a line under the affair. But there is a vanishingly small possibility of such an outcome. Coulson's resignation will

not sweep the *News of the World* scandal under the carpet. On the contrary, it can only raise more questions, thereby intensifying the deep conflicts within the bourgeoisie. Even before his departure, Prescott and others had publicly expressed doubts about the original police investigation. Since then the pressure for it to be reopened has mounted exponentially.

For three years, Scotland Yard and the Crown Prosecution Service have both maintained that there was not enough evidence to prosecute anyone other than Goodman and Mulcaire. But this has been undermined by numerous private prosecutions by figures such as actress Sienna Miller. They are now reportedly an additional 16 people intent on bringing actions.

It has also been revealed that Gordon Brown, the former prime minister, asked Scotland Yard months ago to investigate whether he was hacked between 2005 and 2007 and that Tony Blair expressed concern that his messages to others had been intercepted—though he did not have a mobile phone while in office at No 10.

Alastair Campbell has already denounced the "lacklustre" police investigation as "part of an unfolding scandal". Harriet Harman, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, has called for a proper investigation to be mounted.

Within the government, Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrat energy secretary, has raised questions over the original investigation. "I have worked on a newspaper and I have been a journalist and it does seem to me totally implausible that this was a situation where it was limited to one journalist," he said. "We now know that one very senior member of the *News of the World* executive staff has been suspended. It does seem to me very implausible indeed and I was rather surprised that the police seem to have accepted that story rather than investigating further."

On Monday, Director of Public Prosecutions Keir Starmer announced that its re-examining of police files on the *News of the World* will widen to include fresh allegations of phone hacking. The DPP said he had asked Alison Levitt QC, principal legal adviser to the Crown Prosecution Service, to take a "robust approach" to her review of the original inquiry. Such a review opens up the possibility of further criminal charges.



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