

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown: Murdoch's News International operated a "criminal-media nexus"

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The resignation of Rebekah Brooks is only the latest indication of the ever-widening crisis facing Rupert Murdoch's media empire, News Corp.

Brooks stepped down as chief executive officer of the News International UK, the publisher of the now-defunct *News of the World*, which she once edited. But whatever damage limitation was intended will be small. She is still expected to appear, along with Murdoch and his son, James, before a parliamentary select committee Tuesday to discuss the phone hacking scandal at the *News of the World*.

In the run-up to the select committee, Murdoch has broken his silence on the scandal with an interview for the *Wall Street Journal*, which he owns. His remarks centred on a denunciation of Gordon Brown—made in response to the former prime minister's damning parliamentary speech on July 13. Murdoch said some MPs' comments were "total lies".

Brown has been widely attacked for hypocrisy by journalists and political figures, citing his long connections with Murdoch and dismissing his speech as a fit of pique brought on by News International's switching allegiance from Labour to the Conservatives in 2009. But no one should allow distaste for Brown, one of the architects of New Labour and a pliant tool of big business, to blind them to the fact that this campaign is aimed at burying what he has exposed by shooting the messenger.

Brown accused News International of "lawbreaking often on an industrial scale, at its worst dependent on links with the British criminal underworld."

Murdoch's media "marched in step" with "members of the criminal underworld" and functioned as a "criminal-media nexus".

He criticised the fact that in August 2009, Assistant Commissioner John Yates of Scotland Yard "had taken only eight hours—less time, I may say, than he spent dining with the people he should have been investigating—to reject preemptively a further police inquiry."

Having seen a Select Committee report indicating widespread

phone hacking, Brown had asked the head of the civil service, Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell, to agree to set up a judicial inquiry. However, "It was opposed by the police, opposed by the Home Office and opposed by the civil service and it was not supported by the [Culture] Select Committee," he recounted.

According to Brown, O'Donnell had advised that the Select Committee did not believe that the illegal practices were still continuing, and an inquiry did not meet the test of urgent public concern. Moreover, he argued, time had elapsed and evidence may have been destroyed; there was no evidence of systemic failure in the police, and all their decisions had been checked with the Crown Prosecution Service; and that targeting the *News of the World* close to the general election could be deemed to be politically motivated.

There was, according to the Cabinet Office, "not only no case for a judicial-led inquiry, but not a strong case for either a non-judicial inquiry or even a reference to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, or even for asking the police to reopen their inquiry," Brown summarised.

He complained of no action from the head of the first police inquiry, Andy Hayman, "whose next job just happened to be at News International" and "no action from his successor, Yates" despite being in possession of "vast but unexamined archives exposing criminality on a huge scale".

After leaving office in May 2010, Brown said he had spoken with Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and "handed him, in person, our proposal for a commission into the media". He "wrote to the head of the civil service to point out that the previous advice against the judicial inquiry had clearly since been overtaken by the new evidence."

On Brooks, he said, "As early as the winter of 2002, senior police officers at Scotland Yard met the now chief executive of News International and informed her of serious malpractice on the part of her newspaper staff and criminals undertaking surveillance on their behalf."

On James Murdoch, he noted that "the decision of the News International chairman to pay, without reference to his board, some victims sums of around £500,000, may now be seen as the buying of silence...that must now be the subject of full

parliamentary, as well as police, scrutiny.”

Little wonder that Brown’s statements were questioned by unnamed “former members” of his cabinet, Clegg and others. The Cabinet Office even released the memo cited by Brown, in what was described as a counter-attack. However, as the *Telegraph* acknowledged, “The seven-page briefing note released by the Cabinet Office today was in line with the summary of its contents recounted to MPs by Mr Brown in his speech.”

O’Donnell’s defence was in essence reduced to the assertion that “Decisions on whether or not to hold a public inquiry, and on its scope and nature, are always the decisions of a minister.”

But Brown’s political failures do not detract in the slightest from what he says about the role of others, any more than citing examples of his past relations with Murdoch and Brooks. He may have been Murdoch’s creature, but the efforts to undermine him are because he has turned on his former master.

Brown has reportedly played a behind-the-scenes role in exposing News International’s crimes for the past two years. In the July 14 *Telegraph*, Robert Winnett writes that he “secretly orchestrated—or at the very least supported—a campaign among Labour MPs to bring public attention to the phone hacking scandal.... The campaign was led by two former Labour ministers, Tom Watson and Chris Bryant, both also key figures in the 2006 so-called Balti-house plot which forced Tony Blair to announce the timing of his resignation.”

Patrick Wintour in the *Guardian* July 11 is more informed. He notes that two months before *The Sun* switched support to the Tories, “after *Guardian* revelations about phone hacking and the mounting evidence of a News International cover-up, Brown started to agitate for a judicial inquiry. For at least a fortnight he was in discussion with the home secretary, Alan Johnson. Brown and Lord Mandelson held discussions with Alan Rusbridger, editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, to get a clearer understanding of the scandal.”

Wintour continues, “After the election Brown continued to be concerned by phone hacking, encouraging lines of inquiry, firing off emails and closely following the course of a *New York Times* investigation into the scandal, that was finally published in September 2010. It was around then that Brown wrote privately to the Metropolitan Police to ask whether his phone had been hacked.”

The Blair-Brown faction fight, in which Murdoch stood firmly on the side of Blair, is still playing its part in bringing the hacking scandal to light. The July 10 *Daily Mail* reported how “friends of Mr Brown” and “Well-placed sources” were accusing Blair of seeking “to persuade the Labour MP who led the campaign to expose *News of the World* phone-hacking to back off”.

Blair allegedly “wanted Mr Brown to get his ally Tom Watson to lay off the News International (NI) title, but Mr

Brown refused.”

The *Mail* summarises some of the “damning allegations against NI chief executive Rebekah Brooks and chairman James Murdoch,” which Watson has made using the legal protection of parliament. They include Brooks having “begged Blairite ex-Cabinet Minister Tessa Jowell to help ‘stop this madman Tom Watson’—and also sought help from her friend, Mr Blair.”

Watson has claimed on numerous occasions that he has been threatened indirectly by News International and his bins have been searched. Another Brown ally, Chris Bryant, has stated that News International “behave like gangsters. They operate by a combination of fear and favour.”

Brown’s intervention, however self-interested his motives, threatens to cut across the efforts of all the major parties, after a toothless inquiry has been undertaken, to return to business as usual.

That is why the *Financial Times* tellingly commented, “Mr Brown was also under fire from his own MPs, who warned his angry outburst misjudged the mood of the Commons.... Ed Miliband’s allies claimed that Mr Brown’s ‘backward-looking’ speech struck a useful contrast with the more consensual and forward-looking speech given by the Labour leader on future media regulation.”

In a similar vein, Quintin Letts wrote in the *Daily Mail*, “With his strange genius for turning gold into mire, Mr Brown reintroduced rancour to a Chamber which moments earlier had been sunnily resolute.... Ed Miliband had just made a calm, broadly co-operative speech which had won the praise of the Leader of the House. In earlier Commons exchanges, Mr Cameron and Labour members had seemed to reach a mature understanding on how to deal with the Murdoch problem.”

Dealing with the “Murdoch problem” for the ruling class means something entirely different than it does for the working class. And it is the responsibility of working people to put an end to the destructive anti-social activities of Murdoch and his ilk. They cannot rely on anyone else to do it for them, least of all the newly re-animated Mr Brown who is guided by personal rancour rather than any genuine political opposition to the social forces represented by Murdoch.

What is required now is the active, independent intervention into political life by the working class. Only in this way can the stranglehold of oligarchs like Murdoch and their flunkies in parliament be broken once and for all.



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