British Prime Minister Cameron's position under threat in Murdoch scandal

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The political crisis surrounding the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal is now threatening the position of Prime Minister David Cameron.

With the arrest Sunday of former News International Chief Executive Rebekah Brooks, the Metropolitan Police and Rupert Murdoch's media group are rounding on one another in public.

Brooks is the tenth person to be arrested as part of investigations into phone hacking and the corruption of police officers by News International. None as yet has been charged.

Brooks, a former *News of the World* editor, was invited to meet with police at the weekend on Friday, only hours after she resigned her post at News International, the company that controls Murdoch's media outlets in Britain. Initially, there were allegations that the invitation was a ruse cooked up between the news group and the police to prevent her appearing Tuesday alongside Rupert Murdoch and his son James, News International's chairman, before the parliamentary select committee investigating phone hacking.

The Murdochs had already made clear that their answers to the committee would be limited by the police investigations. Brooks' arrest, it was argued, could see her exempted from appearing. In the event, a statement by Brooks' lawyer said her appearance was a matter for the committee itself.

Brooks' anger at being quizzed for nine hours under caution was made clear in the same statement. While she "is not guilty of any criminal offence," it read, "the position of the Metropolitan Police is less easy to understand. Despite arresting her yesterday, and conducting an interview process lasting nine hours, they put no allegations to her and showed her no documents connecting her with any crime.

"They will in due course have to give an account of their actions and, in particular, their decision to arrest her with the enormous reputational damage that this has involved."

The statement is indicative of the acrimony now breaking out at the highest levels of the state and political apparatus.

Murdoch's *Times* editorialised that if the allegations of bribery amongst serving police officers proved true, it would mean, "Britain's police are riven with corruption on an institutional scale. Journalists who bribe policemen are indicative of a flawed industry. Policemen who can be bribed are indicative of a flawed state."

Most importantly, Brooks' questioning is especially damaging for Cameron, as she is the second close friend of the prime minister to be arrested, after former *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson was detained last week.

Brooks is credited with organising Coulson's appointment as Cameron's chief spokesman—both in opposition and in government—even though he had been forced to resign from the *News of the World* in 2007 after the original hacking investigation. Even when Coulson finally stood down as his spokesman in January, amidst evidence that he had approved payments for phone hacking, Cameron continued to defend him.

The prime minister was made the target of the resignation statement made Sunday by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson.

Stephenson's position became untenable after it was disclosed that between October 2009 and September 2010 he had employed Neil Wallis, former deputy editor of *News of the World* under Coulson, as adviser on media strategy to himself and Assistant Commissioner John Yates. This was at the same time Yates had ruled out reopening investigations into Murdoch's news group.

In his statement, Stephenson insinuated that his appointment of Wallis was as nothing compared with Cameron's hiring of Coulson. Unlike the latter, "Wallis had not resigned from *News of the World* or, to the best of my knowledge, been in any way associated with the original phone hacking investigation," he said.

Stephenson claimed that he had not previously disclosed his connection with Wallis because he "did not want to compromise the prime minister in any way by revealing or discussing a potential suspect who clearly had a close relationship with Mr. Coulson."

His barbed resignation statement apparently came as a rude shock to Cameron. En route with a trade delegation to

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Africa, he had already been forced to cut the duration of the visit from four days to two due to the gathering crisis.

On Monday afternoon, Yates announced his own resignation. While again disingenuously protesting his innocence, he too delivered an indirect attack on Cameron, stating, "We in the police service are truly accountable. Those of us who take on the most difficult jobs clearly have to stand up and be counted when things go wrong."

Britain's largest police force has now lost both its leading officers—including its counter-terrorism chief—within the space of 24 hours as more information on the extent of its collusion with News International has emerged.

The *Guardian* reported that Cameron "is trying to manage the implosion of a political alliance that brought him to power, including the support of News International. He cannot know what divisions, angry recriminations and betrayals will occur in the next year as the causes of the crisis are examined, and individual personalities, facing jail, seek to save their reputations."

Just why that political alliance has imploded, the *Guardian* did not say. The major parties, parliament, the police and the media have been well aware of the charge sheet against Murdoch for years. How could it be otherwise, when so many of them were—to one degree or another—on his payroll?

There are clearly those, however, who are seeking to utilise what began as a fight between rival newsgroups over market share, aimed at containing Murdoch's power, to engineer a political shift.

Labour is playing the lead role in this. Its leader Ed Miliband has been uncharacteristically forthright in attacking the relations between Murdoch and Cameron, and has now forced the prime minister to agree to suspend the parliamentary recess to allow a debate on the phone hacking scandal on Wednesday.

Miliband's attacks are cynical in the extreme, given that it was the Labour government and former Prime Minister Tony Blair that functioned for years as Murdoch's willing political tool.

In a speech on the scandal yesterday, Miliband indicated some of the considerations involved in the moves against Murdoch and now Cameron. In "the space of just a few years we have now seen three major crises… among people and institutions that wield massive power," he said, going on to cite "the banks, then MPs' expenses, and now in our press."

All of them "are about the irresponsibility of the powerful," he continued, which is "holding Britain back in profound ways."

Miliband proposed nothing of any substance to deal with these "abuses." And he made clear that his criticism of Murdoch and "large concentrations of power" were aimed at ensuring the most effective operation of the free market and "genuinely competitive" private corporations.

The real purpose of his call to "restore responsibility as the great British virtue" was to set out Labour's stall as the party best able to lead the social counterrevolution against workers rights and living standards.

Miliband stressed several times the importance of "reforming" the welfare state. "We can't endorse a something-for-nothing society," he said. People must understand that this applied "from the boardroom to the [unemployment] benefits office."

While all the major parties agree on the need for massive austerity measures, there is a growing section of the bourgeoisie who believe that public hostility towards Cameron is undermining that offensive.

Writing in the *Guardian*, former *Daily Mirror* editor Roy Greenslade called on the Liberal Democrats to table a motion of no confidence in the prime minister. It would both "restore public confidence" in Parliament and "create the conditions for an election in which nervous Lib Dem MPs might well prosper."

Up to now, Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg has robustly defended Cameron. Miliband himself has rejected calls by some Labour backbenchers for the prime minister's resignation.

But there are others, including Conservative backers, who believe Cameron's days could be numbered. Damian Thompson of the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* opined, "The flood waters [of political scandal] are slowly rising and it doesn't seem there's a damn thing anyone can do about it."

He added, "There's a chance, albeit a slim one" that Cameron could be out as prime minister next week.

At a press conference on Yates' resignation, Boris Johnson, Conservative Mayor of London, avoided answering a question as to whether Cameron should resign. "I'm not here to discuss government appointments," he said. "Those questions you must address to government."

Johnson is responsible for the Metropolitan Police Authority, which supposedly "scrutinises" and makes "democratically accountable" the capital's police force.

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