

Labour gives Cameron kid gloves treatment over Murdoch scandal

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For the British ruling elite, Prime Minister David Cameron's speech to a specially convened session of parliament was a critical moment. The decision to hold the special session was dictated by demands that Cameron respond to Tuesday's appearance of News Corp head Rupert Murdoch, his son James and former *News of the World* editor Rebekah Brooks before the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee.

Another select committee had questioned former Metropolitan Police commissioner, Paul Stephenson and his deputy, John Yates. The two police chiefs resigned this week over their ties to employees of News International, News Corp's UK arm, and their failure to properly investigate the News International phone hacking and police corruption scandal since it broke in 2005.

Cameron is personally and deeply implicated in the crisis, having hired Andy Coulson as his director of communications in July 2007—just seven months after Coulson resigned as editor of the *News of the World*. Coulson was editor when most of the thousands of revealed instances of phone hacking took place, and as police were being bribed for information.

Cameron is also a close friend of Brooks, who was forced to resign as chief executive of News International. She was editor of the *News of the World* when the mobile phone of the murdered teenager Milly Dowler was hacked by a private investigator, Glenn Mulcaire, who was contracted to the newspaper.

The prime minister addressed parliament as the News International scandal continued to spread. Fresh claims were made that Coulson's pay was subsidised by News International while he was employed by Cameron.

It was also alleged that Neil Wallis—the former *News of the World* deputy editor employed by the Metropolitan Police to “advise” them on phone hacking and police corruption between October 2009 and September 2010—gave “informal” advice on election strategy to Coulson at Downing Street at that time.

Revelations that Wallis was employed by the Met were the catalyst for the resignation of Stephenson and Yates. Coulson was arrested on July 8 and released on bail as part of the on-going police investigation. On Sunday Brooks was the tenth person to be arrested.

On July 1, moreover, days prior to the outbreak of the phone hacking crisis, the government rubber-stamped Murdoch's proposed full takeover of UK telecommunications firm, BSkyB.

Under these circumstances, reconvening parliament for a day was the minimum token gesture open to Cameron. Leading up to the debate, there was speculation that the opposition Labour Party would table a motion of no confidence in Cameron, as Labour leader Ed Miliband had insisted that Cameron was compromised and could not give leadership to the country.

In the event, Labour did no such thing. Miliband merely asked Cameron to apologise for a “catastrophic error of judgement” in hiring Coulson.

Faced with such a pathetic performance, Cameron felt emboldened to brazen things out, proclaiming: “You live and you learn – and believe you me, I have learned.”

“I have an old fashioned view about ‘innocent until proven guilty,’” he said. “But if it turns out I have been lied to [by Coulson], that would be a moment for a profound apology.”

Miliband's only response to these evasions was to state that Cameron had only offered a “half apology” and to ask for a full one. No one on the Labour benches did any better than Miliband.

This collective failure is no political accident. Labour is hopelessly compromised by its own relations with Murdoch and News International. Murdoch's UK newspapers were fervent supporters of the Conservative Party governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major from 1979 until the mid-1990s. In 1997, however Murdoch switched his backing to Labour under Tony Blair.

With the Tories exhausted and deeply unpopular, and with

Labour having voted to abandon its constitutional commitment to social ownership and embraced the free market, Blair was deemed a reliable instrument for advancing News Corp's interests. The relationship ensured that for years News International paid virtually no tax and became an arbiter of British politics. Murdoch and Blair both supported of the illegal invasion of Iraq.

Government officials and Murdoch executives pointed over and over to Murdoch's close ties with the Labour party. Brooks said, "I went to Downing Street regularly while Brown and Blair were at Number 10." She added, "Strangely it was while Labour prime ministers were in Downing Street that I went regularly, not under the current administration."

Despite his damning proximity to the phone hacking crisis, Cameron could tell parliament, "Rupert Murdoch said yesterday: 'The politician I was closest to was Gordon Brown as chancellor.'"

This was a swipe at Miliband, who has sought to distance himself from his predecessors and make a pose of taking the moral high ground. As his coup de grace, Cameron asked, "And who was the adviser to Brown when he was chancellor? It was Ed Miliband."

This record enabled Cameron to cynically declare that whereas his management had launched an investigation into the scandal, Labour had done nothing of the sort.

Asked if he had held conversations with News International executives about the BSkyB bid while he was prime minister, Cameron stonewalled, insisting only that there had been "no inappropriate conversations" with the company.

At one point Cameron taunted Labour, declaring: "As someone once said, I'm enjoying this." All those assembled will have known that Thatcher had made the comment to parliament during the no confidence debate on the day that, unlike Cameron, she was forced to resign.

Labour's refusal to challenge the government has broad political significance. Cameron and other Tories repeatedly denounced Labour for trying to score narrow party-political advantage from the crisis instead of defending the national interest. He said that the "public expect us to stop playing with and to rise to the occasion and deal with it for the good of the country."

This is a demand that the investigation not go too far that Labour, as a big-business party, must heed. While it may yet be forced to form an alternative government if Cameron falls, it does not want to take office under conditions where parliament, the police, the judiciary, and the entire capitalist establishment of which it is a part are discredited.

The Labour Party demonstrated once again that it stands four-square behind the Cameron government's unpopular

£100 billion programme of anti-worker cuts. The government used the focus on Murdoch's appearance before the select committee to announce the privatisation of more than £1 billion of services provided by the National Health Service. The same day the banking industry announced that £14 billion in bonuses were paid out in the last year, 40 percent of all bonuses paid in the UK. Labour does not want to interfere in this pillaging of state assets and on-going enrichment of the ruling elite.

That is why Miliband supported Cameron's announcement of the personnel carrying out the judicial inquiry promised into the phone hacking scandal. Cameron named six people who will sit under the leadership of court of appeal judge Lord Justice Leveson—including former police chief Sir Paul Scott-Lee; George Jones, the former political editor of the right wing *Daily Telegraph*; Sir David Bell, the former chairman of the *Financial Times*; and Shami Chakrabarti, the director of the civil rights group Liberty.

Though still supposedly addressing phone hacking and other criminal practices of the *News of the World* and ties between Britain's media, politicians and the police, the inquiry's remit has been extended so that this is all but generalised out of existence. Its remit now includes not only Scotland Yard, but all police forces where journalists may have paid for information and all broadcasters and social media based on the Internet. This is a sinister and hopelessly wide trawl.

Cameron said that the inquiry does not need to report for 12 months, more than enough time to organise a whitewash. The inquiry will also be divided into two parts, with the first examining the "culture, practices and ethics of the press." Only then will News International be examined—and only when the police probe into the scandal is complete.



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