

Why did UK police declare death of News of the World whistleblower “not suspicious?”

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When the former *News of the World* reporter Sean Hoare was found dead Monday at his home in Watford, north of London, the immediate response of the Hertfordshire police was to issue a public statement declaring his death to be “unexplained but not thought to be suspicious.”

The statement is at the very least extraordinary, and at worst sinister in its implications. Hoare is the man who broke silence on the corrupt practices at the *News of the World* and, most specifically, alleged that former editor Andy Coulson, who later became Prime Minister David Cameron’s director of communications, was fully aware of phone hacking that took place on an “industrial scale.”

Under these circumstances, before either a post-mortem or any investigation had been mounted, how could such a claim be made by the police?

The morning after Hoare’s body was found, former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson and his former deputy, John Yates, were to give evidence before a home affairs select committee. Stephenson had tendered his resignation Sunday and Yates Monday. They were to be quizzed by MPs on their failure to pursue any serious investigation into phone hacking or on the bribing of police officers. This was to be followed by the quizzing of News Corporation head Rupert Murdoch, his son James, chairman of News International, and former *News of the World* editor Rebekah Brooks.

The death of Hoare means that his testimony will never be heard by any such inquiry or, more importantly, by any criminal investigation that may arise.

His public statements to date—coming from within News International, News Corp’s UK arm—are highly damaging. Last year, Hoare gave interviews to the *New*

York Times and the BBC in which he said Coulson knew about hacking that was “endemic” and part of the “culture at News International.”

In September, he told the *New York Times* that Coulson had “actively encouraged” him to intercept mobile phone messages. On BBC Radio 4’s PM programme he said: “I’ve stood by Andy and been requested to tap phones, to hack into them and so on. He was well aware that the practice exists. To deny it is a lie. It’s simply a lie.”

Hoare’s claims were passed on to the Metropolitan Police, who said he declined to give evidence. The *Guardian*’s Nick Davies paints a fuller picture more damaging to the police. He writes that Hoare was “offended when Scotland Yard’s former assistant commissioner, John Yates, assigned officers to interview him, not as a witness but as a suspect. They told him anything he said could be used against him, and, to his credit, he refused to have anything to do with them.”

A week ago, Hoare told the *New York Times* about journalists making payments to the police, and about the use of “pinging”—locating people via their mobile phone signals, a technology supposedly to be used only for anti-terror purposes. He alleged that *News of the World* executive Greg Miskiw had used such techniques. He said journalists were able to purchase the mobile phone tracking data from police for £300.

Hoare’s health was bad after years of alcohol and cocaine abuse, but he was in rehab. He was just 47 years old.

The *Daily Mail* ran a piece specifically seeking to dismiss any and all questions of possible wrongdoing in Hoare’s death. It described him as “a paranoid recluse who believed someone was out to get him,” citing an unnamed “friend and neighbour.”

The newspaper added that he had “spent much of the last weeks of his life ‘hiding’ in his flat with the curtains drawn.” It quoted Hoare’s friend as saying, “He would talk about someone from the Government coming to get him. He’d say to me, ‘If anyone comes by, don’t say I’m in.’”

Given that he was involved in a scandal that is threatening the government, the police and one of the world’s major news corporations—and the treatment already meted out to him—such caution was not paranoia, but common sense.

A *Guardian* report also notes that Hoare’s body was found at 10:40 am, but “It was not until after 9 pm, two hours after news broke that the phone hacking whistleblower had been found dead, that more uniformed and plainclothes police arrived at the scene. At about 9:15 pm, a police van marked Scientific Services Unit pulled up at the address, where a police car was already parked.”

The report continues, “Two officers emerged carrying evidence bags, clipboards, torches and laptop-style bags and entered the building. Three officers carrying cameras and in white forensic suits followed at 9:30 pm.”

Hoare’s death was clearly, operationally at least, being treated as possibly suspicious, despite official statements to the contrary. Late yesterday, police stated that there was “no evidence” of third party involvement in Hoare’s death and that further toxicology tests are taking place.



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