Former Australian senator accuses Murdoch executives of offering a deal

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Allegations by former Australian senator Bill O'Chee that senior News Limited executives offered him "a special relationship" in 1998 undermine the claims by the Murdoch corporation that such abuses are confined to its British tabloid *News of the World*. O'Chee made the accusations in a recent nine-page sworn statement to the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

When the phone-hacking scandal erupted in the UK earlier this year, Murdoch's Australian outlets countered with a stream of editorials and op-ed comments that its local publications were squeaky clean.

Australia's News Limited chairman and chief executive John Hartigan declared that the company was guided by the "highest principles of professional conduct" and that the practices uncovered in Britain "do not exist in Australia, at News [Limited] or any other respectable media outlet."

O'Chee's accusations call these self-serving comments into question. A former member of Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National coalition, O'Chee states that he was asked by Murdoch executives in 1998 to vote in the Senate against proposed digital television legislation, which they believed was disadvantageous to the corporation's local operations. Under Australian law, offering a senator an inducement to influence a vote is punishable by up to seven years in prison.

O'Chee says that the offer was made to him during a dinner at a Queensland restaurant with Malcolm Colless, then director of corporate development for News Limited. Chris Mitchell, editor in chief of News Ltd's *Australian* newspaper, and Rupert Murdoch's oldest son Lachlan are also alleged to have been present during some of the discussion.

The former senator claims that Colless told him that although voting against the proposed digital television laws would be criticised by coalition party members, "we will take care of you." The News Corporation executive is also alleged to have said: "We would have a 'special relationship,' where [O'Chee] would have editorial support from News Ltd's newspapers, not only with respect to the legislation, but for 'any other issues' too."

O'Chee claims to have called Colless a week after the meal to say he had decided to vote for the legislation and that it then became "almost impossible" to attract News Limited coverage. O'Chee lost his Senate seat at elections four months after the lunch.

Murdoch executives, past and present, immediately denied the allegations when extracts of O'Chee's police statement were published on November 23 by the Fairfax Media. Chris Mitchell said he was at a separate table and unaware of any attempts to lobby for O'Chee's vote. Lachlan Murdoch, who resigned his executive position in 2005, issued a statement claiming O'Chee's allegations were "a fabrication."

Late last month O'Chee told the Associated Press that Lachlan Murdoch was at the table during crucial parts of his meeting with Colless. The former senator's statement reportedly says that Colless introduced O'Chee to Murdoch, declaring: "This is Bill O'Chee. He's going to help us with digital TV."

In Australia, as in every other country where it operates, the Murdoch media corporation exercises considerable political clout. Its editorials and commentary are aimed not only at shaping public opinion, but at shaping, and if need be changing, party leaderships and governments. The Murdoch media's role in the destabilisation of the Whitlam Labor government prior to the 1975 Canberra Coup, and undermining Prime Minister Kevin Rudd before his

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ousting last year by Julia Gillard are just two examples.

Since being installed as prime minister in June 2010, Gillard has personally met with Rupert Murdoch on at least two occasions. All senior politicians—whether in government or opposition—know that their careers are at risk if they fall foul of the Murdoch empire.

Murdoch's media corporation controls 70 percent of Australian newspapers and owns pay-TV company Foxtel, Fox Sports, Sky News, Fox Studios and Harper Collins publishers.

Sky News is currently attempting to win the Australia Network contract, the government's international service, which broadcasts to 44 countries in Asia and the Pacific. Foxtel, the company's cable television network, is also attempting to increase its coverage by taking over Austar, a regional cable provider. Decisions on these attempts to further expand its political influence and business operations, however, were delayed by the government after the British phone-hacking scandal broke.

O'Chee told the Associated Press that his allegations against Murdoch executives were "a very, very serious matter." The issue, he continued, "goes right to the heart of government and something that I'm sure would concern every thinking person. I'm glad that the AFP is going to investigate it and I hope they investigate it extremely thoroughly."

Notwithstanding the results of any AFP investigation, O'Chee's appeal for a thorough exposure of the incident will fall on deaf ears. Neither Gillard's minority Labor government nor the opposition Liberal-National coalition will allow any serious exposure of the Murdoch corporation and its methods.

An obvious case in point is the Gillard government's "media inquiry," which was established after phone hacking scandal erupted in Britain, and commenced its hearings last month.

Labor's 'see no evil, hear no evil' investigation will not even examine whether Murdoch's phone-hacking methods have been used in Australia, let alone O'Chee's concerns. The inquiry, in fact, has no power to subpoena any corporate media executives. Its terms of reference are confined to exploring how increased investment by "traditional media organisations" can improve "quality journalism and the production of news."

While it is almost two weeks since the O'Chee revelations were initially reported, the Australian media has published barely another word on the issue.

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