

Murdoch scandal sparks divisions over media regulation within UK's ruling elite

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The Leveson Inquiry into the Ethics, Culture and Practices of the British press has opened up a Pandora's Box of criminality surrounding Rupert Murdoch's media empire, with a trail leading back to Number 10 Downing Street.

At this very point, Lord Hunt, chairman of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), has announced measures ostensibly aimed at strengthening regulation of the media in an effort to defuse a mounting crisis.

Hunt's aim is to rescue the tattered reputation of the media, on which the ruling elite depends so much and whose reputation has suffered significant damage. But the issue has become a battlefield over the degree to which the illegal conduct of News International's publications can be used in order to implement a general clampdown on media freedoms.

Hunt has promised a replacement "robust PCC". The new interim body is to function until recommendations from the Leveson inquiry, which will form the basis of a more permanent new regulatory authority. His measures are an attempt to rescue media self regulation by demanding a named individual at each publisher who will be responsible for compliance with media standards, based on a model derived from contract law.

This proposed PCC will have two divisions. One will have the power to investigate any "serious or systemic" breakdown in standards, such as phone hacking, while the second will deal with the "complaints and mediation arm". Administrative oversight will be vested in a small Management Board or Board of Trustees that will include senior involvement from the media industry.

Hunt's proposals have been met with a mixed response. Prime Minister David Cameron supports self-regulation, just as he did Murdoch's plans to expand his controlling position within British media. Speaking to the *Press Gazette* at the British Press Awards in April 2008 when he was Leader of the Opposition, he stated, "We've no

plans to change self-regulation. I think the PCC has settled down and the system is now working better than it once did."

But Cameron is in a difficult position. A joint parliamentary committee he created just over a year ago as a response to the News International scandal has questioned the credibility of Hunt's proposals and raised the possibility of the broadcasting watchdog Ofcom playing a statutory regulatory role. And there are far more vocal calls for state regulation.

The likelihood is that Leveson's own recommendations will go further than Hunt. Lord Justice Leveson went through a list of what he described as unanswered questions in Hunt's plans. He wanted to know, for instance, if the new PCC should have the power to levy fines, and raised concern that a method needs to be found that avoids grinding down complainants through delays.

However, with Leveson's final report not expected until just prior to the next planned General Election in 2015, some sections of the press have urged Hunt's interim measures to go through. The *Observer's* Peter Preston wrote, "If we are talking about serious and systemic 'breakdown in standards', then Hunt and his supporters can't just leave the old PCC dangling—waiting for the final report, for Westminster debate and government response, for new legislation circa 2016."

"Effective legislation abhors—and should fear—a vacuum."

Others are far less happy with what they see as Hunt's fudge. The actor Hugh Grant is the public spokesman for Hacked Off, which has campaigned for regulatory reform following revelations of phone tapping and bribing of police by Murdoch's now defunct *News of the World* and his daily tabloid, the *Sun*.

Grant has insisted that "self-regulation has failed five times" over 60 years and statutory and legally binding enforcement of a "code of ethics" is necessary.

The moving force behind Hacked Off is the Media Standard Trust, set up in 2006 to lobby for statutory control of the print industry. It represents a significant faction of Britain's ruling elite. It was set up by Sir David Bell, then chairman of the *Financial Times*. Charles Manley of Goldman Sachs, Robert Peston, the business editor of the BBC, Amelia Fawcett, chair of the Guardian Media Group, Robert Worcester, founder of the polling organization MORI and the Bishop of Wakefield, are just a few that sit on its board.

Significantly Bell quit his post after he became a member of the Leveson Inquiry.

In order to project a more impartial image, Grant, a victim of Murdoch's malpractice, is advanced as its public face. He spoke at fringe meetings at all the official party conferences last year, including one alongside Labour Party leader Ed Miliband.

The UK press has been subject to official self-regulation since the creation of a voluntary Press Council in 1953, aimed, it claimed, at maintaining high ethical standards of journalism and promoting a free press. It was just one of the political mechanisms put in place by the ruling class to regulate its own affairs and relations in post-World War Two Britain

However, the development of the global economy and revolutionary discoveries in computer technology and telecommunication techniques during the 1980s placed enormous pressures on all such nationally based agreements—including those in the British print industry.

Feeling a loss of controlling influence over the increasingly global media, and the enhanced power of figures such as Murdoch that specialise in using sex and corruption scandals to manipulate political affairs, a section of the ruling class began to raise the demand for a statutory Press Council that wielded legal sanction.

In 1990, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government set up a departmental committee under David Calcutt, QC. He was asked "to consider what measures (whether legislative or otherwise) are needed to give further protection to individual privacy from the activities of the press and improve recourse against the press for the individual citizen."

The Tories had no intention of biting the hand of Murdoch or any of the press barons on whom they relied. Calcutt instead recommended the setting up of a new Press Complaints Commission to replace the Press Council to demonstrate "that non-statutory self-regulation can be made to work effectively."

The commission was set up at the beginning of 1991

and a committee of national and regional editors produced for the very first time a formal Code of Practice for the new PCC to administer. All publishers and editors committed themselves to abiding by the Code and to ensuring secure and adequate funding of the PCC.

A Press Standards Board of Finance was established and charged with raising a levy on the newspaper periodical industries to finance the commission, making the new body financially dependent on the bosses of the newspaper titles.

Over the next years, self-regulation was repeatedly hailed as a success story—including by the previous Labour government. As late as 2009, a parliament Select Committee report into Press Standards, Privacy and Libel stated that "self-regulation of the press is greatly preferable to statutory regulation, and should continue".

There can be no doubt, given this history, that any legislation restricting press freedom will not target the main newspapers and TV stations that service the capitalists' interest. It will primarily be employed against independent news sources critical of the powers-that-be—particularly Internet-based publications that it was made sure fell within Leveson's remit.

The most likely victims of official media censorship carried out in the name of preserving individual privacy will be groups such as WikiLeaks, numerous bloggers and, of course, the *World Socialist Web Site*. Such measures will further undermine democratic rights and should be opposed, despite whatever outrage is felt over the Murdoch revelations.



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