

Rupert Murdoch testimony: Routine denials of wrongdoing by UK's political power-broker

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Rupert Murdoch's two days of testimony before the Leveson Inquiry into press standards was all the more extraordinary because it was made under oath.

Revelations of "criminality on an industrial scale" by News International, Murdoch's News Corps British subsidiary, forced the government to establish the inquiry. Not only was the phone-hacking of celebrities, royals, politicians and anyone else in the public domain routine at the now-defunct *News of the World*, but there is a mountain of evidence that the tabloid established corrupt relations with police and public officials as a matter of course.

Yet the man widely acknowledged to be amongst the most powerful in Britain, and indeed the world, told the inquiry that he himself was the "victim" of an attempt to "cover up" illegality at the newspaper, organised by "one or two very strong characters" at the NotW to protect "drinking pals".

It was one person in particular, whom Murdoch declined to name, that had "forbade people to go and report to Mrs. [Rebekah] Brooks [former NotW editor and NI executive] or to James [Murdoch—head of NI]".

In the meantime, Brooks—who infamously told a Commons Committee in 2003 that the *Sun* paid police—and James Murdoch were apparently unaware of the conviction of two NotW employees in 2007 for phone-hacking, repeated (and toothless) police "inquiries" into hundreds of complaints on the same issue, and large payouts to several of its victims by Murdoch's title.

The two "strong characters" referred to are believed to be NotW former legal manager Tom Crone and former editor Colin Myler. Both have previously given evidence that they informed James Murdoch of the scale of illegal activity at the tabloid as far back as 2008.

Murdoch lamented the "serious blot" on his reputation

caused by the scandal. He claimed that as soon as he became aware of such practices, he organised "inquiry after inquiry" and employed "legal firm after legal firm" to arrive at the truth.

How then was it possible for millions of emails to be reportedly destroyed by NI when news broke that NotW had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Millie Dowler? Who gave the order? Nothing was said.

Nor was there an examination of the accusation made by Labour MP Tom Watson that members of the Commons Select Committee investigating NI had been placed under surveillance by a "crack squad" of NotW reporters, instructed to find out "every single thing" possible on each member that could be used to intimidate them—a mission that was so successful that the committee decided not to summon Brooks to give evidence in 2010. Who had given the instruction? The question wasn't even asked.

Instead, Murdoch told the inquiry that he wanted "to put it to bed once and for all, that that is a complete myth ... that I used the influence of the *Sun* [NotW's daily companion] or the supposed political power to get favourable treatment."

Even as he was testifying, however, further evidence of nefarious relations between the multi-billionaire and the British political establishment came to light.

Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt was accused of supplying News Corp with sensitive government and commercial information relating to its bid for pay TV channel BSkyB via a secretive backdoor channel. But this was the tip of a very large and not very well hidden iceberg.

For more than 30 years, politicians of all parties have bent their knee at Murdoch's court. So ritual is this obeisance it that Murdoch joked last year, "I wish they

would leave me alone.”

The relationship began under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative administration in the early 1980s, at the time when Murdoch was seeking to take over the *Times* and *Sunday Times*. As he already owned the *Sun* and NotW, this would have given him a near monopoly of the print media.

Murdoch told the inquiry that he could not remember a meeting with Thatcher on January 4, 1981, although he was sure their discussion was “quite appropriate”. But a note by Thatcher’s press secretary, Bernard Ingham, released last month, suggests that a deal was agreed at that meeting that enabled Murdoch to bypass parliament’s Monopolies and Mergers Commission. Just weeks later, Murdoch’s takeover was waved through.

The multi-billionaire denied being “one of the main powers” behind Thatcher’s premiership, although he agreed that politically they were “on the same page”.

The Murdoch press cheered on mass privatisation, the deregulation of the City of London and huge tax cuts for the corporations and super-rich, from which he benefited. NI led the way in the efforts to smash up working class resistance, carrying out a major union-busting operation at its new plant at Wapping, east London, in 1986.

Ingham’s note recorded Murdoch informing Thatcher that he intended to raise profitability at the *Times* by “achieving a 25 percent reduction in overall manning,” and “standing up to the powerful Fleet Street unions”.

Murdoch’s relationship with the political elite was cemented under Tony Blair’s Labour government, which excelled at translating every selfish whim of the financial oligarchy into government policy.

The number of meetings between Blair and Murdoch far surpassed those between Thatcher and the media baron. So close were they that Murdoch had joked to Blair when he was still in opposition in the early 1990s, “If our flirtation is ever consummated, Tony, then I suspect we’ll end up making love like porcupines—very, very carefully.”

Nevertheless, consummated it was. At the inquiry, the multi-billionaire spoke glowingly of the former Labour leader, who is godfather to his daughter. But he insisted that he had “never asked Mr. Blair for favours.”

He denied that an article critical of the European Union penned by Blair for the *Sun* in March 1997—two months before the general election that brought Labour to power—had any connection to the newspaper’s decision, the next day, to publicly endorse a Labour government.

Nor could he remember three phone calls between himself and Blair in the week running up to the Iraq war

in March 2003—when Murdoch’s titles were praising the prime minister for defying mass popular opposition to the invasion.

It should be noted that Peter Clark, a former Metropolitan Police commissioner, claims to have submitted a confidential report on NotW phone-hacking to the Labour government as early as 2006.

Murdoch described his first meeting with Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, while he was still in opposition, on one of the family yachts. This was all part of the “democratic process”, he claimed.

He was “surprised” that Cameron had taken on former NotW editor Andy Coulson as his director of communications. Murdoch claimed ignorance of the fact that NI continued to provide Coulson with private health care, a car and payments from his severance package.

As for his more recent support for Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond, Murdoch told the inquiry he was an “amusing guy”. It transpired that Salmond had pledged to lobby for Murdoch’s takeover of BSkyB just after sealing a deal with the *Sun* to back his election campaign.

What if one falls foul of Murdoch? One indication was given by the media mogul’s attack on former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown.

The two had also been of like political mind, but had a fall-out after the *Sun* switched to backing the Tories in September 2009—just as Brown made his keynote address to the annual Labour Party conference. At the inquiry, Murdoch claimed Brown had made a threatening phone call to his office, stating that News Corp “has declared war on my government and we have no alternative but to make war on your company.”

Why should Brown do that, Murdoch was asked? He was “unbalanced”, Murdoch replied.

Last year Brown accused Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* of using “known criminals” to access his financial and legal files, with the aim of “bringing me down as a government minister.”



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