

Murdoch's acolyte Tony Blair testifies before Leveson inquiry

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Former Labour prime minister Tony Blair's appearance before the Leveson inquiry highlights the fraud that constitutes the official investigation into so-called press ethics.

The inquiry was established with great reluctance due to the mass of evidence of years of criminal wrongdoing by Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* tabloid, including phone hacking, the bribery and corruption of police officers and alleged intimidation of other public officials. The scandal threatened to expose the degree to which Britain's political elite had trampled on democratic norms in league with a clique of billionaires—of which Murdoch is the leading representative—who were able to act without let or hindrance.

This alliance began under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the early 1980s, when it cleared the way for Murdoch's takeover of the *Times* and *Sunday Times*, helping consolidate the oligarch's near monopoly of the print media. In return, the Murdoch media pumped out an unending stream of right-wing social nostrums to pollute the intellectual climate in Britain, cheerleading Thatcher's programme of union-busting, privatisation, deregulation of the City of London and tax cuts for the major corporations and super-rich—all of which he benefited from.

But it was under the Blair government that relations with the arch-reactionary press baron reached their zenith, as the Labour Party embraced his big-business agenda. The courtship began in 1995, when, shortly after ditching Labour's constitutional commitment to social ownership, Blair was invited to address executives at Murdoch's News Corporation at a gathering at Hayman Island.

The trip, Blair told the inquiry, was part of a “very deliberate and very strategic” attempt by Labour to

secure the oligarch's backing.

Once in government, Murdoch's influence was so pervasive that he was described as the 24th member of Blair's cabinet. The pair were so personally close that, after standing down as prime minister in 2007, Blair went on to become godfather to Murdoch's youngest daughter, attending her 2011 baptism on the River Jordan, complete with flowing white robes.

When the *News of the World* hacking scandal first came to light in 2006, it was swept under the carpet by the Metropolitan Police, without any challenge by the Blair government or its successor under Gordon Brown.

All this is a matter of record, which is why Blair had to begin his testimony with a limited admission of culpability.

Relations between politicians and the media—it was always “the media” in general in Blair's testimony—had become “unhealthy”, he said, something he was “uncomfortable” with. But he had had little choice. “[C]ertain newspapers are used by their owners or editors as instruments of political power,” he said, comparing their force to a “tsunami” that could sweep away governments.

It was for this reason that he had determined not to confront the media because it could derail the agenda that really mattered to him, like the “health service, schools or law and order”.

Blair's statement is extraordinary. He admits that a handful of super-wealthy individuals who largely control the media can usurp the democratic process virtually at will. Then he states that not only did he choose not to disturb this set-up, but that, instead, “Consistently my view was that it was not ownership that was the issue. I held that all the way through and still do, by the way.”

For Polly Toynbee in the *Guardian*, this media power is evidence that Blair is the “godfather of realpolitik.”

He is nothing of the sort. Blair did not simply try to “manage” relations with Murdoch, but actively sought out his backing. The reason was not simply because a deal had been struck way back in 1995, but because, as Blair stated, their views often “coincided”.

It hadn’t been necessary to agree with Murdoch that the Labour government would limit any reform of Thatcher’s anti-union laws because the party was determined to keep them anyway, he told the inquiry. Ditto on restricting media ownership, which Blair said he abandoned because he didn’t believe in it.

In fact, the 2003 Communications Act lifted a ban on foreign ownership of television licences in the UK and further facilitated Murdoch’s attempt at a monopoly with his push to take control of the satellite TV channel BSkyB.

In contrast, Blair was only too willing to take on the so-called vested interests he claimed were holding Britain back—by which he meant the millions of working people opposed to the privatisation of health and education and the driving up of social inequality to record levels under his government.

While Labour was not prepared to go to war with the media, it had no qualms about waging a very real and entirely illegal war against Iraq, and facing down widespread domestic opposition in order to do so.

Blair’s kid-gloves treatment by the Leveson inquiry was only disturbed by a protester, David Lawley-Wakelin, a documentary filmmaker. Before being quickly bundled out of the door by security, Lawley-Wakelin denounced Blair as a war criminal who had been “paid off for the Iraq war” by the investment bank JPMorgan and “should be arrested for war crimes”.

Lord Justice Leveson and others fell over themselves to apologise to the former prime minister for the interruption. As Blair asserted that the allegations were “completely and totally untrue”, they reassured him that he didn’t have to answer such charges.

Yet, evidence before the inquiry shows that Blair spoke to Murdoch three times in a matter of a week before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This was at the time when the oligarch’s titles were proclaiming Blair’s readiness to defy mass anti-war sentiment as the hallmark of responsible government.

As for Lawley-Wakelin’s charges, Blair’s money-grubbing is a matter of record. Financial experts have estimated the personal wealth of Blair and his wife at somewhere between ?30 million and ?40 million, placing them among the 2,000 wealthiest people in Britain.

He was barely out of Downing Street when he took a position with JPMorgan for an annual remuneration of \$5 million. The investment bank was later selected to run the new Trade Bank of Iraq, making billions by mortgaging the country’s future oil production.

Documents released in 2011 revealed detailed discussions by Labour ministers with some of the world’s largest oil companies, including Britain’s BP, to carve up the country’s oil reserves in the run-up to the invasion.

Subsequently, Blair has gone on to benefit from lucrative contracts with regimes in the Middle East—most notably Kuwait—through his company, Tony Blair Associates, all the while continuing to deny cutting any deal with another immensely wealthy and powerful individual, former US President George W. Bush, in the run-up to the Iraq war.

None of this was even touched on by the Leveson inquiry. Like the numerous inquiries into the Iraq war before it, it has no interest in getting to the truth but instead seeks to bury it while protecting those responsible.

As if to reinforce the point, Blair’s testimony ended with Leveson inviting him to be part of a select group helping draft proposals for future regulation of the media.

With Murdoch’s man on the inside, a fundamental truth is confirmed. Breaking the ideologically and socially destructive power of Britain’s media oligarchs can be achieved only as the by-product of a mass political movement of the working class against the thoroughly corrupt and debased ruling elite.



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