

Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond embroiled in Murdoch scandal

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8 May 2012

Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond has emerged as one of the most compromised acolytes of Rupert Murdoch and his media empire.

Emails handed over to the Leveson Inquiry by News International show Salmond offering to assist NI's parent body, Murdoch's News Corp, in its battle to win control of the satellite and pay TV broadcaster BSkyB.

Leading NI officials made clear that Salmond offered his services to Murdoch in return, it is implied, for support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) from the *Scottish Sun*.

On February 11, 2011 an email from News Corp's director of public affairs Frederic Michel to then News International chairman James Murdoch noted, "I met with Alex Salmond's adviser today. He will call [Jeremy] Hunt whenever we need him to."

Hunt is the British Culture Secretary, who is now under intense pressure over his relations with NI. As the government minister with responsibility for broadcasting, Hunt was exposed in the same batch of emails as privately supporting News Corp's multi-billion pound planned takeover of BSkyB.

Hunt effectively acted as a channel between News Corp and the government of Prime Minister David Cameron to push through the BSkyB bid. Hunt's adviser, Adam Smith, has been forced to resign. Cameron has been obliged to defend Hunt in the House of Commons.

Another email from Michel to James Murdoch in March 2011 noted, "Alex Salmond called. He had a very good dinner with the editor of the *Sun in Scotland* yesterday. The *Sun* is now keen to back the SNP at the election."

The email continued, "On the Sky bid he [Salmond] will make himself available to support the debate if consultation is launched."

Michel now says the phone call in question was not from Salmond, but an adviser.

James Murdoch told the Leveson Inquiry, "Salmond offered to be supportive ... [the bid] was a good transaction for Scotland."

In the event, Salmond seems not to have made any calls to Hunt and the BSkyB bid was withdrawn.

As soon as the emails were released, Salmond came under intense pressure from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. The three opposition parties, all discredited by their own relations with Murdoch, produced a joint statement demanding Salmond explain himself in Holyrood, the Scottish parliament.

Salmond's problems were made worse by Rupert Murdoch's testimony to the Leveson Inquiry. He told the inquiry in a written statement that Salmond "has not explicitly asked me for the political support of NI's titles ... but of course Mr. Salmond is a politician."

Murdoch said of Salmond, "He's an amusing guy and I enjoy his company." Asked whether Murdoch had contributed towards the *Scottish Sun*'s decision to support the SNP, he replied, "I don't remember, but probably yes."

Murdoch went on to describe his attitude towards the SNP perspective of Scottish independence: "Well, it's a little emotional, but I am attracted by the idea. But I'm not convinced, and so I said we should stay neutral on the big issue, but let's see how he [Salmond] performs."

Speaking on BBC Radio, April 28, Salmond defended his relations with NI by defending the Murdoch group.

"The idea that malpractice and illegality is confined to one newspaper organisation is for the birds," he said. "At least across the London press that potential

illegality was huge and industrial in scale.”

Salmond described Murdoch as “the most substantial figure in journalism in the last 59 years,” someone with whom he continues to seek a “good and businesslike relationship”.

In fact, Salmond has been ingratiating himself with NI for decades, having been a *Sun* columnist between 1998 and 2003, and, as First Minister, the source of numerous sycophantic invitations to Murdoch and his acolytes. In October 2007, Murdoch met Salmond in New York and accepted his invitation to join the Holyrood government’s “Globalscots” network, an “elite sales force” of 900 business people with Scottish connections.

Salmond was guest of honour at the opening of a new NI printing plant near Glasgow.

Salmond offered Murdoch tickets to a play and various appearances as his special guest at political and cultural functions.

Murdoch offered Salmond tickets to the Ryder Cup golf tournament in September 2008 and the editor of the *Scottish Sun* offered him a golfing trip and to see Scottish Opera.

When the disgraced *News of the World* was finally shut down, Salmond hailed its replacement, the *Scottish Sun on Sunday*, as “an example of the good newspapers can do.”

Salmond’s grovelling to Murdoch stands alongside his courting of billionaire Donald Trump, and his support for disgraced RBS chief, Fred Goodwin. The SNP has long rested on financial support from transport magnate and Christian evangelist, Brian Souter.

An April 27 editorial in the *Herald* expressed concern over Salmond’s credibility, noting that minor misdemeanours ended the political careers of one of Salmond’s predecessors as First Minister, Labour’s Henry McLeish. It asked, “How does this episode square with the new politics Mr. Salmond promises Scots if they back independence? How does Scotland as a ‘progressive beacon’ marry with a leader who appears to be dazzled by very rich men...”

Salmond’s problems were compounded following the launching of a legal case by another of his predecessor’s, Labour’s Jack McConnell, now Baron McConnell of Glenscorrodale, whose phone, along with those of his children, may have been hacked by the *News of the World*. McConnell’s phone number

was found in the notebooks of jailed private investigator Glen Mulcaire.

Announcing the findings of the House of Commons Select Committee report “News International and phone hacking”, Labour MP Tom Watson demanded that Holyrood established a committee to investigate phone hacking in Scotland.

Referring to NI and the Scottish legal system’s hounding of former Scottish Socialist Party leader Tommy Sheridan, part of which took place under Salmond, Watson went on, “Tommy Sheridan lost his liberty on a majority verdict of a jury not in full possession of the facts. He received a three-year prison sentence. I believe the judgement is unsound.”

The House of Commons report concluded that Murdoch himself was “not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company.” True to form, Salmond refused to back the report, rejected calls for a Holyrood inquiry into phone hacking, He refused to inform Holyrood whether his own phone had been hacked.



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