

A revealing look at Murdoch's influence on British politics

A review by Dave Hyland
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Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the corruption of Britain by Tom Watson and Martin Hickman, Allen Lane, 384 pp.

In a new book, Labour MP Tom Watson and *Independent* journalist Martin Hickman throw some light on the way in which politicians in the UK have bowed down before Rupert Murdoch's wealth and power, as well detailing the incestuous relationship between his newspapers and a corrupt police force.

Dial M for Murdoch follows Watson in his role as a member of the Culture, Media and Sports Committee as he attempts to expose the pernicious influence the media mogul has had on UK politics and seeks to prevent News Corporation from winning the majority share ownership of satellite broadcaster BSkyB.

The figures outlining the size and influence of News Corp are staggering: "At the start of 2011, 1 billion people daily digested his products—books, newspapers, magazines, TV shows and films—and News Corporation, his holding company, had annual sales of \$33 billion... In Britain, he had come to control 40% of national newspaper circulation... In his native Australia his domination was greater still; 70% of the newspaper market; while in his adopted United States, through the *New York Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the most watched cable news outlets, *Fox News*, Murdoch exerted a strong pull on American politics" (p. 5).

The authors explain how, prior to the 1997 General Election, the Tony Blair/Gordon Brown leadership of the Labour Party made overtures to the oligarch: "in 1995 Blair made a transcontinental pilgrimage to a News Corp conference on Hayman Island off Australia, where he spoke to the assembled executives of News Corporation and held talks with the Kingmaker... According to the diaries of Piers Morgan, the former *News of the World* editor, an apologetic Blair told him; 'Piers, I had to court him. It is better to be riding a tiger's back than let it rip your throat out. Look what Murdoch did to [former Labour leader Neil] Kinnock' " (p. 7).

As a result of external pressure over its 2006 White Paper, "What Price Privacy", the Blair government dropped its plans for incorporating a custodial sentence for breaches of the Data Protection Act into the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill.

The police were well aware of the phone hacking taking place: "The *News of the World* even played a voicemail recording from [murdered schoolgirl] Milly's [Dowler's] phone to Surrey Police. Despite knowing the paper had accessed the inbox—which could have triggered the automatic deletion of evidence (because murderers sometimes leave taunting messages on victims' phones)—Surrey took no action."

Murdoch's organisation made use of phone hackers, criminals and corrupt police officers to garner information to put pressure on individuals. Some of this was used to embellish press stories about celebrities, but the *News of the World* newspaper sought to use political information to pressurise those who opposed News International.

Dial M quotes one of the *News of the World's* own documents. "Under the heading *News of the World* strategy, the document continued; 'The *News of the World* is aware of these facts, and is planning to put pressure back on the solicitors by revealing these facts and by linking their political affiliations and career benefits from the cases. They plan to do this publicly and through discreet lobbying'" (p. 160).

Phone hacking was mainly directed at leading members of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy such as John Prescott, deputy leader of the Labour Party, and Fire Brigade Union leader Andy Gilchrist.

Tommy Sheridan, former Scottish Socialist Party leader, was also targeted. Watson briefed Sheridan prior to his three-hour interrogation of Andy Coulson, the prime minister's former director of communications, because he feared that Sheridan had gone to jail because of misleading evidence and what is now known about the *News of the World's* phone hacking means his perjury verdict is unsafe.

The *News of the World* reporter on royal affairs, Clive Goodman, and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire were sent to prison for hacking, but the authors point to the way the Crown Prosecution Services in collusion with the police manipulated evidence in the interests of protecting the interests of more senior figures:

"The Crown Prosecution Service file note dated 14th of July 2006 stated 'the police have requested initial advice about the data produced and whether the case as it stands could be ring fenced to ensure that extraneous matters will not be dragged into the prosecution area'."

By the July 25 the CPS had agreed privately with the police that the case should be "deliberately limited" to "less sensitive" witnesses. A senior Crown Prosecution Service lawyer wrote: "it was recognised early in this case that the investigation was likely to reveal a vast array of offending behaviour. However, the CPS and the police concluded that aspects of the investigation could be focused on a discrete area of offending relating to J. L. P. and HA [the royal aides] and the suspects Goodman and Mulcaire'" (p. 42).

An entire chapter is given over to the murder of detective Daniel Morgan in 1987. It has been alleged that suspects in the murder used their contacts with *News of the World* to subvert the investigation.

Morgan's family have made no less than five attempts to make the government hold a public inquiry into his murder. Watson supports the call for a public inquiry and points out, "After 24 years, five investigations, 750,000 documents and the expenditure of £15 million, Scotland Yard has again failed to jail anyone for the murder of Daniel Morgan" (p. 168).

Watson and Hickman's central contention is that Murdoch and his organisations have corrupted the institutions of politics and the police.

There is ample evidence of this. But Watson would like the reader to believe that for the last 30 years the institutions of the British capitalist state were simply the victims of Murdoch's empire and that these institutions would be returned to health if only Murdoch's malign influence was removed.

This is false. The political corruption of Labour, for example, stretches back over decades. It has acted as British imperialism's major political prop. By the time Blair is quoted in 1995 as saying, "It is better to be riding the tiger's back," the material basis for national reformist parties and programmes had been destroyed by the objective developments in world economy. The Labour Party had become a hollowed-out shell, with all genuine socialist minded workers and youth having been driven out, expelled or dropping out in disgust at its continuous rightward lurch. The void left in "New Labour" was filled by middle class layers attracted by its right-wing programme.

Watson, a former president of the National Union of Students at Hull University and National Political Officer for the AEEU trade union, became a Labour MP in Blair's second government. As supporter of Chancellor Gordon Brown, he rose to a position within the Cabinet Office. However, Watson's siding with Brown against Blair in a factional battle would see him targeted by the Murdoch publishing empire.

In 2006, Watson won his case against the *Sun* newspaper, which accepted that it had defamed him and later settled out of court for a substantial sum of money. News International had to apologise for placing him under surveillance. That year Watson signed a letter to Blair, calling on him to resign and to end the uncertainty over his succession, i.e., by giving way to Brown. He was forced to resign from cabinet after refusing to withdraw his signature.

Along with Watson's loyalty to Brown and his personal mistreatment, Watson's opposition to Murdoch became bound up with concerns shared by others in ruling circles that the commercial and political power of the oligarch was becoming a threat to the general interest of British imperialism. In his position on the Culture, Media and Sports Committee, Watson became a staunch opponent of Murdoch's takeover of BSkyB. This would mean that the country's wealthiest broadcasters could then cross-promote the broadcaster's 10 million subscribers, "giving his newspapers a 'significant advantage over other Fleet Street papers', while, at the £7.9 billion, 'BSkyB and News International's combined revenues would dwarf the BBC's £3.6 billion and ITV's £1.9 billion'."

Dial M cites approvingly media analyst Claire Enders' warning that Murdoch in Britain could match Silvio Berlusconi's dominance over the media in Italy. In a rare show of agreement, the BBC, BT and the owners of the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Mirror* and *Mail* group newspapers objected to Murdoch's plan.

This issue came to define the deep divisions that exist within the British ruling class and shifted the factional dynamics within the ruling class towards Watson's anti-Murdoch position. Huge amounts of money are at stake. This has already led to the sacking of one business secretary, Vince Cable, and could now lead to the forced resignation of another, Jeremy Hunt. Former *News of the World* editor and NI CEO Rebekah Brooks has been charged, along with others, with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

At a time of unprecedented social polarisation in Britain, the existing state and political arrangements are facing an increasingly difficult task holding in check the growing antagonisms between these warring factions.

The Leveson Inquiry is a quasi-legal political mechanism set up to buy the capitalist class time while its contending factions fight out their bitter ideological and political differences and the state settles on a new strategy. But it is an extremely dangerous manoeuvre for the bourgeoisie, as it's forced to allow a brief period in which a shaft of daylight can illuminate some of the murkiest corners of its oppressive state apparatus.

Ever since the Faustian pact between Margaret Thatcher and Murdoch, successive governments have come to rely on his media empire as a weapon with which to manipulate public opinion and create the ideological climate suited to the unrestrained rule of the super-rich. But during the last decade the illegal methods employed by Murdoch's employees—which are ultimately the product of this same lack of political restraint—have gone so far that they now threaten to destabilise the entire apparatus of rule.

Watson writes in the preface:

"As the book shows, I hope beyond any doubt, prime ministers, ministers, Parliament, the police, the justice system and the 'free' press became collectively defective when it came to investigating the activities of NewsCorp. Now that Murdoch's corrupt grip on our national institutions is loosening, and thanks to the laser-beam focus of Lord Justice Leveson, who leads the public enquiry into this affair, these individuals and public bodies are belatedly starting to clean up their acts."

With the weasel words "collectively defective" and high praise for "laser-beam focus of Lord Justice Leveson", Watson seeks to hide the major responsibility of the Labour Party for the present catastrophic social situation facing workers and rekindle illusions in capitalist state institutions.



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