

Britain's Leveson Inquiry hit by allegations of political interference

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In his more wistful moments, UK prime minister David Cameron must wish he had the power to reverse the decision to set up the Leveson Inquiry into the “ethics” of the UK’s media.

But the move was forced upon the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government by the revelations of phone hacking and the bribery of public officials by Rupert Murdoch’s *News of the World* tabloid and other titles at his British subsidiary, News International.

The scandal exposed the corrupt relations between the multibillionaire representative of finance capital and Britain’s ruling establishment that developed over the last three decades in particular.

The aim of the Leveson Inquiry was to head off further revelations and effect some agreement on media regulation that would supposedly end this sordid state of affairs.

Six months on, and at the cost of £6 million and counting, it is no nearer to reaching its goal. Instead, the inquiry has opened up ever more damning questions and is proving to be a political calamity for the Conservative Party and for Cameron himself.

Last week, Lord Justice Leveson set aside time to study documents submitted suggesting how any press legislation might be framed. Instead, a row broke out over political interference into the inquiry, concerning a speech made in February to parliamentary journalists by the Conservative education secretary, Michael Gove.

In that speech, Gove said the inquiry was having a “chilling effect” on press freedom. When asked by journalists for his reaction, Cameron had apparently backed Gove, stating that he had made an “important point”.

In an article on June 17 headlined, “Levesons ‘threat to quit’ over meddling minister”, the *Mail on Sunday* claimed that Leveson had placed an “angry call” to the cabinet secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, over Gove’s remarks, and threatened to resign unless “ministers were silenced”. Leveson reportedly demanded the education secretary appear before the inquiry to explain his remarks.

This was the clarion call for a number of Tory MPs to

declare that Leveson was suppressing press freedom.

Their charge is completely cynical. Their concern is not the defence of “free speech”, which has already been severely curtailed. It is to protect the Tory party and its corporate sponsors—not least Murdoch himself—from further damaging details.

As for the *Mail on Sunday*, its “exposure” was a clumsy attempt to undermine the inquiry and bring Leveson to heel. Its publishers, Associated Newspapers Ltd, represent a group of rival media organisations who, while keen to exploit Murdoch’s difficulties for their own competitive advantage, are determined that the inquiry should not impinge on their own nefarious relations with Britain’s ruling elite.

On Monday morning, Leveson had to issue a statement on the matter. He admitted to phoning the prime minister’s office, but denied that he ever threatened to resign.

His intention was not “to challenge the *Mail on Sunday*”, Leveson said, but to “give Associated Newspapers Ltd the opportunity to pursue the allegations they made”. Above all, he was concerned to ensure that Gove’s position was not that of the government. “Put shortly, I was concerned about the perception that the inquiry was being undermined while it was taking place”, he said.

His latest remarks came only days after he had made an extraordinary unscheduled statement appealing to the Tories to support his inquiry. “It remains essential that cross-party support for this inquiry is not jeopardised,” Leveson said, adding that he was “very keen to avoid—inter-party politics and the politics of personality.”

Leveson is anxious that his inquiry has some semblance of independence if it is to have any legitimacy. The more evidence is taken, however, the more the inquiry threatens to undermine the very interests it was intended to protect.

Another issue resurfaced last week when Boris Johnson’s links to News International came under fresh scrutiny. It emerged that the Conservative London mayor, whose responsibilities include policing and who previously chaired the Metropolitan Police Authority, dined with the oligarch at his home in London on January 24, 2011, just days before

the Metropolitan Police launched a new inquiry into phone hacking.

The dinner was not declared in the Register of Hospitality, although Johnson said it had been disclosed on his mayoral website.

But Tom Watson, the Labour MP who has campaigned on the phone hacking scandal, questioned whether the mayor had briefed Murdoch on developments inside Scotland Yard at their dinner.

Watson is quoted in the June 20 edition of the *Independent* newspaper: "It's remarkable that Boris Johnson would fail to declare such an important meeting at a crucial period in the inquiry. I've been following this scandal long enough to guess that he can't remember what was discussed, or that no-one present took a note but I would like to know if they discussed the inquiry".

"When did Johnson know it was going to be re-opened and was Rupert Murdoch given advance notice?"

Johnson's links with the Murdoch empire had already been the subject of controversy since September 2010, when he rejected calls for London's Metropolitan Police force to reopen its investigation into phone hacking as "codswallop". The insinuation is that Johnson used his influence to block police investigations in return for the support of Murdoch's titles in his mayoral contests.

Watson speaks for a section of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats who are pressing for greater press regulation. This campaign is just as cynical and reactionary as that of their adversaries.

It was the Labour Party under Tony Blair that fully consummated the relationship between government and Murdoch that began under Conservative premier Margaret Thatcher.

Murdoch's titles pumped out an unending stream of right-wing propaganda, cheerleading Labour's privatisation of health, education and welfare; supporting the invasion of Iraq and the attack on democratic rights under the guise of the "war on terror". Together with its policy of "light touch" regulation for the banks and corporations, all these measures ensured a record rise in the fortunes of the super-rich, with Murdoch a chief beneficiary.

Like many others, Labour Party figures like Watson and former prime minister Gordon Brown were to fall foul of Murdoch. Brown has accused the oligarch of effectively sabotaging his fight for re-election in May 2010 by publicly switching to the Tories and publishing stories calculated to damage him politically and personally.

In addition, they are concerned that the Murdoch scandal has called into question the sanctity of many essential pillars of the state.

This has led them to call for various forms of regulation to

ensure organisations like News International are not allowed to run out of control and put the interests of the capitalist class as a whole at risk.

On Murdoch, Watson has said he wants the multibillionaire to show some "genuine contrition." "I don't think he really thinks he's responsible for this", he said, urging that News Corporation "put in serious pieces of corporate governance".

At the same time, Watson has appealed to Cameron to use the inquiry to "utterly recalibrate the relationship between British politics and the British media" by establishing "light-touch regulation with an arm's length regulator a million miles away from government...."

Whatever is agreed through the inquiry, the attack on the democratic rights of working people will continue, as the ruling class presses ahead with its efforts to clamp down on the Internet, Twitter and other social media.

And whatever the difficulties of Cameron and large sections of the political establishment caught in the glare of the inquiry, Murdoch continues to get off scot-free.

On Thursday, it was announced that News Corp is to separate its entertainment and newspaper businesses into two separate companies. The move is intended to protect News Corp's lucrative film and television assets from litigation over the phone hacking scandal.

There was speculation, too, that the move would leave News Corp free to revive its bitterly contested plans to take control of the British TV satellite channel BSkyB, which it was forced to drop as a result of the *News of the World* revelations.

News Corp share prices rose to a five-year high on the news, while BSkyB shares also rose.



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