

UK Prime Minister Cameron given kid gloves treatment at Leveson inquiry

Julie Hyland
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The Leveson Inquiry into press standards descended into farce this week, with the appearance of Prime Minister David Cameron.

The inquiry was established in the wake of the exposure of widespread criminality at Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, including the bribery and corruption of public officials and police officers.

On the eve of Cameron's appearance, a *Sun* journalist, a police superintendent and two others were arrested by police in connection with the scandal. Thirty-three people have now been arrested under the Metropolitan Police's Operation Elveden investigation into alleged corrupt payments to public officials. A separate investigation into phone-hacking by Murdoch's British subsidiary News International continues.

As Cameron gave evidence, former *News of the World* editor Rebekah Brooks made her first appearance in court on charges of conspiring to pervert the course of justice, namely destroying evidence of phone-hacking.

Any genuine examination of the illegal activity of News International, much less the involvement of Britain's political elite in facilitating such activities, is strictly off limits to the Leveson Inquiry, whose remit is deliberately limited to "press ethics" in general.

Cameron nevertheless faced specific questions over his and his party's relations with the Murdoch empire:

Why had he taken on former *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson as his director of personal communications in 2007, only shortly after Coulson had resigned his post with News International following the jailing of two of its employees for hacking into the phone messages of the Royal family?

How did he respond to the charge that Coulson's appointment was part of a quid pro quo agreement in

which the new Tory leader received the backing of Murdoch's daily *Sun* newspaper in return for commercial favours?

Why had the prime minister chosen Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt to adjudicate on Murdoch's News Corporation's £8 billion bid for the TV satellite channel BSkyB, despite Hunt having declared himself a "cheerleader" for the bid? And why does Cameron continue to protect Hunt despite evidence that he privately communicated with News Corp executives during the bid?

Any one of these issues is potentially politically lethal for Cameron. In his testimony, Cameron admitted to meeting Rupert Murdoch 10 times, James Murdoch 15 times and Brooks 19 times while in opposition. It is, moreover, a matter of record that during this time, the Tory line as regards the media regulator Ofcom, which would oversee the Murdoch bid, changed as relations between the party and the oligarch developed. So much so that, by July 2009, Cameron pledged that a Conservative government would limit Ofcom's powers.

According to Peter Osborne in the *Telegraph*, "This policy announcement took place approximately one month after the Tory leader attended the Oxfordshire wedding of the newly appointed News International Chief Executive Rebekah Brooks—and six weeks before James Murdoch's notorious McTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh Festival, in which he too launched a brutal attack on the media regulator."

Just two months later, James Murdoch informed Cameron at a private Mayfair club that *The Sun* would back the Tories in the 2010 general election.

Cameron was asked about a meeting with James Murdoch in May 2009, just prior to his speech on Ofcom. Murdoch may have raised the issue of

regulation, the prime minister answered vaguely, but he couldn't remember. He agreed that he had discussed Coulson's appointment with Brooks but only because he wanted to know if he "would be good at the job".

Coulson's appointment was "controversial", Cameron agreed, in part because of "bad things happened at the NoW while he was editor". But Coulson had done the "honourable thing" by resigning and "deserved a second chance". Besides, he was the only tabloid editor available for hire at the time, Cameron claimed.

On several occasions after 2007, he had sought assurances from Coulson about his knowledge of phone-hacking at the tabloid, especially as the scale of it began to emerge, and he had received "undertakings", the prime minister said. He denied any knowledge of Murdoch's bid for BSkyB before it was publicly announced, and said he could not recall a memo from Hunt on November 19, 2010—just shortly before he replaced Business Secretary Vince Cable as adjudicator—in which the culture secretary made clear his support for the takeover.

Cameron insisted that no "overt or covert" deals were made to win Murdoch's support. Claims that some "grand bargain" had been struck was "absolute nonsense from start to finish".

Cameron squirmed when a text message from Brooks to himself dated October 7, 2009, was read out. Written on the eve of his speech to the Tory conference, Brooks had written gushingly, "I am so rooting for you tomorrow not just as a proud friend but because professionally we're definitely in this together! Speech of your life? Yes he Cam."

The text is one of a number News International have been made to disclose to the inquiry.

Brooks was a "close friend", Cameron said, and a neighbour: Hence her invite in the same text to a "country supper". Asked whether he met Brooks socially every weekend, he struggled to remember. After a break, in which he checked dates with his wife, he informed the inquiry that they had met up every six weeks or so, leading to a joking exchange with Lord Leveson on the "great value" of prime minister's wives.

Asked to explain the text, Cameron said that "*The Sun* had made this decision to back the Conservatives, to part company with Labour, and so *The Sun* wanted to

make sure it was helping the Conservative party put its best foot forward...."

"I think what it means was that we were, as she put it,...friends, but professionally we—as leader of the Conservative party and her in newspapers—we were going to be pushing the same political agenda."

That agenda was spelt out in *The Sun*'s leader comment the next day, headlined in an echo of Brooks' e-mail, "Yes, he Cam". In his conference speech, the Tory leader had "swept aside any last doubts about his capacity to lead this nation," it ran.

"The Tory leader vowed to haul us out of debt, smash the grip of Big Government and help entrepreneurs put Britain back to work". Cameron had pledged to ensure British troops in Afghanistan would receive "all the kit they need to fight with" and had "warned people must once again take more responsibility for their lives instead of relying on the State."

Notwithstanding his personal embarrassment, Cameron faced no real scrutiny. At the start of the week, Lord Leveson had made an unexpected appeal to the Tories to support his inquiry.

In his statement, Leveson had stressed, "It remains essential that cross-party support for this inquiry is not jeopardised."

"The way in which the BSkyB bid was addressed is a small but significant party of the story," he continued.

"I am specifically not concerned—and am very keen to avoid—inter-party politics and the politics of personality."

On Wednesday, Hunt survived a vote in parliament, tabled by the Labour Party, that he should be referred to the adviser on ministers' interests over his handling of the BSkyB bid. The Liberal Democrats abstained on the vote, in what was described ludicrously as a "plague on both your houses" stance.

In truth, the day before Cameron's appearance, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg had endorsed Hunt's actions in his own evidence to the inquiry. The culture secretary had made a "full, good and convincing account" of his actions, Clegg said.



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