

Leveson whitewash of Murdoch's UK media empire

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On Monday, UK Labour MP Chris Bryant stated that News International's Management and Standards Committee had stopped cooperating in May with the investigation into phone-hacking and other illegal activities at Rupert Murdoch's now defunct *News of the World*.

Using parliamentary privilege, he suggested this was because evidence had emerged that could implicate the billionaire oligarch and his son, James, in criminal practices. News International had been happy to help the police investigation by "chucking overboard" journalists, Bryant said, as long as "the proprietor's feet didn't get wet."

Bryant asserted that News International had destroyed a laptop to conceal evidence of an illegal payment by Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper in 2005 for photographs of former Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein in his underwear. Bryant said that the illegal payment, involving a US soldier in California, meant that "at some point there will be charges brought against senior directors, quite possibly including James and Rupert Murdoch, as part of the body corporate."

The fact that even a *possible* criminal prosecution of Murdoch and son was raised only on this single question, and in the United States at that, underscores the fraud perpetrated by the Leveson Inquiry, set up in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal.

The inquiry, which reported last week, was touted as a response to evidence of "industrial scale criminality" at News International. The Murdoch press illegally hacked into the private phone conversations of hundreds, if not thousands, of people and bribed police and politicians to cover up their crimes. But to date, just 19 people have been charged with any offence. Most are journalists, including former *News of the World* editors Andy Coulson and Rebekah Brooks, who are not expected to stand trial until September 2013.

The fact of potential criminal proceedings was used as a pretext for ruling out any examination by the inquiry of personal culpability in News International's abuses. But Leveson's whitewash went much further, essentially exonerating those implicated in the crimes already uncovered.

Foremost among these are the Murdochs. Rupert Murdoch's disingenuous claim that he was the unwitting dupe of lower-ranking employees was taken for good coin. Even while acknowledging "some concern" over James Murdoch's evidence to the inquiry, i.e., that he perjured himself as to whether he was aware of phone-hacking, Lord Justice Leveson stated baldly that he was unable to "reach any conclusion" on the truth of his statements.

The scandal threatened to lift the lid on the mercenary relations between Murdoch and Britain's official institutions and leading personnel that formed the background to the crimes committed by the Murdoch press. Beginning with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, and even more so under Labour and Tony Blair, successive British governments have bent their knee at Murdoch's court.

Britain's political class was given a free pass by Leveson. Acknowledging that politicians from all parties had developed a relationship with the media "which has not been in the public interest", the report stated there is no evidence of "anything resembling a 'deal' whereby News International's support was traded for the expectation of policy favours."

The very fact that such crude lies are advanced, and generally accepted without protest by the media, underscores that corruption is systemic—the rule rather than the exception. This is, after all, said of a country where it is an open secret that government heads regularly discuss major issues with Murdoch, who exercises something close to veto power over state policy!

Democracy is a façade behind which plutocrats and their political hirelings operate as a law unto themselves.

Prime Minister David Cameron's employment of Coulson as his director of communications, after Coulson had been forced to resign from *News of the World* in 2007 over the hacking scandal, was brushed aside by Leveson.

So too was evidence that former Culture Secretary James Hunt tried to facilitate Murdoch's News Corporation's controversial takeover of the pay TV channel BSkyB last year. Leveson said that while Hunt created a "serious problem" in his handling of the BSkyB bid, he did not show "bias" and acted "commendably."

News International's abuses could continue unchecked in part because it was protected by the police. Extensive evidence was given to the inquiry of police taking bribes from News International and closing down earlier investigations into the phone-hacking. But Leveson claimed the police have nothing to answer for and that they conducted themselves with "integrity at all times."

The defence of those implicated in high crimes and misdemeanors stands in stark contrast to the draconian punishment meted out against working class youth involved in the riots in London and other cities in England last year, who were arrested in their thousands, dragged before kangaroo courts and subjected to punitive sentences for minimal offences.

The obeisance of the political elite towards Murdoch is rooted in a shared class agenda pursued over three decades, centered on a massive transfer of wealth from working people to the super-rich. The Murdoch press functioned as chief propagandist for this offensive, of which the arch-reactionary proprietor was a prime beneficiary. It was carried through against the working class by the police, who engaged in violent strike-breaking and trampled on civil liberties.

Leveson's findings are a green light for this type of collusion to continue.

The illegal practices at *News of the World* came to light only because of competing commercial and personal interests between different sections of the British bourgeoisie. To regulate these antagonisms, while throwing a cordon sanitaire around Murdoch and his acolytes, Leveson proposed a new "independent" body to regulate the press, backed by parliamentary statute. This body would warn newspapers when an individual "has made it clear that they do not welcome Press intrusion," he suggests.

Key legal protections offered to investigative journalists under the Data Protection Act would be removed, so that

anyone deemed in breach could be jailed for up to two years.

Such measures have nothing to do with upholding the democratic rights of ordinary people from powerful media conglomerates. Rather, while protecting the personal lives of the rich and famous from intrusion, a severe blow will be struck against genuine investigative reporting and freedom of speech.

The treatment meted out to Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and Private Bradley Manning is a chilling indication how far this has already gone. The exposure of war crimes committed by US imperialism and its allies has been countered with a conspiracy, involving Britain, the US, Australia and Sweden, to frame Assange on trumped-up charges of sexual assault so that he can be deported to America to face charges of espionage.

The legislation proposed by Leveson would be employed against anyone else seeking to expose the nefarious activities of the ruling elite.

There is nothing peculiarly "British" about this sordid affair. At its very heart, the Murdoch phone-hacking scandal raises the issue which cannot be even hinted at by Leveson—who owns and controls the media, and in whose interests.

Corporate ownership and control of the media is incompatible with the most basic interests of working people. Only by placing the media under public ownership and democratic control can the abuses perpetrated by the corporate-financial oligarchy be ended and freedom of speech genuinely protected.

This requires a political struggle against all of the institutions of the bourgeois state and its political parties through the independent mobilization of working people in the fight for a workers government and the socialist reorganization of society.

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