

UK's new press regulations a major threat to democratic rights

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The Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties have agreed press regulatory measures that constitute a profoundly reactionary attack on free speech and freedom of the press.

After weeks of haggling, a press regulator is to be established by Royal Charter—a document published in the name of the queen that lays out the terms of bodies such as the BBC.

Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that through this mechanism he had kept his word to prevent any “statutory underpinning” to the regulator that would threaten a free press. However, a clause is to be added to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill which will state that a Royal Charter cannot be changed except by a two-thirds majority of Parliament.

Labour leader Ed Miliband and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, who had insisted the body must be backed by statute, are claiming victory.

The fudge devised by the three leaders overturns 300 years of press freedom. The resort to royal prerogative means that the Privy Council—a secretive body of senior politicians—will oversee administration of the regulator.

The spectre of government censorship is reinforced by the clause enabling politicians to make amendments to the charter.

The establishment of the new regulator involves numerous panels and groups, beginning with a Recognition Appointments Panel to be selected by Sir David Normington, commissioner for public appointments.

The Recognition Panel, when appointed, will have powers to oversee the regulator and pass judgment on its work. This panel, in turn, will appoint 12 members of the main body, in which representatives of the publishing industry will be a minority.

The press regulator will be able to require corrections

and apologies, and direct where they are placed. Those who refuse to join the “voluntary” regulator will be subject to an “exemplary damages” penalty of up to £1 million if they are deemed to have published material with “reckless disregard.”

This is state licensing of publications by another name. Even if publishers are found to be in the right, they may still be subject to paying all associated legal costs.

The charter will also set the precedent of state censorship of the Internet. It will reportedly define a publisher as anyone publishing news-related material in the course of a business and involving a range of authors subject to editorial control.

The government claims that this means Twitter, Tumblr and individual blogs will be exempt. But the definition clearly threatens a huge range of news sources, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The implications were made clear in the remarks by former Formula One racing chief Max Mosley, who said the new regulator should be able to “cut the wire” to web sites that flout its rules. Mosley told a hearing of the parliamentary select committee that six Internet service providers carry 94 percent of UK web traffic. “Of course, in the worst case you can figuratively cut the wire”, he said. “An order of an English court is enforceable in England in that way”.

Such threats are reminiscent of the actions of authoritarian regimes, such as China and Iran, whose suppression of the Internet is routinely denounced by Britain's ruling elite. In this instance, however, the attack on free speech is being presented as a victory for “little people” against unscrupulous press barons. Miliband crowed, “Today we break the pattern of decades and decades where politicians promised to act on wrongdoing by the press, and failed to do so”.

The same line has been put forward by the nominally liberal *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers, which endorsed the new regulator. Writing in the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee claimed, “The press is free, but the balance is tilted a little in favour of the citizen against bare-knuckled thuggery... This is about who runs the country—a democratically elected parliament with strong public support on this or Rupert Murdoch, the Barclay brothers and the [Daily] Mail’s Paul Dacre, strong-arming politicians to their will” and setting a “raucous right-wing news and opinion agenda that distorts the balance of public debate and warps the broadcasters’ search for the centre ground”.

Such claims heap one lie upon another.

They present the phone-hacking scandal at Rupert Murdoch’s News International—supposedly the impulse for the charter—as the result of lax regulation, rather than a case of high crimes and misdemeanors.

This deliberately avoids the fact that News International’s activities could have been stopped at any point through existing criminal law. That it was able instead to hack into phone accounts and bribe police and public officials with impunity for years is due to the fact that the right-wing oligarch was protected by politicians of all parties in Toynbee’s “democratically elected parliament”, who competed for his political patronage.

To this day, Murdoch and his son James, then head of News International, have gone virtually unscathed and escaped being held accountable.

It was to conceal the mercenary relations between Murdoch and Britain’s official institutions and leading personnel that the Leveson Inquiry into press standards was established. This exonerated the culprits of any wrongdoing, while providing the pretext for the onslaught on civil liberties now underway.

That the Murdoch scandal ever came to light was because of competing commercial and personal interests within the ruling elite. Since then, various representatives of the bourgeoisie have sought to mitigate the destabilizing effect of these conflicts—not least in alerting working people to political conspiracies behind the scenes—by affecting a rapprochement between rival interests and seizing an opportunity to strengthen the state.

It is this reinforcing of the state and its institutions that formed the basis for agreement between the three

parties, and which has warmed the hearts of Toynbee, et al. Only last Thursday, Cameron walked out of cross-party talks on press regulation saying that no deal could be made as the differences were “unbridgeable”. With Miliband and Clegg faced with making good their threat to inflict a defeat on the government in a parliamentary vote, frantic eleventh-hour talks took place over the weekend.

Critical in their ability to find agreement was the inclusion of Hacked Off, the high-profile campaign group that represents victims of press intrusion. No less than four members of the organization were present in the talks in Miliband’s office.

Hacked Off’s endorsement of the charter makes clear that its opposition to press abuses has nothing to do with the defence of democratic rights. Rather, its protests are motivated by the selfish interests of celebrities and other “personalities”, concerned to defend their personal freedoms at the expense of the democratic rights of everyone else.

The rich and powerful have nothing to fear from the agreement that has been made. Nor will it restrict the right-wing agenda that has dominated British political life for three decades and more. It will be used against the working class, to suppress oppositional views.

The power of the corporate-financial oligarchy can be broken and freedom of speech genuinely protected only by placing the media under public ownership and democratic control. 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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