Murdoch's Politics—An ex-Stalinist in awe of Rupert Murdoch, Part I

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The following two-part review was the last essay Dave Hyland wrote before his untimely death on December 8, last year.

The revelation in 2011 that Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* had hacked into the voicemail messages of murdered teenage schoolgirl, Milly Dowler, and dozens of high-profile figures sparked a public outcry throughout Britain and internationally.

In a bid to divert attention from evidence of widespread criminality and their own refusal to act, the powers-that-be established the Leveson Inquiry, supposedly to examine the "Ethics and Culture" of the British press. This not only confirmed the industrial scale of the hacking operations carried out by the Murdoch title, but also revealed a web of bribery and corruption involving News International—the British subsidiary of Murdoch's News Corp.—members of the London Metropolitan Police and other public officials.

What could be more necessary, therefore, than a credible academic figure to detoxify the Murdoch image by holding out the possibility that a new, politically "progressive" News Corp could emerge from the disastrous experience? Step forward David McKnight.

McKnight, a former Stalinist, is associate professor at the Journalism and Media Research Centre at the University of New South Wales in Australia and was previously employed as a journalist at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and ABC TV's "Four Corners."

He is the author of several books on Australian espionage, as well as numerous articles and two books in which he repudiates revolutionary politics and socialism. (Robert Manne and David McKnight [Eds], *Goodbye to All That?*, 2010 Black Inc Melbourne; David McKnight, *Beyond Right and Left: New Politics and the Culture Wars*, 2005, NSW, Australia.)

Originally published in Australia as *Rupert Murdoch: an investigation of political power* by Allen and Unwin, it came under attack from the Murdoch media and its right-wing supporters who claimed that McKnight was using taxpayers' money to fund left-wing communist propaganda. It has now acquired a new title and some amendments to become the first book to be published about Murdoch and News Corp since the Leveson Inquiry ended last August. It received very favourable reviews across the entire liberal and "left" press in the UK, from the *Guardian* to the *Socialist Review*.

Anyone reading it in the hope of finding a serious accounting of Murdoch's politics and influence will be in for a grave disappointment. Instead, the author makes his assessment as if it were merely a matter of recounting the subjective ideas and personal relationships of the super-rich mogul, without feeling the need to address them within a wider historical and political context.

Throughout its 222 pages, McKnight portrays the News Corp boss as all-powerful. He claims that, in the aftermath of Leveson, the best that can be hoped for is that one of the "progressive" tendencies within the Murdoch dynasty will take over after the octogenarian retires. Hence its subtitle *How one man's thirst for wealth and power shapes our world* beneath the front cover photograph of a vaguely sinister looking News Corp boss.

McKnight states his aim is to "argue that the arrogance and contempt for rules which have been revealed in the phone hacking scandal arise from a wider culture within News Corporation. At every level—journalism, politics or business—Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation push the boundaries of ruthless self-interest to their limits and beyond." (p2)

The more recent arrests of journalists employed by the Trinity Mirror Group have underlined that phone hacking is not specific to the "culture within News Corporation," as McKnight claims, but is a more general feature of a media that functions entirely in the interests of the state and the financial oligarchy.

The pursuit of "ruthless self-interest" is the norm for bourgeois institutions. News Corp is not an exception. It has an edge not only because of the nature of the telecommunications industry and its global reach, but because of Murdoch's close relations with the political establishment, Conservative and Labour alike, which earned him the ironic title, the "24th member" of the Cabinet.

It is this that accounts for the fact that the *News of the World* believed it could act with impunity. Indeed, despite the hacking scandal, Murdoch himself has gotten away scot-free.

McKnight appears to be in complete awe of the billionaire right-wing strikebreaker when he writes: "Phone hacking is just the latest example of the untrammelled power of Rupert Murdoch (p3)."

No account is made of why, given such "untrammelled power", evidence of criminal activities at Murdoch's title ever came to light.

The revelations over Milly Dowler ignited growing political and social tensions that were intensifying in the UK as the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition began its austerity offensive. This included the conflict that had been escalating behind the scenes between warring factions of the British bourgeoisie over ownership of the BSkyB satellite platform.

Despite fierce opposition from other media groups, the coalition was set to wave through News International's £12 billion takeover of BSkyB, which would have given Murdoch even greater profits and enormously increased political clout.

The hacking scandal—in which the *Guardian*, a lead opponent of Murdoch's bid, played the main role—put a stop to that. However, while one section of the bourgeoisie may have been satisfied at thwarting Murdoch, the criminality and nepotism the scandal exposed within all sections of the establishment was even more destabilising

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than the original dispute. Hence the rush to initiate the Leveson Inquiry to buy time while the ruling elite attempted to bring things back under control.

McKnight states blithely, “But in spite of the damage to his reputation and legal actions against his executive, Murdoch will survive one way or another.” (p12)

He makes no attempt to make an objective assessment of the Leveson Inquiry, treating it as an unbiased body operating somewhere above the class struggle.

“The Leveson Inquiry was charged with probing the culture and ethics of the news media and its relations with the police and politicians,” he states. (p1)

Who charged it with this task? McKnight doesn’t say. Such inquiries are mechanisms employed by the bourgeoisie to try to obscure and conceal problems that threaten to expose the true class relations that exist within capitalist society—repeatedly employed over such issues as the lies used to justify the Iraq war.

McKnight makes no attempt to address what was revealed at the inquiry regarding extensive police bribery, fraud and conspiracy that stand at the heart of the British capitalist state. His analysis rather takes more the form of political biography.

He writes that although born into the “opulent home” of wealthy press baron and former journalist Sir Keith Murdoch, the young Rupert was nevertheless a “rebel” and “outsider,” who even dabbled with socialist politics as a student at Oxford University in the 1950s. The reader is told Murdoch even had a bust of Lenin on his mantelpiece. After his father’s sudden death in 1952, he inherited the *Adelaide News*, a small provincial newspaper, and in 1964 launched a national broadsheet, the *Australian.*

Murdoch’s political direction during this period “was something of a zigzag… He had met with the aspiring Labour leader Don Dunstan and spoken at a meeting of the socialist Fabian Society. But in 1959, shortly after a clash with [Rohan] Rivett, [the former *News* editor] Murdoch published an editorial supporting the White Australia policy, which restricted non-white immigration to Australia. Then, in 1960, he visited Cuba and returned singing Fidel Castro’s praises; soon after, he began to cultivate an acquaintance with the crusty leader of the Australian Labour Party, Arthur Calwell, giving him lunch several times at his office and praising him to his top journalists.” (p46)

Political differences existed between these various groups and individuals, but Murdoch appears to have been attracted to them for their role as a political mechanism through which the working class could be subordinated to the interests of the bourgeoisie and to the nation state. It seems that Murdoch was studying them as though swotting for a PhD. It certainly served him well when he acquired ownership of the British daily newspaper, the *Sun*, in 1969, and established a close working relationship with then-Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

McKnight states that the acquisition of the *Sun* was “the most important newspaper of his life; it turned into a money machine, funding his purchase of US film studios and television channels, and, most importantly, it gave him an unrivalled position at the heart of British politics.”

“The *Sun* was originally owned by the Trades Union Congress and then sold to the Mirror group, which wanted to offload the sickly broadsheet. Murdoch believed he could boost its circulation to the millions and told other journalists the *Sun* would become a radical newspaper.” (p50-51)

This omits the fact that underpinning the TUC’s decision to sell off its press was its fear that it could be put under pressure by militant workers, demanding it be utilised to supply the movement with an independent voice.

McKnight elaborates on the *Sun*’s support for Labour at that time:

“The *Sun*’s political stance for Labour was clear; the tabloid carried a long interview with Harold Wilson, the Labour prime minister, as well as the slogan ‘forward with the people’.” (p51)

In a two-page editorial, Murdoch set out the paper’s political principles. “The *Sun* opposed capital punishment, apartheid in South Africa, racism in Britain, the Vietnam War **,** entry to the European Common Market and the hydrogen bomb. It endorsed, above all, the permissive society. ‘Anyone—from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Mick Jagger—is entitled to put forward his own moral code’, Murdoch said. Evoking the newspaper’s antiestablishment views, an early editorial called for the abolition of the honours system that had bestowed a knighthood on Murdoch’s father.” (p51)

Ever since the 1917 Russian Revolution, the British bourgeoisie relied on the labour bureaucracy and its national reformist programme to prevent the working class in Britain from taking the revolutionary road. While appearing to put forward elements of a reformist programme and adopting an “antiestablishment” stance, the new daily sought to encourage a petty-bourgeois individualist outlook among a layer of workers with the intention of undermining class consciousness and solidarity.

McKnight says, “In the *Sun*’s first few months Harold Wilson made a point of cultivating an alliance with Murdoch. He lunched several times at Murdoch’s offices and later invited Murdoch and other newspaper editors to Chequers, the Prime Minister’s country residence.” (ibid)

It is generally understood that Murdoch enjoyed regular secret meetings with a succession of British prime ministers, but McKnight makes clear that this did not begin in the early 1980s with the Tory leader, Margaret Thatcher, but before, with Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson. In other words, it was the Labour bureaucracy that launched Murdoch and News Corp’s media empire, which was to become such a major enemy of the international working class movement.

To be continued

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