

Tony Blair offered aid to Murdoch in phone-hacking scandal

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24 February 2014

The trial at the Old Bailey in London, over phone hacking by *News of the World* employees, heard that former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair secretly offered his services as an adviser to the Murdoch media empire.

The disclosure came as the prosecution rested its case against former News International chief and *News of the World* editor Rebekah Brooks. Brooks has been on trial since October, along with six others, including her husband Charlie Brooks and Andy Coulson, Prime Minister David Cameron's former director of communications.

The charges relate to "industrial scale" criminality at the now defunct *News of the World*, including hacking the phones of hundreds of individuals and the bribery of police officers.

A close friend of the billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, Brooks faces four charges, including conspiracy to hack phones. The judge ordered a fifth charge—relating to alleged payment for a photograph of Prince William—to be dismissed.

Evidence presented at the Old Bailey hearing included an email exchange between Brooks and News International head James Murdoch on July 11, 2011. In it, Brooks reported Blair's offer, as well as his advice to establish an inquiry to "clear" the Murdochs of any wrongdoing.

I have just "had an hour on the phone to Tony Blair," she wrote.

The former prime minister had advised (all language verbatim):

"1. Form an independent unit that has an outside junior counsel, Ken Macdonald, a great and good type, a serious forensic criminal barrister, internal counsel, proper fact checkers etc. in it. Get them to investigate me and others and publish a Hutton-style report.

"2. Publish part one of the report at same time as the police closes its inquiry and clear you and accept short

comings and new solutions and process and part two when any trials are over."

Recording that he had urged her to "keep strong," "it will pass," Brooks continued that Blair is "available for you, KRM [Rupert Murdoch] and me as an unofficial adviser but needs to be between us. He is sending more notes later."

The exchange is extraordinary. It came just a week after the *News of the World* had been forced to close after it was revealed to be involved in hacking the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler.

The disclosure lifted the lid on rampant criminality within the Murdoch empire, in which phones were routinely tapped and numerous police officers, amongst others, were given "bungs" in envelopes to inform on individuals.

Yet even as evidence of nefarious activities in high places was the subject of a major police investigation, the former prime minister was proffering advice, "between us," to those potentially implicated, on how they could be shielded from any fallout.

The email underscores the degree to which any semblance of democratic norms had been trampled over by the political elite, all of whom had bowed at the court of King Murdoch for decades.

While this began under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and has been carried on by the Cameron government, which employed Coulson despite allegations of phone hacking, it was the Blair government that really gave the arch-reactionary his head. So much so, that Murdoch was referred to as the "24th member" of Blair's cabinet.

Following the disclosure of the *News of the World*'s illegal activities, the Tories and Labour both sought to put some distance between themselves and the billionaire.

At the same time as Blair was giving phone advice to Brooks, Labour leader Ed Miliband was demanding a

judge-led inquiry into the phone hacking scandal. His call was portrayed by the media as evidence of the new leader's determination to "stand up" to Murdoch and clean up Labour's stable.

It now transpires that Miliband's demand approximated the "advice" being given by Blair to protect the Murdochs. But then Blair is a past master at using judge-led inquiries to conceal crimes.

The reference to appointing an "outside junior counsel," etc., follows the model of the Hutton Inquiry, set up supposedly to inquire into the apparent suicide of United Nations weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly.

In May 2003, Kelly had been maliciously "outed" as the source for then BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan's assertion that the government had "sexed up" its Iraq dossier, which made the spurious claim that the then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein could launch "weapons of mass destruction" within 45 minutes. Amid the furore that followed, which threatened to expose that Blair and his government were guilty of war crimes—namely the launching of a pre-emptive war of aggression against Iraq based on false and doctored "evidence"—Kelly was found dead on July 18 in woodland near his Oxfordshire home.

By establishing an inquiry strictly limited to the circumstances of Kelly's death, Blair ensured there was no examination of the spurious case made for war. The final report by Lord Hutton not only exonerated the government of any responsibility for Kelly's death. It turned the tables, making the BBC and Gilligan culpable for disclosing the information in the first place!

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, the whitewash Hutton Inquiry was a "black day for democracy in Britain."

"The fundamental question underlying the inquiry was: Do the British people have the right to hold their government accountable on matters pertaining to life and death?

"Hutton's verdict was a resounding 'No.' He has come down squarely in favour of a quasi-dictatorial form of government, in which those who hold power are not answerable for their actions to the people. He has, moreover, set in motion a witch-hunt against any section of the media that maintains the slightest independence from the government and subjects its claims to critical review. His findings clear the way for an unprecedented attack on freedom of the press and free speech."

Blair has not denied the veracity of the email exchange. In response, a spokesperson said it was "simply" Blair "giving informal advice over the phone."

The spokesperson continued: "Mr. Blair said that if what he was being told by her was correct, and there had been no wrongdoing, then a finding to that effect by a credible Inquiry would be far better than an internal and therefore less credible investigation."

Whatever Blair's claims, the Hutton Inquiry has indeed been the model for handling the fall-out from the Murdoch scandal.

In the wake of the phone hacking revelations, a judge-led inquiry, this time chaired by Lord Justice Leveson, was established in 2011. Strictly limited to investigate the "culture, practice and ethics" of the UK media in general, the aim was to obscure not only the widespread criminality and corrupt practices that pervaded the *News of the World* and its parent company, News International, but also the police and the entire body politic.

In his own evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Blair claimed that he had been "uncomfortable" at the "unhealthy" relations between politicians and the "media"—the name Murdoch was never mentioned.

"[C]ertain newspapers are used by their owners or editors as instruments of political power," that could sweep away governments, Blair said.

He had felt unable to confront the media because it could derail the agenda that really mattered to him, like the "health service, schools or law and order," he claimed.

This lying self-justification was the basis on which Leveson whitewashed the political elite. While acknowledging that politicians had developed relations with the media that have "not been in the public interest," there was no evidence that Murdoch's support "was traded for the expectation of policy favours," he claimed.

Far from being a victim of circumstance, the email makes clear that Blair was actively involved in courting and advising the Murdoch empire as to how the institutions of state could be manipulated to forestall the consequences of their own criminality.



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