

UK: Former News of the World editor Coulson sentenced to 18 months in prison

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Andy Coulson, the former *News of the World* (*NotW*) editor and former head of communications for UK prime minister David Cameron, was given an 18-month jail sentence Friday, for conspiracy to intercept voicemail messages.

Coulson was found guilty after 8 days of jury deliberations following a 130-day trial. His predecessor as *NotW* editor, Rebekah Brooks, the former head of billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch's media empire in Britain, was acquitted of phone hacking charges.

Prior to the trial, three other ex-journalists, along with private investigator Glenn Mulcaire, who was contracted by the *NotW* to do the hacking, had pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy to unlawfully intercept communications. Former chief reporter Neville Thurlbeck was imprisoned for six months, former news editor Greg Miskiw for six months, while Mulcaire received a six-month suspended sentence and former reporter James Weatherup received a four-month suspended sentence. Weatherup and Mulcaire also received 200 hours of community service.

The sentences of all the guilty were reduced by the judge "to reflect the delay" of bringing the case to trial.

The trial followed the revelations of massive criminality at the *NotW*, including hacking the phones of hundreds of individuals and the bribery of police officers. The *NotW* was closed down by Murdoch in July 2011 as the result of mass revulsion after it emerged that leading figures at the tabloid had hacked the phones of many people, including politicians and celebrities—and, above all, the voicemails of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler in 2002. The phone of another murder victim, Clare Bernal, was also hacked within hours of her death in September 2005.

Conspiring to intercept voicemails carries a maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment. As a

non-violent offender, it is expected Coulson will be freed in just nine months because he is required to serve only half his sentence. He was not given the full two years because of his previous "good character", said the judge.

The judge, Mr. Justice Saunders, said in his Sentencing Remarks that Coulson had "to take the major share of the blame for the phone hacking at the *News of the World*". There was "insufficient evidence to conclude that he started the phone hacking" at the *NotW* but there was "ample evidence that it increased enormously while he was the editor." He added, "He knew about it and encouraged it when he should have stopped it."

Saunders continued that it was important to have in mind, "the amount of phone hacking that went on for the benefit of the *News of the World* and over what period. It had started by April 2002 when Milly Dowler's phone was hacked and it continued until August 2006 with the arrest of Mulcaire and Goodman. The amount of phone hacking increased during the period of time covered by the indictment to a level where Glenn Mulcaire was saying that he couldn't cope with being given any more targets to hack. Over the period, there were many thousands of phone hacks and many hundreds of voicemails were accessed illegally."

He stated that when the phone of Milly Dowler was hacked, "Andy Coulson was editing the paper in the absence of Rebekah Brooks."

On one occasion in 2006, Coulson had instructed a senior journalist looking into the private life of the son of a famous former footballer to "do his phone."

Miskiw, Thurlbeck, and Weatherup were given the maximum one-third discount to reflect their pleas of guilty, the judge said. Regarding Mulcaire, Saunders

noted that he had previously been sentenced to six months' imprisonment, "for only a fraction of the phone hacking that he had carried out, although, of course the Judge [at the time] didn't know that."

Mulcaire, he added, had pleaded guilty to just three further conspiracies, each relating to a single victim, and to one substantive count of hacking Milly Dowler's phone.

The judge said Mulcaire had been "truly the lucky one", because his previous jail term had been "too short to reflect the full extent of your phone hacking activities. If a full investigation had been carried out in 2007 then all those matters could have been dealt with at the same time."

This was an oblique reference to the fact that no serious investigation was ever carried out by the Metropolitan Police, despite the fact that evidence began to emerge long ago of mass phone hacking and criminality at the Murdoch newspaper.

As a result of the fallout from the Dowler revelations, made public by the *Guardian* in July 2011, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson was forced to resign, along with his deputy, Assistant Commissioner John Yates. It was Yates who, in July 2009, as the head of the phone hacking investigation, decided not to reopen the initial 2006 police inquiry into practises at the *NotW* despite being in possession of evidence of as many as 4,000 victims of illegal hacking.

The hacking scandal is far from over and still poses a significant threat to Britain's ruling elite. News UK, renamed from the previous "toxic" News International, which owned the *NotW*, could be charged with crimes as a corporation, and Rupert Murdoch himself is to be interviewed by the Metropolitan Police.

The jury reached a "no verdict" on two remaining counts that Coulson and *NotW* former royal editor Clive Goodman conspired to commit misconduct in public office by paying public officials for the acquisition of royal phone books. Shortly afterward, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) stated that it was in the public interest for a new retrial to be held over these charges.

The CPS is considering whether to charge eight people in connection with a second investigation into phone hacking at the *NotW*, after being given a file by the Metropolitan Police under its "Operation Pinetree."

Following the sentencing of Coulson and the others, Labour Party leader Ed Miliband said, "I think, once again, it throws up very serious questions about David Cameron's judgement in bringing a criminal into the heart of Downing Street despite repeated warnings."

For Miliband and the Labour Party to attempt to take the moral high ground over the hacking scandal is staggering. The intimate connections of the Tories to the Murdoch empire, which resulted in Cameron employing the criminal Coulson as his spin doctor, are now well established, but this is no less the case with the Labour Party.

All of the revealed criminality at the *NotW* occurred during the period of the last Labour government, which was in office from 1997 to 2010. By 1997, Murdoch decided that the Tories had exhausted their usefulness as a vehicle for attacking the working class and enriching the ruling elite, and switched his support to Labour.

The *NotW* hacking scandal first came to light in 2006 and was swept under the carpet by the Metropolitan Police, without challenge by the Labour governments of Blair and his successor, Gordon Brown. Indeed, in June 2011, Miliband, as the new leader of the opposition, attended News International's summer party in London, alongside Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls, two of his closest advisers, Tom Baldwin and Stewart Wood, Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander. The *Guardian* noted at the time that Labour luminaries outnumbered a Conservative delegation headed by Cameron and his wife Samantha.



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