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Secretary of State's Office
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97/08559

MEETING WITH PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

The Secretary of State met Lord Wakeham, Chairman, and Guy Black, Director, of the Press Complaints Commission on 24 September. You and Mr Stevens were also present.

2. The Secretary of State thanked Lord Wakeham for early sight of his proposed press announcement of the measures he had put to the PCC's Code Committee earlier in the afternoon. This had enabled him to consult Cabinet colleagues, and Lord Wakeham's co-operation was much appreciated. The Secretary of State went on to welcome what Lord Wakeham had achieved in a short space of time, but said that there remained areas in which the press needed to make further progress. This was the line the Government would take in response to Lord Wakeham's announcement, and it would also say that the press must sustain the letter and spirit of its undertakings. Lord Wakeham said that the Government's approach was very helpful.

3. The Secretary of State asked Lord Wakeham whether editors would in practice sign up to the measures that he had put to them. Lord Wakeham said that he hoped that tabloid and broadsheet editors would make statements supportive of the broad thrust of his proposals in the press on Friday (26 September), and that they would implement them immediately, in advance of the formal processes which would need to be completed to incorporate them in a new Code. He thought that there might be some attempt on the part of some interests to backslide in the Code Committee but that his proposals would prevail. The new Code would then come back to the PCC for formal endorsement.

4. Lord Wakeham explained that there were two issues on which he had been unable to make headway. The first was on sanctions against newspapers that broke the Code. This needed a great deal more thought. The second was that whilst editors accepted that the children of well-known public figures should not be the subject of press attention solely because of their parents' position, they would not accept that spouses should be similarly protected. Lord Wakeham then

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explained the improvements he had secured, set out in his draft press statement.

5. The Secretary of State said that, in terms of the future agenda, there were three further areas which the Press Complaints Commission needed to address. The first was sanctions for transgressing the Code. The Secretary of State recognised that this was difficult for the press, but it was an issue to which it would have to return. The second was the definition of the public interest, which still gave the press a great deal of leeway. The third was that the Commission's procedures were currently reactive, whereas the success of a more proactive approach to self-regulation had been amply demonstrated by the absence of intrusive coverage of Prince Williams' schooling.

6. Commenting, Lord Wakeham noted that he had already touched on the need for further thought on sanctions. Lord Wakeham thought it tactically better not to remit the definitional issue of what constituted the public interest to the Code Committee, but to tighten the definition by building up case law over time. On the matter of adopting a more active approach, Lord Wakeham said that he intended to ask the industry for some additional funding to allow him to reorganise the Commission so that it could monitor intrusive journalism which did not result in complaints, and to ask editors to justify the action they had taken. This process would identify areas in which the Code needed to be further tightened. Lord Wakeham further said that he proposed to circulate the revised Code, which would represent the toughest self-regulatory approach in the world, to foreign ambassadors in London, and to open a dialogue with those responsible for press regulation in other countries.

7. Finally, Lord Wakeham said that he had had some useful discussion with Lord Williams at the Home Office about the incorporation into domestic law of the EU Data Protection Directive. The Secretary of State said that there was currently inter-departmental discussion of the issue, and the Home Office was being generally helpful. The Secretary of State said that the directive could be incorporated with a more or less oppressive effect on the media, and he was keen to see the least oppressive form of incorporation. Lord Wakeham registered his concern that the incorporation of the directive should not lead to a privacy law by the back door.

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Principal Private Secretary

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