

EXHIBIT ONE
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IN RECENT years a powerful thesis has emerged that the media are a hostile force in British public life. It is taught in universities and journalism schools. It has formed the basis for numerous books and newspaper articles. It is believed by a large number of intelligent people, including many journalists.

In this article I will argue that this view is not merely misleading but fundamentally untrue. Rather than being hostile to politicians and other public figures, the British media should be understood as a core part of the governing machine.

British journalists will almost always favour the powerful and glamorous over the weak and unfashionable. Not that this should this come as a surprise. Britain is a capitalist state, largely controlled by corporate, government and financial interests. These interests own or control a great deal of the media, so it is only natural that a client press has emerged to serve the sometimes shadowy forces which dominate British public life. Those arguing that Britain possess a 'feral press' need to show why some of the richest and most powerful men in Britain- Murdoch, Rothermere, the Barclay Brothers, Desmond etc- should be set on the destruction of political and other structures.

Yet advocates of the 'feral press' thesis have never advanced beyond raucous assertion. In particular they have never produced a theoretical model which explains why the press should be, as they claim, nihilistic. More importantly, they never produced compelling evidence. John Lloyd's influential book, *What the Media is Doing to Our Politics*, produces only one example to support his argument, the reporter Andrew Gilligan's 6.07am Today programme broadcast on 29 May 2003 in which he claimed that Blair government had 'sexed up' claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Tony Blair's later speech on the 'feral media' was similarly bereft of substance.

The evidence that British public life is dominated by a culture of client journalism is, by contrast, widely available and well-documented. The most obvious fact staring any observer of the political scene in the face is not the hostility between journalists and politicians. It is how close they are. They live together, eat together, dine together, go to bed together. This is hardly surprising since so many of our most prominent politicians – George Osborne, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Gordon Brown, Ed Miliband, Yvette Cooper, Ed Balls etc etc- are former journalists. There is also a lively trade in the opposite direction, from politics into journalism.

At party conferences politicians spend far more time with grandees from the national press than their mass membership. For many years New Labour would arrange for the Sun editor Rebekah Brooks and her fellow News International executives to be given special seating just behind the cabinet for the party leaders's speech. Much of what passes for political news coverage and analysis is in truth the result of an elaborately choreographed collaboration between 10 Downing Street and elite members of the media class.

Politicians, Whitehall media handlers and journalists make identical assumptions and share a common language - they tend to be metropolitan, Oxbridge educated, typically with degrees in the arts rather than the sciences. They share a fascination with politics and media and have far more in common with each other than ordinary voters. Ideological sympathy plays an important part, and this can cross conventional party lines. Britain's most influential journalists have tended to share the same 'modernising' analysis as the dominant factions inside the three mainstream parties, a position which involves scorn towards local activists and a learned though cynical preoccupation with techniques of political manipulation and control. Personal friendship plays a far larger role than many realise, partly because the existence of these friendships are private. Political journalism in Britain cannot be understood, however, without an understanding of the role these friendships play.

This intense private connection between members of the political and media classes is very rarely given much publicity. Alastair Campbell's diaries offer a sniff of how it works. Here is Campbell describing how he handed a scoop to Tony Bevin, political editor of the Observer: 'I told him what it was, and I saw tears welling up in his eyes. Are you serious? I said I was. I love you, he said, and I love him. I want to kiss you.'

The late Tony Bevin is remembered by his friends in the parliamentary lobby as a cussed and independent figure. However the Campbell diaries present him in a different light- as supplicant and favourite of the government machine. Elsewhere Campbell recounts how he all but dictated a Times front page story: 'The words went to Webster, the spin was applied, and away we went.'

These stories from Alastair Campbell's diaries illustrate one important structural reason why recent British governments have on the whole been able to rely on an uncritical press. Politicians have been able to exploit their exclusive access to information as a means of distributing patronage to their media clients. And once in power politicians gain access to the government machine, increasing their power one hundredfold. There is a wealth of examples of client journalists on key publications have been rewarded for loyalty with leaks of forthcoming government announcements, and troublesome reporters punished by withdrawal of favour.

This essential background explains the otherwise thoroughly mysterious failure of the press to invigilate abuse of power. British governments can get away with most things. Facts concerning complicity in torture remain scant, and I intend only to deal with the media coverage here, but we now know that in the wake of 9/11 the Blair government was involved in the rendering of terror suspects

to states that practised torture, and that Britain supplied questions to be put to torture victims and were complicit in the abuse of detainees in numerous other ways.

The failure of the British press and media to investigate reports, which started to emerge at an early stage, that the British state was collaborating in torture is shaming – and inconsistent with the feral press thesis. Indeed it was not until 2008 that a solitary British journalist, Ian Cobain of the Guardian, began to ask serious questions. As Cobain identified a chain of collusion that may have led from Downing Street, through the foreign office, MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service to barbaric practices in prison cells from North Africa to Pakistan, other newspapers remained silent, preferring to believe ministerial denials. Perhaps this is not surprising because they were so very strong and emphatic. This is what foreign secretary Jack Straw said in December 2005:

Unless we all start to believe in conspiracy theories and that the officials are lying, that I am lying, that behind this there is some kind of secret state which is on league with some dark forces in the United States, and also let me say, that Secretary Rice is lying, there simply is no truth that the United Kingdom has been involved in rendition full stop.

Even when Cobain established beyond doubt that the British government was rendering British citizens to be tortured on foreign countries, other newspapers, with the honourable exception of the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, mainly ignored his findings. The indifference of The Times was staggering. In March 2009 a dozen grandees, including the former Chief of the Defence Staff Charles Guthrie, wrote a letter to the paper demanding an independent enquiry into torture allegations. The paper published the letter- it could hardly do otherwise – but failed to run a story about it and ignored the evolving torture scandal for a further eleven months.

Media inertia over torture followed a pattern which had already been established during the run up to the invasion of Iraq. The British government fed a mass of false information into the public domain in the autumn of late 2002 and early 2003. Virtually every claim about Saddam Hussein's WMD capacity made by Tony Blair and his ministers was wrong. Yet the majority of the British mainstream press not only accepted the government account of Saddam Hussein's WMD uncritically but tended to embellish it, making the alleged dangers far more terrifying and lurid. During this wretched period - I was Political Editor of the Spectator and regret my own failure to examine official assertions with a more sceptical eye - the press acted as a conduit for this government propaganda. Only two newspapers, the Independent and Piers Morgan's Daily Mirror, seriously tried to challenge the official narrative.

This lazy willingness to accept the official version of events has been the default position of the British media for the last fifteen years. Again and again the lies and falsehoods uttered by ministers and their spin-doctors have been passed into the public domain by reporters. A very good example of media complicity in political corruption concerns the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2010. The *Daily Telegraph* investigation is often held up as an example of the how a nihilistic press has recklessly chosen to slur a generally virtuous political class. Deeper investigation shows the opposite.

Mps had been running an expenses racket at Westminster for at least two decades, making use of false claims, misrepresentation, accounting tricks and intimidation of officials to steal tens of millions of pounds of tax payers money. Whenever evidence of this came to light, it was largely ignored by political reporters. When the Tory Michael Trend stepped down from parliament ten years ago after misclaiming some £90,000 in expenses, it made no more than a few paragraphs. Even when the information which eventually exposed the expenses scandal was offered to journalists it was greeted by a lack of interest. The Sun, The Times and the Sunday Express turned the information down, before the Daily Telegraph made the bold decision to publish. Had it not done so, Mp's criminal abuse of their expenses would not have come to light.

The stories above account involve three of the biggest scandals of the last decade. The feral press proposition works in none of them. Finally I want to look at the phone hacking scandal and its aftermath because at first glance the criminal actions of News International papers fit extremely tidily into the thesis that Britain is being undermined from within by a hostile press. However the story is more interesting than that because, as the sordid details of phone hacking by the News of the World emerged into the public domain, the political class went to extraordinary lengths to protect the interests of Rupert Murdoch.

Consider the facts. By the end of 2006- a full five years before the revelation that Milly Dowler's voicemails had apparently been deleted turned News International's phone hacking into national story – the Blair government was aware that cabinet ministers' phone messages had been intercepted. Culture secretary Tessa Jowell was informed by the police that her phone had been hacked. According to evidence given under oath to Leveson by Peter Clarke, the former Metropolitan police deputy assistant commissioner, the Home Secretary John Reid was told that the deputy prime minister John Prescott had been hacked. (FN: Reid denies that he ever received 'any briefing from the Met suggesting that there was widespread hacking including Mps and the Deputy pm.' See Guardian, Friday 2nd March 2012.) Jowell's friendly connection with News International continued unabated. She was an indefatigable attendee at News International social events, up to and including Rupert Murdoch's infamous summer party at Holland Park in the summer of 2011.

A complicated picture emerges from the above stories, but none of them point towards the existence of a relentlessly hostile press. They suggest instead an unappetising collaboration between the British media and political elite, defined by mutual private advantage and connection. The British media have tended to condone the falsehoods and law-breaking of politicians, while the politicians meanwhile sought to minimise or obscure media illegality.

Tony Blair and Rupert Murdoch have stood at the apex of this anti-democratic system for most of the last two decades - and it is instructive and symbolic that Blair has become the godfather of one of Murdoch's daughters. As the phone hacking scandal went global the former prime minister made statements which supported the Murdoch defensive position that the lawbreaking by News International was part of a wider pattern of criminality within Fleet Street. David Cameron, who once proclaimed himself 'heir to Blair', refined the connection between Rupert Murdoch and Downing Street when he hired Andy Coulson, former editor of the News of the World, as his director of communications. (One of Ed Miliband's early steps as Labour leader was to mirror this decision, appointing the News International political journalist Tom Baldwin to a similar role). At his constituency base in Witney, Cameron

would mingle enthusiastically with the senior Murdoch circle, including the former Sun editor Rebekah Brooks and the tycoon's now shamed son James.

Essentially Tony Blair incorporated the most powerful members of the media class into government, a system which was continued by David Cameron. Gordon Brown fought to duplicate this strategy and frenetically cultivated Rupert Murdoch and other powerful figures such as the Daily Mail editor Paul Dacre. But he seems to have been too awkward and clumsy to make the system work, and felt horribly betrayed when Rebekah Brooks and James Murdoch shifted the Sun behind David Cameron's Conservative Party in the autumn of 2009.

To sum up, the bulk of the British press have supported whichever party is in office. This has been a consistent pattern over the last three decades. The press was loyal to the Conservative Party from 1979 to 1992. There was then a hiatus during John Major's government, after which the media threw its weight for three consecutive general elections behind the fresh-faced Labour leader Tony Blair.

This toadying subservience to power has been matched by a courtier's contempt for political weakness and isolation. The press turned viciously on Michael Foot, a more honourable and effective Labour leader than is sometimes realised, and later on Neil Kinnock. The Tory leaders William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith - both distinguished politicians - were later to be humiliated in the same way. Ed Miliband has endured a measure of this media contempt since being elected Labour leader in late 2010.

How come the belief - widely and sincerely held - in the feral press? It may help to understand the concept as part of a political strategy. Noam Chomsky and Edward S Herman have noted that 'among their other functions the media serve and propagandise on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them... This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists internalisation of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy.'

Chomsky has noticed that some of these powerful interests use what he and his collaborator Herman call 'flak' (which they define as a persistent claim, made by powerful lobby groups, that the media is biased against the political establishment) as a method of keeping errant reporters in line. There are some problems with the details of the Chomsky/Herman analysis - their claim that advertisers are able to shape news coverage does not apply often in Britain. Yet the wider picture painted by Chomsky of a generally subservient media in thrall to corporate and government power remains the most realistic available.

The Guardian writer Nick Davies, in his brilliant *Flat Earth News*, has painted a detailed picture of how this world works. Davies shows how journalists have become instruments of big money as well as power. In pitiless detail he exposes how commercial interests - corporations, public relations agencies, lobbyists - can manipulate the news. The same ability to manipulate is enjoyed by intelligence agencies, Hollywood studios and sports impresarios, all of whom are able to use exclusive access and information as a way of shaping and often creating the news. Financial, showbiz and sports pages are just as much a manifestation of corporate influence peddling as political reporting. Davies' has produced a much more accurate, detailed and truthful portrait of the connection between media and power in Britain than the intellectually bankrupt 'feral media' model.

Acting almost single-handedly, though with the steady support of Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, Davies' investigation has led to the exposure of a network of private deals, law-breaking and corruption linking Rupert Murdoch's News International to the heart of Britain police, civil service, and political establishment. News International has operated with an impunity unknown in British corporate history, in large part because its bosses have enjoyed access to politicians at the highest level. The sheer scale of the wrongdoing, and the level of political involvement, dwarfs previous British scandals such as the Poulson affair of the early 1970s or the fall of Robert Maxwell in 1991.

With the collapse of the Murdoch system of government there is some reason to hope the British newspapers can reawaken their civic role of pursuing truth rather than the worship of power, and that the politicians can recover their poise and integrity. British public figures should recall that those who do not lie, do not cheat, and pay their taxes have little to fear from the press.

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