

Tony Baldry MP v The Daily Telegraph

Clauses noted: 1

Mr Tony Baldry MP complained to the Press Complaints Commission that a series of articles published in The Daily Telegraph on 26 July, 28 July and 29 July, headlined "Howard gets tough on 'bedblocking' MPs", "How 'bedblockers' spend their time" and "Baldry puts the voting record straight", were inaccurate and misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code of Practice.

Following the remedial action taken by the editor – and an additional offer from the newspaper – no further action was required.

The complainant was mentioned in the first article, which reported that Conservative MPs who were thought to be underperforming – so-called 'bedblockers' – were coming under pressure to free safe seats for younger candidates. The second article was a diary piece which outlined the complainant's extra-parliamentary activities and voting record. The third article was a further diary piece which sought to correct a quotation which was wrongly attributed to the complainant.

The complainant said that the first article was misleading since it had unfairly omitted him from a table of the speech and voting records of 'bedblockers'. His inclusion would have shown that he was an active MP who had made 122 speeches during the present Parliament in addition to asking a considerable number of oral and written questions. A letter to the newspaper on this point and a further letter from the complainant's Association Chairman were not published.

In addition, the complainant was highly concerned that the second article depended entirely upon a quotation he had not made. It had then focused on the complainant's voting record – the statistic most damaging to him – without acknowledging that he was away from Westminster on Parliamentary business for a number of weeks a year as Chairman of the International Development Select Committee. The complainant did not consider that the subsequent correction and apology regarding the wrongly attributed quotation were sufficient – particularly since the piece sought, in his view, to query the number of speeches he had made by saying that the number was what he had "claimed".

The newspaper said that the first article was not written as a personal attack on MPs but followed discussion with some of the most senior members of the Conservative Party who were concerned with its poor showing in Opposition. It maintained that the article accurately reflected the views of people at Conservative Central Office. The complainant was included in this piece because of criticism by sources of an intervention that he had made to a speech made by Michael Howard in the House of Commons. While the complainant may well have been active in Committee, the article centred on the quality of Conservative MPs' challenge to the Government in the House. The newspaper said that the complainant's omission from the performance table was not malicious, but simply reflected the fact that he did not qualify as one of the worst performing MPs against the criteria which were highlighted.

Regarding the wrongly attributed quotation, the newspaper acknowledged its error and said that it had immediately put the record straight in its next edition and in the same part of the newspaper. In the interests of fairness it had also published the complainant's assertion regarding the number of speeches he had made, regardless of the fact that this had not been confirmed.

In an attempt to resolve the matter, the newspaper also offered to publish a letter from the complainant. The complainant said that such a letter would have been an acceptable offer at the time but was inadequate some months after the event.

Adjudication

The Commission firstly considered the issue of the performance table of parliamentary 'bedblockers'. It noted that not all of those who were featured in the text of the article were included in the table, and vice versa. Between them the article and the table appeared to criticise a number of MPs for different reasons – and according to the article the complainant was included because of an unwelcome intervention during a speech given by Michael Howard rather than on the basis of his speaking record or number of questions that he had tabled. In this context, the Commission was not persuaded that the complainant's omission from the table was misleading.

However, there was clearly a significant error in the follow-up piece which appeared in the diary column. Both parties to the complaint acknowledged that the complainant had not made the remark attributed to him. In these circumstances, it was incumbent on the newspaper to correct the matter promptly. The Commission noted that this had occurred in the next edition of the newspaper, something that it welcomed. While the complainant may have been unhappy with the form in which the correction appeared, it had put the record straight promptly and with due prominence as the Code requires. However, in light of the complainant's unhappiness with this piece the Commission was pleased that the newspaper had made a further offer to the complainant to publish a letter from him in which he could take issue with the coverage in his own words. Such a letter would have allowed any residual issues – such as the explanation for his voting record – to be settled. The Commission considered that the action taken by the newspaper constituted a sufficient remedy to the complaint and it concluded that nothing further was required on the part of the newspaper. Further complaints regarding the reiteration of the complainant's voting record, and the fact that he "claimed" to have made over 100 speeches, did not appear to raise a breach of Clause 1.

Relevant ruling

Hunt v The Guardian, 1999

Adjudication issued 2004