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Statement by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport

BSkyB Takeover

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, Members on both sides of the House were disappointed that a statement of such importance was taken in the middle of the afternoon, but out of respect for our Ulster Unionist friends we have tolerated that decision. What I believe is intolerable is the fact that the Secretary of State saw fit to parade around TV studios before making the statement to the House. Has he availed himself of the opportunity to ask whether he can apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House for this discourtesy?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no. The timing of the statement is not quite what Members had expected, which was evident during earlier exchanges in the presence of the Leader of the House. The circumstances that led to the timing of this statement were explained: there is a balance of considerations, and it was felt important to protect the Democratic Unionist party's half-day debate. When I became aware of the situation, it seemed to me that such protection must be guaranteed. I confess, however, that I had rather expected—and had indeed been led to expect—that although announcements to the stock exchange would be made, no media interviews would be undertaken before a statement was made to the House. I was led to expect that and the Secretary of State knows very well that I was led to expect that, so the fact that interviews have taken place is a notable disappointment and it might be regarded by some as a discourtesy to the House. In those circumstances, I feel sure that the Secretary of State will want to be aware of that discourtesy and will take the opportunity to express his regrets to the House.

Mr Hunt: I am, of course, prepared to apologise if there is any element of procedure that I have not followed correctly. I would like to explain that I did one clip under embargo and the deal I made with the media organisations was that they should not use it until after the statement had been made. However, because the issue was referred to in oral questions earlier today, some of those media organisations took that to mean that the issue had been addressed in the House and went ahead and broke that embargo. I made the position very clear and I did no media interviews other than that one clip under embargo. I want to make that clear so that the House can understand what happened.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for the explanation that he has kindly offered to the House. There is no doubt that the situation had not been fully anticipated and has not been the subject of the range of internal exchanges that would ordinarily be expected. I know he is aware of that, and what he has said is courteous. I am happy to leave it at that.