

TRANSCRIPT of Michael Gove to the Press Gallery

21 February 2012

Michael Gove (Education Secretary): One of the things that struck me over the course of the last few months is that a new set of stereotypes, every bit as misleading and caricatured as some of the stereotypes that have grown up around politicians, have grown up around journalists and around the media and the way in which it operates.

And I'm thinking in particular of the Leveson Inquiry and the debate that has surrounded it. One of the things that struck me about politics is that there is a particular tendency to which all politicians are tempted to succumb. In the aftermath of a specific crisis when an undoubted wrong has been done there's a desire to find a judge, a civil servant, a representative of the great and the good, inevitably a figure from the establishment to enquire in to what went wrong and to make recommendations about what might be put right.

It's a natural thing for politicians to do but there are dangers associated with it. Sometimes the recommendations of that report may be modest, proportionate and sane but sometimes they gave birth to quangos, commissions and law making creatures that actually generate over regulation, over prescription and sometimes a cure that is worse than the original disease. And if we look back at Government's response to various crises in the past there have been some profound crises that have effected all of our consciences. And because they've effected our consciences people have wanted to be seen to act.

So, for example, in the immediate aftermath of BSE and the problems associated with the quality of our food the Food Standards Agency was quite rightly set up. But one of the problems is that the Food Standards Agency had morphed over time from being a body which was responsible for governing the safety of our food to one that became yet another meddlesome and nannying organisation that was telling us what we should eat and in what proportion.

The same thing applied to the Vetting and Barring Scheme and also to the Every Child Matters Agenda in the wake of the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié and, subsequently, Baby Peter. In both cases with Vetting and Barring the tragic death of two children led to an attempt to ensure that we more effectively policed those who worked with young people but the result of that is a situation where Philip Pullman had to apply for a Criminal Records Bureau check in order to go in to a school to read to children in order to provide them with the enlightenment and adventure and sense of wonder which should be part of their birth right.

And in the same way in the aftermath of the Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter tragedies we developed guidance, the Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance, which is eight hundred pages long; impenetrable and which as you know has still not ensured that our children are safer today than they were two, three or five years ago. And I see the same dangers in the Leveson Inquiry and in the way in which the debate on press regulation are moving now.

It's undoubtedly the case that there were serious crimes which were committed but we know that those crimes were serious because they broke, if the allegations are proven, the already existing criminal law. There are laws against the interception of messages, there are laws against bribery, there are laws which prevent journalists like any other professional going rogue. And those laws should be vigorously upheld, vigorously policed.

However there is a danger at the moment that what we may see are judges, celebrities and the establishment, all of whom have an interest in taking over the press as arbiters of what a free press should be, imposing either soft or hard regulation while what we should be encouraging is the maximum amount of freedom of expression and the maximum amount of freedom of speech.

And the reason why I say it's a particular danger at the moment is because we all know that newspapers are under threat; under threat from the pressure of advertising migrating online, under threat from a variety of new news sources. That's why whenever anyone sets up a new newspaper, as Rupert Murdoch has done with the Sun on Sunday, they should be applauded and not criticised. And that's why journalists should be, I believe, more assertive in making the case for press freedom and politicians should recognise that we have nothing to gain and everything to lose from fettering a press which has helped keep us honest in the past and ensure that the standard of debate in this country is higher than in other jurisdictions.

And there's a particular point that I want to make. I as a politician like all politicians find myself occasionally on the receiving end of reporting that might make me irritated or might make me raise my eyebrows. In the course of the last two months for example the Observer's reported that half of the Sure Start children centres in this country have closed. The real number out of three and a half thousand is just eight. The Observer reported this week that I spent the last week in holiday in the US, if they'd only rung me, they wouldn't have needed to talk to me they could merely have listened to the ring tone they'd have known that I was in England.

But actually I know that newspapers make mistakes. I know Kelvin Mackenzie said that sometimes the story is so good you don't want to make that extra telephone call and it's good to see that the ethics of Kelvin Mackenzie govern the Observer's news desk.

But what I want to do is to concentrate on the big picture and the big picture is that there is a chilling atmosphere towards freedom of expression which emanates from the debate around Leveson and I think that there are laws already in place that we should respect and there are principles already in place that we should uphold which are central to making sure that this country remains free.

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