

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF PETER OBORNE
DATED 23 April 2012**

I, Peter Osborne, of say as follows:

I make this witness statement in response to the Leveson Inquiry's notice sent to me on 5 April 2012 (the **Notice**), with particular reference to the questions raised in the Notice. This witness statement is made in addition to the witness statement which I provided to the Inquiry in response to a notice sent to me on 8 August 2011.

1. I am Peter Osborne and the Chief Political Commentator of the Daily Telegraph. I am not an employee of the Telegraph but I am contracted to write a weekly political column, as well as a number of articles. My career can be divided into roughly two parts. I was a front line working reporter for approximately fifteen years, mainly at the Evening Standard and the Daily and Sunday Express. From 2001 I was political columnist for the Spectator. I joined the Daily Mail in the same role in 2006, and the Daily Telegraph in 2010. In this period I have reflected and commented as well as reported. The transition from reporter to commentator came about as I became increasingly aware of the way governments and newspapers collaborated in the manufacture and manipulation of news. The uncodified British constitution relies on strong ethical codes of correct behaviour. How, I asked myself, could the British system have permitted an unelected red top journalist to become for a time arguably the second most powerful person in Britain? This led me to my first book, *Alastair Campbell and the Rise of the Media Class* (1999). This was followed by *The Rise of Political Lying* (2005); and *The Triumph of the Political Class* (2007). I also report and present films for Channel Four Dispatches and Unreported World.
2. In my books I have argued that contemporary politicians have set out to do something new and remarkable. They have handed over many of the historic functions of parliament- for instance, its role as the dominant source of information about the executive arm of the state - to newspapers. Indeed modern politicians have awarded an almost constitutional role to the British media by building it up as an alternative to state institutions. Representative democracy was steadily replaced by what a system of government which has been populist, self-aggrandising, contemptuous of traditional institutions and liberties, intolerant of the judiciary and hostile to the rule of law.
3. During this time the press and broadcast media have normally failed to hold politicians to account. The biggest disasters of my adult lifetime – entry to the Exchange Rate Mechanism, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic policy errors leading to the 2008 banking crash – were cheered on by the bulk of the mainstream press. (The same was true of appeasement in 1938.) The press was wise after the event, which is not the same thing. Likewise, the famous

corporate scandals, failures and collapses – Guinness Four, Maxwell, RBS etc- have owed almost nothing to press investigations issuing a wake-up call.

4. I have set out some of the reasons for this in my forthcoming article for the Political Quarterly exposing the myth of the hostile media, a draft of which I have included as Exhibit One. In this article I argue that the press as a whole is a manifestation of corporate, financial and political dominance. It is true that politicians can be fiercely criticised in the media, but only very rarely has the press stepped in any meaningful sense into a role that holds power to account or checks serious, ongoing abuse. Normally the press aligns itself with the government of the day and will take the side of the powerful against the weak, or the majority against the minority. As shocking evidence for this proposition, I have included my pamphlet Muslims Under Siege, as Exhibit Two.
5. The core relationship between politicians and the media is one of intense mutual fascination and collaboration. Throughout my professional career the British media has been dominated by the Murdoch empire, which typically forms an alliance with the political party in power. During the Blair and early Cameron administrations, Murdoch personnel were incorporated as part of the government machine, and visa versa. There is some reason to believe that the Murdoch connection with government contributed to the general News International sense of impunity. Ministers were aware of the extraordinary fact that their own phones had been hacked by the end of 2006, yet appear to have taken no serious action. Yet more incredible some members of a Commons Select Committee felt they were intimidated and threatened by News International, and yet nothing was done. Meanwhile Murdoch papers took little notice of government criminality. The Times, for example, was slow to report evidence that the British government had been complicit in torture.
6. There is no question that this connection between politicians and media, which is invisible to the ordinary voter or newspaper reader, has done great damage to the public interest. A great deal of what passes for news is a manifestation of what the founder of Open Democracy Anthony Barnett has labelled manipulative populism. Stories and narratives have been constructed through collaboration between government and media machines. In these cases newspaper stories simply become a manifestation of power. Furthermore, there is troubling evidence – from Margaret Thatcher’s arguably improper decision to allow Rupert Murdoch to purchase the Times, through Tony Blair’s readiness to discuss Rupert Murdoch’s business interests with Italian prime minister Romano Prodi, to the Conservative government’s recent readiness to wave through the News Corporation bid for the remainder of BskyB – of government readiness to do commercial favours for Rupert Murdoch.
7. You ask about the distinction between politicians in and out of government. Politicians once in government have been able to make use of their access to the machinery of state to gain helpful media coverage. This gives them an ability to

control and influence media which is completely denied to opposition parties. In addition governments find themselves in a position to do (or withhold) commercial favours to media concerns. This source of patronage may be one reason why over recent decades Britain has developed a pattern of long periods of one party government, and may partly explain the poor press recently enjoyed by the current leader of the opposition.

8. You ask about appointments. I can think of no case where a cabinet minister has resigned or been sacked thanks to media pressure. Ministers may resign following financial wrongdoing (David Laws, Peter Mandelson); lying and general incompetence (Stephen Byers); breach of ministerial rules (David Blunkett; Liam Fox); alleged lawbreaking (Chris Huhne); party intrigue (Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair). In almost all these cases the act of resignation has been preceded by damaging headlines. But damaging headlines alone can never force a minister out. There is always in my experience a more substantive reason. Sometimes press support may help secure a promotion. Peter Mandelson's swift return to the Cabinet after his first resignation occurred after a very powerful campaign in the Sun newspaper.
9. Meetings between journalists and politicians should be viewed as a potential conspiracy against the public, even more so meetings between ministers and editors and proprietors. It would be better if political journalists paid more attention to speeches, white papers, public hustings, parliamentary debates etc and less to informal contacts. The House of Commons used to enforce a system of social apartheid between reporters and politicians. It is a great pity this no longer exists. I am astonished that the House of Commons does not take much more severe action against ministers who leak announcements in advance to the press. A great deal of George Osborne's recent budget appears to have been handed over to his allies in the press and media. Sixty years ago the Labour Chancellor Hugh Dalton resigned after inadvertently handing one tiny snippet to the Evening Standard as he walked into the chamber to give his budget speech.
10. Newspapers can arguably be justified in carrying out criminal acts when an investigation is in the public interest. One lesson of the phone hacking scandal is that such events should be attended by due process within the media organisation concerned. I would suggest a standing committee of four senior figures – Editor, Managing Editor, Legal Head and one Old Hand- should formally meet to discuss and sanction any illegal conduct, each time it occurs. Such meetings should be fully minuted and open to subsequent inspection. I am sceptical about more regulation. The illegal conduct of the Murdoch titles only carried on so long because of a catastrophic failure by the police to enforce the law as it already existed.
11. I feel very hopeful about the future. The exposure and part collapse of the Murdoch empire may have opened the way to a new decency both in British journalism and our public life.

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

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Peter Osborne

23 April 2012