

THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURES, PRACTICES
AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANDREW GRICE

I, **ANDREW GRICE** of Independent Print Limited, 2 Derry Street, London, W8 5HF, WILL SAY;

I have been Political Editor of The Independent newspaper for the past 13 years. I was previously Political Editor of The Sunday Times, where I worked for 10 years. I have been a member of the Parliamentary Lobby based at Westminster for 30 years. I worked on local newspapers – the Slough Observer and Coventry Evening Telegraph --for seven years before moving to Parliament, where I served local papers, including the Liverpool Echo, for five years before moving on to the national press in 1987.

Politicians and the media have always had close contacts; they need each other and always will. However, I believe the relationship has changed markedly and for the worse during my 30 years as a Westminster-based journalist. Several newspapers have taken on the role of players on the political stage rather than spectators and analysts. It is not new for right-leaning papers to lead the opposition to a Labour Government, especially when they perceived the official Opposition to be feeble. But it has become more open and more strident. It is true that Conservative-leaning newspapers can also be highly critical of Conservative or Conservative-led governments, in effect taking on the role of an internal opposition. Liberal-minded papers such as The Guardian and The Independent tend to be more even-handed. One of the first sayings passed down to me by veteran members of the Parliamentary Lobby when I joined it in 1982 was: "Left-wing journalists bend over backwards to be fair to the Conservative Party. And right-wing journalists bend over backwards to be fair to ...the Conservative Party." It is a light-hearted rule of thumb that has stood the test of time.

Newspapers have always espoused a political line in their editorial comment but in recent times have become much more partisan. The dividing line between comment and news has become very blurred – in some cases, almost invisible. In particular, right-leaning quality newspapers have become even more likely to edit the facts to suit their own agenda than they were 10 or 20 years ago. As a whole, therefore, the press has become less reliable, less honest and less balanced, which cannot be in the public interest.

The expansion of television, notably the BBC Live and Sky News channels, have forced a declining, highly competitive newspaper industry to look for a new role. Most members of the public get much of their information about politics from TV news bulletins; the press has shouted louder and louder to seek their attention, and often appears more interested in providing infotainment than information.

The televisual age was epitomised when the TV debates between the three main party

leaders dominated the newspaper coverage of the 2010 election. And yet, despite their tumbling sales, newspapers still matter to politicians, not least because broadcasters often follow the papers' agenda and follow up their stories. So governments and political parties devote increasing amounts of time and energy trying to influence the coverage of politics in the papers.

The game played out between the media and politicians is getting faster and faster. The 24-hour news channels were followed by the expansion of websites, blogs and twitter. I have an image of the two groups constantly chasing each other's tail in an increasingly mad dance that must sometimes leave the public bemused.

As the press seeks a new role, I believe most papers have sadly crossed a line between scepticism about politicians – which is healthy in a democracy – and cynicism, which is not. The Daily Telegraph was right to expose abuses in the system of MPs' expenses. But I fear that the feeding frenzy since has gone too far, damaging the political system by fuelling public hostility and a dangerous lack of trust. Today's politicians do not deserve the deference of bygone age; the press plays a vital role in holding them to account. But they do deserve a little more respect than they get from many newspapers. While purporting to act in the public interest, some papers undermine it. I fear that the way politics is covered today by most papers will discourage some of the brightest and best people from going into politics – notably from business. This would accelerate the trend towards a political class of advisers turned MPs turned ministers with little experience of the outside world, which would not serve the public well.

However, I still believe that overall our free press is a force for public good and that it must therefore remain free. The terrible irony of the closure of the News of the World was that in recent years, after the phone hacking took place, the paper had broken some very important stories which were undoubtedly in the public interest, such as the corruption in Pakistani cricket. The Sunday Times, another Rupert Murdoch-owned paper, uncovered important stories such as alleged wrongdoing in Fifa, football's governing body and, recently, that Conservative fund-raisers offered donors access to the Prime Minister. The Sunday Times and my own paper The Independent have shone a light on the murky world of lobbyists, whose primary purpose (unlike that of newspapers) is to influence government decisions and policies. The Guardian, of course, led the field in uncovering the phone hacking scandal, with back-up from other papers including The Independent. All these important disclosures might not have been made under the more restrictive regime sought by some politicians and pressure groups, which would (perhaps unwittingly) curb investigative journalism. Newspapers still play a vital role in shining a light on parts of the political system that some politicians would rather keep hidden – such as the way parties raise money and the role of lobbyists.

Sometimes, the cynicism of the press is justified. However, its new techniques do not always see the end justify the means. One development is the allegation that papers now act as agents provocateurs, with journalists posing as someone else – such as a business client or a party donor – in order to catch a political player breaking the rules, sometimes captured by a hidden camera. It is a difficult line to draw. I would argue that The Sunday Times's recent "cash for access" revelation about Conservative Party fund-raising and The Independent's work with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism on lobbyists were justified in the public interest. However, I would not

say the same about The Daily Telegraph's "sting" in which undercover reporters posed as constituents of Vince Cable, the Business Secretary. What might interest some members of the public is not the same as the public interest.

I have attended many meetings between editors and senior politicians, including prime ministers. Some have been in a social setting – for example, a dinner at the home of an editor, or in a restaurant—and others more formal occasions, for example at 10 or 11 Downing Street. I have not been involved in any meetings between proprietors and politicians.

I suspect the frequency of meetings between senior newspaper executives and politicians (including proprietors) has increased during my 30 years as a political journalist. I suspect that the vast bulk of such discussions involved a government (or opposition) politician trying to influence proprietors and editors to secure the most favourable coverage. But the increasingly close contacts may have led to an informal understanding – or, at least, a belief – that the politicians, of whatever party, would not act in a way that undermined the commercial interest of the proprietor. The most obvious example would be cross-media ownership rules in relation to Rupert Murdoch's newspaper and television interests. Even if such understandings were informal, it would not be healthy or in the public interest, and could give the major media companies an unfair advantage over their smaller rivals or businesses operating in a different sector (though such firms would have their own methods of lobbying politicians).

I believe the influence of newspapers in determining the outcome of general elections is overstated. It was not "The Sun what won it" in 1992; it was Labour who lost it and the outcome would have been the same without The Sun shining on the Conservatives. I always believed that Rupert Murdoch's decisions on which party to support were taken mainly for commercial rather than political reasons; he wanted to back a winner to maximise his influence with the next government, as we saw with The Sun's defection from Labour to the Conservatives in 2009.

What became an unhealthy relationship between press and politicians in recent years was born for a good reason. The treatment meted out to Neil Kinnock by the tabloids in the run-up to the 1992 was personal and nasty. Tony Blair and his colleagues in New Labour vowed "never again." As Mr Blair put it: "It is better to ride the tiger's back than let it rip your throat out." This involved rebuilding contacts with Rupert Murdoch's papers, which had been strained (and publicly severed) by an industrial dispute at their Wapping headquarters. Although I never witnessed such a discussion while working for The Sunday Times, I suspect there was an understanding that Labour would not implement its previous policy of curbing cross-media ownership in return for which Murdoch papers would not subject Labour to the "Kinnock treatment." The close relationship which developed might have been understandable from Labour's point of view while it was in opposition. It was not healthy once the party regained power in 1997, when the Murdoch papers influenced the Blair Government's policies on issues such as Europe, tax and business. Lance Price, who was deputy to Alastair Campbell, the Downing Street communications director, later described Mr Murdoch as the "24th member" of the Blair Cabinet. He added: "No big decision could ever be made inside No 10 without taking account of the likely reaction of three men: Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Rupert Murdoch."

New Labour's determination to avoid the "Kinnock treatment" also saw the introduction of a much more disciplined – some would say ruthless—approach

to news management, led by Peter Mandelson and Mr Campbell and with the full blessing of Mr Blair and Gordon Brown. Of course, you could never stop politicians handing out stories and interviews like sweets to favoured newspapers or to trusted journalists and it would be fruitless to try. But the new culture of spin involved much more pressure on journalists to toe the spin doctors' line; more rewards and punishment and complaints to editors over the heads of independent-minded journalists. Selective briefings and discrimination against some papers was not intended to give the winners a commercial advantage but intended to secure the most favourable coverage. A more even-handed approach to all newspapers would have served the public interest better.

The approach was copied by the Conservatives when David Cameron became their leader. He based his campaign to win the following general election on the New Labour playbook, so it is hardly surprising that there were similar close contacts between senior Conservatives and Murdoch executives.

If you closed down the Parliamentary Lobby system at Westminster, it would reinvent itself tomorrow. I have always argued and voted for reform and the institution, although much-criticised, has not stood still. When I joined the Lobby in 1982, we were allowed to attribute the comments of Margaret Thatcher's press secretary Sir Bernard Ingham only to "Whitehall sources". I would have been taken into a dark room and tortured if I had dared to describe Sir Bernard as "Downing Street sources," which seems absurd now. Mr Campbell was right to put Lobby briefings on the record in 1997.

Although the Westminster Lobby is a target for critics because it is well known, similar groups of journalists operate more informally in areas like health and education. The days when the Lobby could be accused of being part of a cosy club or a conspiracy against openness are long gone. Today its members ask very searching questions of Downing Street at its twice-daily briefings and play an important role in holding the Government to account.

There will always be private conversations between ministers, political advisers, MPs and civil servants on the one hand and journalists on the other. People involved in any walk of life will invariably say more to journalists if they know they will not be quoted by name. Such conversations are mutually beneficial and could not be regulated away. Although some observers criticise the use of such anonymous sources, I am sure it helps the press and therefore the public to get closer to the truth. One area where agenda-setting journalism has been overtaken by a new agenda-driven journalism is the coverage of the European Union. It is also in my view an example of what newspapers perceive as their commercial self-interest trumping their interest in balanced reporting. Fear of closer media ownership rules from Brussels has driven most newspapers down a hardline Eurosceptic path. They run a constant, not a one-off, campaign to push politicians along the same route, probably the most obvious example of the press being a player rather than a watcher of the political game. The result is an unhealthy bias in which most newspapers seek to portray the EU and its institutions in the most unfavourable light. The skewed centre of gravity means that the more even-handed papers—such as the Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent and the Daily Mirror—can be dragged down a Eurosceptic route.

When this inquiry was set up, some politicians told me privately that natural justice was at work: this would be the media's equivalent of the MPs' expenses controversy

and politicians would take revenge by introducing statutory control of the press.

It is obvious that the current system of self-regulation has failed. In my view, the public interest would be served by a much tougher, independent watchdog with teeth, composed of people who are not on the payroll of newspapers. Perhaps a system of co-regulation should be considered, with self-regulation underpinned and overseen by an independent body such as Ofcom. The advertising industry has a model along these lines which seems to work.

In my view, statutory regulation would struggle to keep pace with rapidly changing technology; it would not be easy to regulate twitter, let alone whatever comes next. More importantly, there would be a grave risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater and inhibiting the best of British investigative journalism, an outcome which would only harm the public interest.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

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

Signed
Andrew Grice

Dated 19/04/12