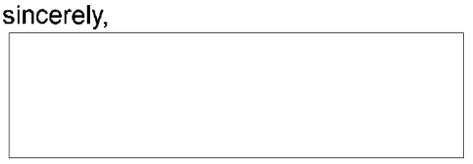
Note to inquiry secretary

I hope I have answered all the issues you raised in your letter. Thank you for the opportunity to enter a submission. I have answered the questions largely in the order you posed them although, as you will see, I have gone into a lot of detail on some of them and entered other ideas and thoughts as appropriate so as to keep a narrative flowing.

Yours sincerely,



Philip Webster.

NI Group Limited
P Webster
First Statement
23 April 2012

IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

WITNESS STATEMENT OF

PHILIP WEBSTER

Career history

1 I am currently editor of The Times website (www.thetimes.co.uk) and –was previously Political Editor of The Times.

2 After training as a journalist on the Eastern Daily Press in Norfolk I joined The Times in 1973 as a reporter in the House of Commons Press Gallery. After nearly eight years covering proceedings in both Houses and the European Parliament I joined the Westminster Lobby as Political Reporter in 1981. I was promoted to Chief Political Correspondent in 1986 and became Political Editor in 1993, a job I held until 2010. After 37 years at Westminster I switched to my current role after the 2010 General Election. James Harding, who has appeared before the Inquiry, is the eighth Times Editor under whom I have worked.

The relationship between politicians and the press

3 It seems to me after nearly 40 years working for The Times that the relationship between politicians and the press has always been one of mutual dependency, mistrust, suspicion and occasional bitterness, and it probably always will be. Politicians need the media to spread the word about their activities; the media need politicians to satisfy their readers' interest in the issues of the day. But in those four decades the embrace into which both sides are locked has become far more confrontational and the deference that once characterised the journalist's attitude towards senior politicians has gone completely.

4 During those decades I have observed the virtual disintegration of the old-style Lobby system which once involved completely non-attributable briefings twice a day by Downing Street for a select band of political correspondents, and all manner of mysterious briefings by senior ministers, Leaders of the Opposition and other figures. The mystique that once surrounded the system played into the hands of the Government of the day, which was able to control the outflow of news. It also suited the lazier journalists who had a ready-made source of news with which they could satisfy their newsrooms and a set of confidentiality rules which enabled them to hide the fact that they had not had to work too hard for their stories.

5 As a young parliamentary journalist I aspired to get into the much-revered Lobby because that was clearly the way forward. But I never enjoyed the institutionalised secrecy

surrounding it and shed no tears when the system became more transparent from the end of the 1980s, through the 1990s to a point where there has even been serious talk of televising Downing Street briefings. These events can be extremely mundane and boring and would be unlikely to interest viewers for long.

6 But the arrival of the 24 hour news cycle and the growth of digital round-the-clock journalism has helped to break down the near-Masonic style barriers that once existed.

7 Of course politicians still like to talk unattributably and sometimes go through contortions to do so. The reports back from Tokyo recently suggesting that sources close to David Cameron believed he was relaxed about publishing his tax returns emanated, I assume, from the mouth of Mr Cameron himself. But all branches of journalism – sport, business included - have their own "lobby" systems, with sources revealing, leaking, issuing information in an unattributable way. This will always be the case, and often the deeper insights into what politicians, business chiefs or even bankers are thinking about would not happen in any other way.

8 The onset of a more confident confrontational press has led to a general deterioration in relations between media and politicians. Politicians over the last two decades at least have tended to blame the press for lowering the standing in which they and Parliament are held. This became particularly apparent during the 1992-97 Parliament when the outgoing Conservative government was beset by a series of "sleaze" scandals and John Major, who had good relations with the press before getting to Number 10, became visibly more and more disillusioned with it. Even Tony Blair, who assiduously courted the media, made criticism of the press a topic for one of his last speeches as prime minister.

9 Politicians have complained that the press is far more interested in exposing their shortcomings than writing about the good things they have done. One factor they often cite is the lack of reporting these days of what goes on in the parliamentary chambers, a complaint that it is impossible to dispute. When I joined The Times we had a parliamentary staff of 12, four times the size of the Lobby team, and reported both Houses until adjournment each night or early morning. Now, in common with other papers, there are no reporters purely assigned to that role. The world really has moved on.

10 The other factor – linked to the above - that has angered politicians has been the way that gradually the media appear to have taken on the role of the elected politicians. Where once the House of Commons dominated, now it is the interview or debate on the Today programme or Newsnight that will have more influence on events.

11 While I welcomed the death of deference towards politicians I have been less comfortable with the diminution of respect for them. The personal treatment of figures such as Neil Kinnock, John Major and, particularly towards the end of his premiership, Gordon Brown has sometimes seemed out of order. When even the BBC asked Mr Brown whether he was on anti-depressants, an idea for which there was no evidence at all, many journalists felt a sense of embarrassment. Like it or not Mr Brown led the democratically elected government of the country and treating him with such disdain was treating the democratic process with disrespect as well.

12 I believe that overall the growing confidence and strength of a free press in holding politicians to account has been beneficial to the public interest, but the power of the press itself has to be carefully scrutinised.

13 The exposure of the wrongdoing of MPs in the expenses scandal turned out to be a triumph for the free press. It was clearly in the public interest that these details should come to light, even if it was the final proof in the minds of many MPs that the press were out to get them. The recent Sunday Times story about the Conservative treasurer promising access to the Prime Minister in return for political donations was clearly in the public interest even though it involved the impersonation of potential donors by reporters. This came at a time when the hacking revelations and the very existence of this inquiry has called into doubt the use of such techniques. Inquiries by the press have resulted in many ministerial resignations over the years, most but not all of which were vindicated by subsequent events. The resignation of the former Conservative Defence Secretary came after persistent work by the press revealed his unwise links with a defence lobbyist.

Extent of politicians' willingness to constrain the media

14 The politicians will have their view of this but the media is powerful and it is not unnatural for individual politicians – any more than any other profession – to seek to create a good impression in the media. Whether that has dissuaded governments from taking action against the media on issues such as regulation, privacy and conduct is for them to answer. Certainly at the backbench level there has been no reluctance in recent years to become involved in media issues; the Culture Committee's inquiry re hacking was set up quickly. The press benefits from a robust relationship with the political world and should be wary of overt attempts to curry favour from any quarter. The press has an obligation to report fairly and accurately and not be swayed by apparently generous acts (for example the granting of an interview).

Links between individual politicians and senior journalists

15 As Political Editor I had regular meetings with senior politicians of all parties. These took the form of interviews, lunches or dinners (usually along with another colleague from a newspaper or broadcasting outlet), briefings, or drinks parties thrown by the minister's department. There would also be regular contact with them in the Members' Lobby of the Commons.

16 During the Labour years I interviewed the Chancellor several times a year, and the Prime Minister once or twice a year. Apart from that there would be fairly regular opportunities to see them at Downing Street receptions. Occasionally they would also be invited to The Times headquarters for lunches with the Editor and leader writers and I would often attend those.

17 The journalist always, without exception, paid for the lunches and dinners with politicians so as to feel no obligation at all to them. The hope of the journalist at those off-the-record lunches or dinners was that they would produce tips, lines of inquiry, straightforward "drops" that would lead to stories in the paper. That wish was not always fulfilled but most ministers would come along intending to land something usable into the conversation.

18 These exchanges were a two-way benefit. Ministers and senior Opposition figures obviously felt it would do them no harm to lunch, say, with the political editors of The Times and Channel 4 News. They used the occasions to promote themselves and particular policies they were pursuing at the time. Ideas were floated, often well before they had reached Cabinet level; some were not averse to telling us the job they wanted in the next

reshuffle. Given the privileged nature of the conversation it was not unknown for them to do down the reputation of colleagues as well as opponents.

19 For us it was a way of getting to know them better, making it easier for us to call them at a weekend if necessary, and of course it provided us with information. Political correspondents would also get good access to prime ministers on their overseas trips, usually travelling on the same aircraft, and talking to them at regular intervals during the travels. It meant inevitably that we came to know such people on first-name terms. But that apparent cosiness was no more than politeness. Most politicians understood that the journalists with whom they had once lunched convivially might well be writing or talking about their demise sometime soon.

20 The other opportunity for meeting senior politicians was during the party conference season. On these occasions we were joined by senior editors and often senior executives including Les Hinton, Rebekah Brooks and James Murdoch from News International taking their opportunity to get to know our leaders. As political editor it fell to me to set up breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with ever growing groups from head office and the politicians and their entourages. These were pleasant social occasions but with the politicians on their guard because they were in the presence of journalists whom they did not know they were far less likely to produce "news" than the one-on-one or two-on-one gatherings.

21 There would also be Times and News International receptions at these events where the high quality champagne and late-night bacon sandwiches were an added attraction. The other occasion for meeting politicians would be Rupert Murdoch's annual summer party, always at a desirable location in London.

22 As a senior journalist I would meet Mr Murdoch occasionally on his visits to London to talk about politics and politicians, but probably less than a dozen times during my whole 30 years in the Lobby. Although Mr Murdoch is a man of strong views, I was never, under any of the editors with whom I worked, asked to write a story in a way that it was felt would please the proprietor. As far as I know the same was true of leading articles carried by the paper. During all those years I never had one letter of criticism – or indeed congratulation – from Mr Murdoch for anything I had written in the paper.

23 The Times has a spread of readers from all parts of the political spectrum. I recall some polling from a few years ago that had the split roughly 40:30:30 between the main parties. Its readers look to the Political Editor for fair and impartial coverage. If there was any suggestion that he or she was susceptible to persuasion from any quarter to take a particular line(left or right, for example) on a story he or she would be unable to do the job properly and would not last long. The readers expect the highest standard of the Political Editor of The Times and all holders of the job are aware of their responsibility to meet that expectation.

24 The very nature of the Westminster Village inevitably meant that friendships occasionally developed between journalist and politician. In many cases the politician and the journalist were at university or school together so the link already existed. I have good friends in all three main parties. In my case most of those developed from sporting links, through playing in the Parliamentary Golf Society, and skippering the press football and cricket teams for some 30 years in matches against the politicians. This, again, may give the impression of cosiness to the outside world. But it would be a very naïve politician indeed who felt that friendship with a journalist would protect him or her in the event of them

becoming involved in any scandal, wrongdoing, or political embarrassment. And journalists would be very naïve if they did not know that some politicians would quite happily tell their editors if they were unhappy with the way they had been treated on some stories. As I've mentioned above Westminster can be a cruel place, where political reputations rise and fall with alarming rapidity.

Selectivity between titles

25 Politicians and their media advisers were always in my experience careful to select their "market" for a story that they wanted out in the public domain. A Labour politician with a good internal Labour story to tell would knock on the door of the Guardian or the Mirror. But a Labour politician with a story that might appeal to a wider audience might well go to an "unfriendly" stable such as the Mail.

26 One running sore for political correspondents is the perception of stories being "given" to favoured titles. I watch it from afar now but it is quite obvious to me that in recent weeks, as the Government has taken a knock in the polls, Downing Street or individual ministers have floated a number of stories with their traditional supporters at the Mail and Telegraph. These have taken the form of interviews or advance notice of upcoming announcements. I and colleagues at The Sun were the target of some envy during the early Labour terms when it appeared we were getting more than our fair share of stories.

Has political journalism moved from reporting to seeking to influence political events?

27 It was a common claim after Labour's landslide of 1997 that the weakness of the Conservatives meant that the media had become the only effective opposition to the Government and had therefore taken the Opposition's role. It certainly felt a bit like that at the time. While Tony Blair's failure to take Britain into the euro was more down to the opposition of Gordon Brown than anything else, there is little doubt but that the pronounced euro scepticism of papers such as the Sun, Telegraph, Mail and even The Times has had a deep impact on public opinion and prevented any thought of more European integration.

28 U-turns, past and present, from the dropping of the poll tax during the Conservative years, to any number under Labour and now again under the Conservatives, including the recent ones on e-mail surveillance and secret trials, have been forced on the Government by media pressure and campaigns. The Times would claim that the recent government moves to make adoption easier has been the result of its own campaign.

29 As my former colleague Peter Riddell pointed out in a recent book, the politicians' battle to have debate on their own terms was lost in the 1950s with the abandonment of the wartime rule that stopped radio and television issues that were due to come before Parliament in the next fortnight. Since then as the media has become stronger and more aggressive it has often wanted to set the terms of debate itself.

30 We have observed the rise of the commentariat. Where 40 years ago there used to be only a handful of commentators on newspapers, now all of them have a long list of them. They have to be accommodated and have taken some of the space that was occupied purely by news and information.

31 The sackings of ministers from the Profumo scandal to the present day have often been at the behest of the media and against the initial wishes of the Prime Minister of the day. This has undoubtedly resulted in some injustices. The second dismissal by Tony Blair of Peter Mandelson back in 2001 appeared designed to forestall a media storm if he stayed on. The removal of Charles Clarke as Home Secretary under Blair seemed similarly media driven. Several Conservative ministers who quit during the "back to basics" saga in the 1990s were forced out despite attempts by John Major to keep them.

Relationships between senior politicians and senior press executives

32 It is clearly in the public interest for political editors, editors of national newspapers, and even non-editorial senior executives to meet and share views on the state of the nation. It is part of a natural discourse in which politicians can explain their mission, what they are trying to achieve and their ultimate goals, and newspapers can put their case as well, explaining to ministers why they are taking their chosen line on a variety of subjects. One of the attractions of working for The Times is that it is not bound to any one party, having supported both the main parties at recent elections. Within the comment side of the paper there is a broad sweep of opinion with writers who represent all shades of political views.

33 Newspapers should and do make their judgment on which party to endorse at a general election on their views of the policies put forward at that time, and on the quality of the competing potential ministerial teams in front of them. It is nothing new for newspaper proprietors, whose motives in buying their papers has always been seen as power rather than making money, to try to influence events. Beaverbrook's attempt to oust Stanley Baldwin in 1931 brought the famous riposte from Baldwin that he was seeking power without responsibility – "the prerogative of the harlot through the ages."

34 But the wooing by New Labour for the support of the Murdoch empire in the run-up to 1997 has been explained by Mr Blair himself. He and his communications chief Alastair Campbell both believed that the opposition of The Sun in particular had led to Neil Kinnock's defeat in 1992. The polls suggest that Sun readers had shifted long before then. It is also likely also that Sun readers had shifted well away from Gordon Brown before that newspaper opted for Mr Cameron in the autumn of 2009.

35 Personally, I regarded the spectacle of party leaders feeling obliged to make friends with newspaper chiefs with whom they probably had little in common as rather demeaning, as well as unnecessary. Gordon Brown's Commons onslaught against News International in the wake of the hacking revelations was clearly driven by his anger at the way he was dropped by the Sun in the middle of the 2009 party conference, and his erroneous belief that he would get the backing of News International when the time came.

36 The events of the last 12 months, leading to the resignation of Andy Coulson, whom Mr Cameron had employed as communications chief, and Rebekah Brooks, with whom Mr Cameron's family had become friendly, has clearly been a massive embarrassment to politicians. Mr Cameron and Ed Miliband, speaking about the Blair and Brown premierships, have admitted that the relationship between press and politicians got too close.

37 In my view it would not make sense to end such contacts because of the current furore and I see no sign of that happening. But clearly all future contacts – by that I mean telephone calls as well as meetings - between Prime Ministers, Chancellors other key ministers and newspaper and broadcasting chiefs should be put on the public record. It would also make

sense in the interests of transparency for any issues discussed that could have a commerciai impact on the newspaper or broadcaster to be recorded as well.

38 In my view a relationship between senior politicians and the media is in the public interest. Regular contact between politicians and the press, whether through press conferences or briefings, can only help public understanding of what the Government is doing. Contact can also act as a sounding board for both sides on policies that are about to be unveiled. Understanding by the media of the policy should help the elected government get it across to the public. If it is flawed the media will not be slow to point that out. The only risk I can see from such relationships is if they become too close and decisions are taken in the interests of one side or the other and not for the public good.

39 It would be hypocritical not to acknowledge that of course the press benefits from the attention of politicians. Regular formal and informal chats with politicians bring us stories and information to store away to build up stories later on. The politicians themselves obviously have to judge how close that relationship should be, and we have seen signs recently that perhaps both main leaderships may have felt they got too close.

40 I see little difference between contacts between senior government figures and opposition figures in this context. It is perfectly legitimate for the press to meet with, get to know, and understand the policies being put forward by the next potential government.

General election

41 Broadcasters are obviously guided by their own rules of neutrality and impartiality at election time. From the written press's point of view it is incumbent on them to ensure that their readers are given full opportunities to read the prospectuses being put forward by the competing parties at the coming poll. During my time as political editor and since The Times paid particular attention to displaying balance between the parties, always interviewing all the main party leaders and giving the fullest possible coverage to their manifesto launches. The relationship does change somewhat at this time as the parties make their last attempts at securing the endorsements of the "weathervane" papers who leave their decisions till late in the campaign. The public interest would not be served by a party making a rash promise in order to secure the backing of a particular paper.

Regulating the relationship between politicians and the press

42 I would be opposed to any formal regulation of relationships between politicians and the media - other than the changes mentioned in point 37.

43 I think the public interest is best served by a strong, frank, respectful relationship between both sides. As mentioned earlier this will take some to recover in the wake of recent events, with some politicians seeing the problems that have befallen News International as a kind of revenge for the horrors visited upon them by the expenses row.

44 The faith of the public has to be restored in the press after the phone hacking/police payments scandal and in politicians after the expenses outrage. It is no consolation to either side to know that both groups are held in extremely low esteem by the public at large. The public needs to be treated better. People who are mistreated by the press should get quick and easy redress and corrections should be published more prominently than now. While avoiding statutory regulation, self-regulation of the press should be

replaced with a new independent regulator with powers to investigate and punish wrongdoing by the press.

45 Equally importantly, in my view there needs to be a new defence in law for reporting in the public interest. This would require journalists to make a public interest case for controversial stories that they are pursuing and publishing but it would also give them a valid defence in law for crossing boundaries to expose genuine corruption. As we have seen there may be extremely isolated cases where in the public interest even hacking is legitimate if it exposes criminality.

Influence of the media on public policy

46 As political editor I had no role in lobbying ministers or opposition spokesmen about public policies which might affect the media, and am therefore not best placed to give information on this.

Influence of the media on the formulation and delivery of government policy

47 I mentioned earlier the impact of Eurosceptic newspapers on public opinion. In their meetings with newspaper executives politicians will often hear the full force of their arguments. Business ministers will be told that certain regulations are harming them. Home secretaries will be told a newspaper's view that something should be done, for example, about the extradition laws. Sometimes the Government will respond directly to a newspaper's campaign on a certain issue, for example The Times' campaigns on adoption or safe cycling.

48 Other times ministers might make populist gestures because they are unhappy with how an issue is playing in the press, particularly the tabloids. It would be idle to pretend that ministers do not every day worry about the headlines. Newspapers daily run campaigns to influence policy but in doing so they contend they are doing no more than reflecting the wishes, aspirations and needs of their readers. That claim has to be treated with care; letters and e-mails are a better indicator of activism than a true balance of opinion and papers can be quite selective about choosing which of their readers' opinions to act on.

49 'Sarah's Law', giving parents the right to check the history of people who have regular access to their children, is a classic example of a policy emanating directly from a newspaper campaign (The Sun).

Influence of the media on public and political appointments

50 As mentioned earlier, over the years, media pressure has been a factor, though not necessarily the dominant one, in the resignation or sacking of many politicians. Going back to the 1980s Margaret Thatcher eventually and reluctantly accepted the resignation of Cecil Parkinson, one of her closest allies, because of the media storm around him. Under Labour a succession of ministers were forced out through media pressure. Stephen Byers quit as Transport Secretary after Tony Blair tried to keep him. Peter Mandelson's second resignation was designed to prevent another storm but appeared harsh in the aftermath. Beverley Hughes quit as Labour's immigration minister over what seemed like an innocuous mistake over Eastern Europe visas.

51 Sir Ian Blair was removed as Metropolitan Police Commissioner after a long press campaign which culminated in Boris Johnson, the Mayor, saying he had lost confidence in him. Sharon Shoesmith, director of social services in Haringey, was forced out over the Baby P case in what seemed at the time a response to the public and press outcry. She later won an appeal against her dismissal. Fred Goodwin, former chief of RBS, lost his knighthood after a press campaign; similarly Stephen Hester gave up his bonus after a media furore.

52 Going back even further, Jeffrey Archer stood down as London mayoral candidate over perjury charges (News of the World); Jonathan Aitken was forced from the Cabinet over Saudi contacts (The Guardian); Neil Hamilton was defeated by anti-sleaze candidate Martin Bell after the cash for questions affair (The Guardian). More recently Baroness Uddin was suspended from the Lords for claiming expenses for travelling to an empty property in Maidstone while living in the East End (The Sunday Times)

53 The political press has over the years had an impact on the appointment of ministers. As mentioned before ministers have lobbied for their own promotions. A common practice in my Commons career was for the Government whips to let out the names of the people they regarded as the coming stars. Reporters would write them up as tips for the top in reshuffle stories. Lo and behold they would often appear in the government list on reshuffle day. Similarly civil servants had a big impact on who was promoted and demoted in government. The mandarins, far more indiscreet than is generally recognised, would "let slip" the names of ministers they felt were performing badly or well in their contacts with senior journalists. Soon the word would be out that X really was not up to it. Sometimes the prime minister of the day would take note; sometimes he or she would ignore.

Signed .....

Dated 23 – 4 – 2012