

Statement to Parliament: Leveson Consultation Response

Check against delivery

Mr Speaker,

With your permission, I wish to make a statement on the Leveson Inquiry and its implementation, and the freedom of the press.

Over many centuries in Britain, our press has held the powerful to account and been free to report and investigate without fear or favour. These principles underpin our democracy and are integral to the freedom of our nation.

Today in a world of the Internet and clickbait, our press face critical challenges that threaten their livelihood and sustainability – with declining circulations and a changing media landscape.

Mr Speaker, it is in this context that we approach the Leveson Inquiry, which was set up seven years ago in 2011, and reported six years ago in 2012, in response to events over a decade ago.

Progress made

The Leveson Inquiry was a diligent and thorough examination of the culture, practices and ethics of our press in response to illegal and improper press intrusion.

There were far too many cases of terrible behaviour and having met some of the victims, I understand the impact this had.

I want, from the start, to thank Sir Brian for his work.

The Inquiry lasted over a year and heard evidence from more than 300 people including journalists, editors and victims.

Three major police investigations examined a wide range of offences, and more than 40 people were convicted.

The Inquiry and investigations were comprehensive.

And since it was set up, the terms of reference for a Part 2 of the Inquiry have largely been met.

There have also been extensive reforms to policing practices and significant changes to press self-regulation.

IPSO has been established and now regulates 95% of national newspapers by circulation. It has taken significant steps to demonstrate its independence

as a regulator.

And in 2016, Sir Joseph Pilling concluded that IPSO largely complied with Leveson's recommendations. There have been further improvements since and I hope more to come.

In November last year, IPSO introduced a new system of low-cost arbitration.

It has processed more than 40,000 complaints in its first three years of operation; and has ordered multiple front page corrections or clarifications.

Newspapers have also made improvements to their governance frameworks to improve internal controls, standards and compliance.

And one regulator, IMPRESS, has been recognised under the Royal Charter.

Extensive reforms to policing practices have been made.

The College of Policing has published a code of ethics and developed national guidance for police officers on how to engage with the press.

And reforms in the Policing and Crime Act have strengthened protections for police whistleblowers.

So it is clear that we have seen significant progress, from publications, from the police and also from the newly formed regulator.

New challenges and the future

And Mr Speaker, the media landscape today is markedly different from that which Sir Brian looked at in 2011.

The way we consume news has changed dramatically.

Newspaper circulation has fallen by around 30 per cent since the conclusion of the Leveson Inquiry.

And although digital circulation is rising, publishers are finding it much harder to generate revenue online.

In 2015, for every 100 pounds newspapers lost in print revenue they gained only 3 pounds in digital revenue.

Our local papers, in particular, are under severe pressure. Local papers help to bring together local voices and shine a light on important local issues – in communities, in courtrooms, in council chambers.

And as we devolve power further to local communities, they will become even more important.

And yet, over 200 local newspapers have closed since 2015, including two in my own constituency.

There are also new challenges, that were only in their infancy back in 2011.

We have seen the dramatic and continued rise of social media, which is largely unregulated.

And issues like clickbait, fake news, malicious disinformation and online abuse, which threaten high quality journalism.

A foundation of any successful democracy is a sound basis for political discourse. This is under threat from these new forces that require urgent attention.

These are today's challenges and this is where we need to focus.

Especially as over 48 million pounds was spent on the police investigations and the Inquiry.

During the consultation, 12% of direct respondents were in favour of reopening the Leveson Inquiry, with 66% against. We agree and that is the position that we set out in our Manifesto.

Sir Brian, who I thank for his service, agrees that the Inquiry should not proceed on the current terms of reference but believes that it should continue in an amended form.

We do not believe that reopening this costly and time-consuming public inquiry is the right way forward.

Considering all of the factors that I have outlined to the House today, I have informed Sir Brian that we will be formally closing the Inquiry.

But we will take action to safeguard the lifeblood of our democratic discourse, and tackle the challenges our media face today, not a decade ago.

During the consultation, we also found serious concerns that Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 would exacerbate the problems the press face rather than solve them.

Respondents were worried that it would impose further financial burdens, especially on the local press.

One high profile figure put it very clearly. He said:

'Newspapers...are already operating in a tough environment. These proposals will make it tougher and add to the risk of self-censorship'.

'The threat of having to pay both sides' costs – no matter what the challenge – would have the effect of leaving journalists questioning every report that named an individual or included the most innocuous data about them.'

He went on to say that Section 40 risks 'damaging the future of a paper that you love' and that the impact will be to 'make it much more difficult for papers...to survive'.

These are not my words Mr Speaker, but the words of Alastair Campbell talking

about the chilling threat of Section 40. And if anyone knows about threats to the press it's Alastair Campbell.

Only 7 per cent of direct respondents favoured full commencement of Section 40. By contrast, 79 per cent favoured full repeal.

Mr Speaker, we have decided not to commence Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and to seek repeal at the earliest opportunity.

Action is needed. Not based on what might have been needed years ago – but action now to address today's problems.

Our new Digital Charter sets out the overarching programme of work to agree norms and rules for the online world and put them into practice.

Under the Digital Charter, our Internet Safety Strategy is looking at online behaviour and we will firmly tackle the problems of online abuse.

And our review into the sustainability of high quality journalism will address concerns about the impact of the Internet on our news and media.

It will do this in a forward looking way, so we can respond to the challenges of today, not the challenges of yesterday.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, the future of a vibrant press matters to us all.

There has been a huge public response to our consultation. I would like to thank every one of the 174,000 respondents as well as all those who signed petitions.

We have carefully considered all of the evidence we received. We have consulted widely, with regulators, publications and victims of press intrusion.

The world has changed since the Leveson Inquiry was established in 2011.

Since then we have seen seismic changes to the media landscape.

The work of the Leveson Inquiry, and the reforms since, have had a huge impact on public life. We thank Sir Brian Leveson for lending his dedication and expertise to the undertaking of this Inquiry.

At national and local levels, a press that can hold the powerful to account remains an essential component of our democracy.

Britain needs high-quality journalism to thrive in the new digital world.

We seek a press – a media – that is robust, and independently regulated. That reports without fear or favour.

The steps I have set out today will help give Britain a vibrant, independent and free press that holds the powerful to account and rises to the challenges

of our times.

I commend this statement to the House.