

## EDITORIAL BACKING THE BBC

'WHAT'S The Point of the BBC?' was the question addressed by *Panorama* on 7 March 2004. 1,000 people took part in an ICM poll, and the programme gave prominence to the survey results.

Some of these were confusing. Take the question on the BBC's future funding. The poll found that 31% of people supported the continuation of the licence fee; 31% thought there should be advertising on the corporation's channels and 36% thought the BBC should be funded by subscription. However the poll also found that 59% still felt the corporation was still good value for money.

Support for the BBC as an institution in the wake of the Hutton report was strong, with 68% believing that the BBC was 'a national institution we can be proud of' and a majority—54%—said that the BBC should continue to run its own affairs rather than be subject to greater control by an external regulator.

A couple of weeks before the *Panorama* programme, David Elstein published *Beyond the Charter: The BBC after 2006*, a report produced by a group of broadcasting experts for the Conservative Party. Their proposals included:

- abolishing the Board of Governors
- splitting the BBC into separate units
- introducing subscription charging for BBC television services
- setting up a new Public Broadcasting Authority to distribute public funds to all broadcasters
- abolishing the television licence fee

We believe that the report, which is very persuasive and well argued, identifies the key issues which will determine the fate of the BBC after 2006. We fundamentally disagree with the report's conclusions, but they need to be convincingly challenged. Over the coming months, both in *Free Press* and in a pamphlet we plan to produce, we will do just that. The BBC is not a perfect institution, but we are backing it for the simple reason that broadcasting should not be dominated by commercialism or subordinated to the influence of billionaire media owners.

## MURDOCH WATCHING

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

Rupert Murdoch believes that in three years there will be three global media corporations and his company, News Corporation, will be one of them. He made this comment after releasing the company's half-year results in February, 2004.

For years, Murdoch's strategy has been to build a global media group with a firm hold on content and distribution, and he has been willing to shift political allegiances, even his nationality, to achieve this. One part of that strategy was realised last December when he secured US distribution for all his content businesses by buying the US satellite pay-tv group Direct TV for \$6.6bn.

The UK, however, still remains an important focus for Murdoch and two recent news items should give us cause for concern. Back in 1995 we carried an article by John Pilger, analysing the significance of Tony Blair's trip to Australia to address News Corporation's executives. It signalled the start of the process, which led to Murdoch's papers backing Blair in the 1997 and 2001 general elections.

Fast forward to 2004. The *Independent* (2 March) carried the report: 'Michael Howard, the Tory leader, will be the star guest at the tycoon's global conference this month.' Murdoch has already raised the possibility that papers like *The Sun* could switch allegiance from Blair to the Tories if they look like a viable alternative government.

It is worth mentioning that Michael Howard's press secretary is Guy Black (formerly secretary of the Press Complaints Commission) and a long-standing



friend of Rebekah Wade, the *Sun*'s editor. Through the connection he has succeeded in getting the Conservatives favourable coverage in the tabloid.

Murdoch's dominance in UK media has also been boosted by Sky News winning the contract to supply news to Channel Five. The disturbing aspect to this is that ITN chief executive Mark Wood described Sky's bid as 'predatory and aggressive' and said, 'We could not produce a quality news programme at the kind of reduced price levels at which the new contract seems to have been awarded.'

We have been here before. Murdoch ruthlessly used predatory pricing in the 1990s. He was willing to bear huge losses during the price wars to weaken and close other newspapers.

Sky also weakened ITN in aggressive bids for the ITV news contract, forcing ITN in turn to slash the cost of its own bids to retain the contract.

The Channel 4 contract is now exposed when it comes up for renewal in 2007, especially if by then ITV has swallowed up ITN, which the Communications Act

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# Where is liberalisation taking the British media?

**DES FREEDMAN**

NEW Labour has been engaged in plans to liberalise the British media since 1994.

The 2003 Communications Act is a huge boost to this project and connects with its desire to see market principles spread to all areas of public life (see *Free Press* 134 and 135).

OFCOM, the new super-regulator created by the Communications Act, has already signalled its intent to smooth the way for further liberalisation. Led by a former adviser to Blair and a former managing director of the highly unsuccessful and debt-ridden cable company NTL, one of its first decisions was to appoint Luke Johnson as the new chairman of Channel 4. He is a businessman with no experience of broadcasting apart from the fact that he made his money from owning the restaurants in which TV stars eat. What are his real qualifications? According to someone who knows him: 'Luke's completely money-mad. There is not a scintilla of understanding of public service broadcasting in him. He does have a sort of glamour that comes from being rich and comparatively young' (*The Guardian*, 2 February 2004). Just the sort of man to deliver public service principles in a liberalised climate.

OFCOM's light touch regulation is accompanied by the highly interventionist and politicised role of government in influencing both long-term policy and everyday media content. It's not just the spin and constant harassment from Number Ten that should disturb us, but the more profound alliances between Blair and the media establishment.

Let us not forget that a decisive part of the history of New Labour was its determination to win the support of media moguls, particularly Rupert Murdoch, and the backing of the *Sun*. In 1995 Blair flew halfway round the

world to address News Corporation executives and it was New Labour MPs who argued at the time against the Conservatives in favour of loosening cross-media ownership restrictions. It was Blair who took time out of his busy schedule in 1998 to make a personal phone call to his friend Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian premier, supporting Murdoch's bid to buy an Italian TV station. In 2001 Blair accepted a £100,000 donation from porn baron Richard Desmond, the new owner of the *Express*, who was obviously wishing to curry favour with Downing Street.

Yet Labour ministers continue to claim that media policymaking is non-political, that key decisions of ownership and control are now to be policed by the apparently neutral competition authorities. A great fuss was made when Labour rebels led by Lord Puttnam won a 'public interest test' during the passage of the Communications Act to judge on whether media mergers and acquisitions could go ahead. Yet, the public interest test is to be instigated and ruled on by the secretary of state for trade and industry. So much for the depoliticisation of media policymaking.

Domestic liberalisation is being accompanied by the ongoing negotiations under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) over incorporating free trade disciplines into the audio-visual industries. GATS is moving very slowly as countries first take requests on sectors to 'open up' and then make offers based on these requests. Given that the EU has refused to make any commitments in the area of audio-visual in the name of protecting cultural diversity, it is hard to see any immediate shake-up of the media environment.

However there are two points to consider. The USA is striving for GATS to be applied to the audio-visual

sector. It has the most to gain from opening up markets across the world to Hollywood products and has responded to EU stubbornness by saying that an audiovisual exemption for the EU is 'not something that we could agree to'. Difficult and protracted negotiations look likely. Secondly, whether things move quickly or not, the principles that underlie the GATS - a firm ideological commitment to markets in all areas of public life - have been entrenched both by the multilateral negotiations and by national legislation like that passed recently in the UK and the US, with its loosening of ownership restrictions.

What are the consequences of this drive to liberalise?

The intense competition for profits sees newspapers chasing each other for populist rewards with anti-strike, anti-asylum seeker and anti-welfare stories. Can we really expect balanced, thoughtful contributions to public life in an environment driven by such narrow commercial and ideological motivations? A major exception to this lies with coverage of the Iraq war where papers like the *Mirror*, *Independent* and sometimes the *Guardian* overtly challenged government arguments. In my opinion, this is the exception that proves the rule. Critical coverage here was not proof of an innately lively and diverse press but evidence of the massive splits and arguments within the government, military, security services and amongst the public. The press became one forum in which these differences were aired. Much of this space has since been closed - look at the *Mirror's* return to a diet of celebrity gossip.

We can already see, post-Hutton, the disastrous impact of both commercial and political pressure on BBC news and current affairs as news chiefs (backed by the governors) try to avoid upsetting the government by pursuing less controversial stories.

Despite the fact that the BBC was proven to be more sympathetic to the government in its war coverage than other broadcasters, it is now clear that there is to be some sort of payback for the perception that it was critical by, for example, bringing the Corporation under the control of OFCOM, opening up licence fee payments to commercial broadcasters or turning the BBC into a subscription only organisation. These are all options that we should resist.

It is a grim picture but not too grim. The splits amongst the political and military establishment during the war gives just a glimpse of what the media could offer up as a forum of debate. The fact that BBC workers spontaneously walked out to protest against what they saw as a challenge

to the independence of the BBC is also grounds for optimism. Finally the growing demands in the anti-corporate, anti-war and anti-capitalist movements for a democratic, grass roots, accountable and independent media system is certainly symbolic of a crucial shift taking place. The issue of media policy, so often buried in corporate boardrooms, civil service offices and government bunkers, is literally taking to the streets.

**Des Freedman is a lecturer in communications and cultural studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London, the author of *The Television Policies of the Labour Party, 1951-2001* (Frank Cass) and co-editor of *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (Sage).**

## MEDIA MONITOR

### ITV TOLD KEEP IT LOCAL

FIRST Meridian, now ITV Central's Nottingham studios are faced with closure. But the company's plans are meeting strong resistance from journalists in the East Midlands newsroom. 5,000 local people have signed a petition, and the NUJ has the support of BECTU and Amicus in its campaign.

In addition forty-seven MPs have signed an early day motion, tabled by Mansfield Labour MP Alan Meale, expressing concern at the studio closure. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon is a Midlands MP but as a member of the Cabinet cannot sign an EDM. He has written to OFCOM chief executive Stephen Carter about the proposed closure and the relocation of operations to Birmingham.

The Commons Culture Media and Sport Select Committee has also thrown its support behind the NUJ campaign to keep ITV regional news produced locally. Its report, *Broadcasting in Transition* (HC 380), makes some strong recommendations, including 'the first major test for OFCOM' being 'the protection and maintenance of regional commitments by Channel 3 licensees. It also sees 'no reason why this process should not be conducted in public'.

Later on the report refers specifically to the way ITV has proceeded apace to downgrade

production facilities with 'scant consultation with the trade unions'. Again the report urges OFCOM to 'monitor the situation closely, and to take steps to safeguard the present high quality of programming in all sub-regions across the whole country. The potential threat posed by over-consolidation of regional and sub-regional news production centres will provide an early, major and crucial test for the credibility of OFCOM'.

The NUJ and ITV Central journalists have set up a website to coordinate the campaign: [www.notfrombrum.org.uk](http://www.notfrombrum.org.uk)

### THE MEDIA & THE MINERS

Channel 4 and BBC 2 aired documentaries, and newspapers produced supplements remembering the 1984-1985 miners' dispute, a mammoth industrial struggle by the miners to defend jobs and communities.

Over the years we have had films in which the dispute has been either a backcloth (*Billy Elliot*) or played a central part (*Brassed Off*). The latter film used the South Yorkshire mining village of Grimethorpe, famed for its colliery brass band, to reflect the pain and terrible suffering engendered during the yearlong strike.

It is worth pondering the fate of the mining village twenty years on.

The village is close to Cortonwood, the colliery whose threatened closure set off the dispute. On the former pit site (bought by London investors for £46.5m) is a business and retail park. But when the Grimethorpe pit closed eleven years ago (14,000 people used to work at the pit, power station and coking plant) the impact was devastating.

Today the population has fallen by a fifth to less than 4,000. Ill-health is twice the national average, educational achievements less than half, and housing prices are 80 per cent below. Add to that the massive job losses between 1971 and 1997 when 60% of industrial jobs disappeared in South Yorkshire, with the collapse of the coal, steel and engineering industries. It is now calculated that the true cost of the destruction of the mining industry - the strike, closures, redundancy, and economic and welfare costs - has been £30bn, with Grimethorpe's experience multiplied across the mining communities of England, Scotland and Wales.

The CPBF played an active role during the dispute, when most of the mainstream media were deeply hostile to the miners. We produced special issues of *Free Press*, the very popular *Media Hits the Pits* pamphlet and intervened to highlight media bias. In addition, other media workers produced the Miners Campaign series of videos and Fleet Street print unions a Right of Reply special to support the miners. Printers on *The Sun* also refused to print the notorious MINE FUHRER front page with a picture of Arthur Scargill suggesting his wave to miners was a Nazi salute.

Of course this was not enough. Our efforts were puny compared to the resources the government and the National Coal Board could draw on to influence the media. For example the advertising campaign orchestrating the Return to Work offensive, coordinated by a special NCB unit in Coal House, Doncaster, spent £4.5m on advertising to break the miners' solidarity.

**For those who want a powerful fictional treatment of the miners' dispute try the recently published novel by David Peace, *GB84* (Faber, £12.99)**

# Campbell in denial

NICHOLAS JONES

WHEN it comes to facing up to his own past, Alastair Campbell remains in denial, unable to recognise the damage which he did to both the democratic process and political journalism.

An audience at the Royal Festival Hall with Tony Blair's former spin supremo began as an exercise in self justification and turned into an extended rant against the reporting standards of British newspapers, television and radio—a news media which he claimed was more distrusted than anywhere else in Europe.

British journalists were castigated for expressing greater distaste and contempt for politicians than their counterparts across the Channel, a sin from which Campbell exonerated himself on the grounds that in his career he had 'never disparaged politics or politicians' or 'sought to undermine people in public life.'

His clean bill of health for himself sat uncomfortably with what became a rather odious spectacle as he used every opportunity to get a cheap laugh by putting the boot into Clare Short.

Paul Dacre, the *Daily Mail* editor, was his principal hate figure but time and again he went out of his way to express his contempt for the views of the former International Development Secretary, neatly forgetting that, unlike himself, she was after all a democratically-elected politician.

Campbell spoke eloquently about his training as a journalist in 1980 on the *Mirror* group scheme in Plymouth where he met his partner Fiona Millar; his enthusiasm shone through once he realised his future lay in journalism. Sadly he did not care to reflect on his own failure to show support and solidarity for the many valiant souls within the media industry who work so hard to enthuse the reporters of tomorrow and try to instill in them high ethical standards and a proper sense of fairness.

In his six and a half years he spent in Downing Street, first as Blair's official spokesman and then as director of communications, Campbell had an unparalleled opportunity to help raise the standards of political journalism.

He could have done his bit to drive up levels of accuracy and fairness by ensuring a level playing field for all political journalists at Westminster; he could have tried to counter to the growth in unsourced and exaggerated stories by insisting that



he, and the rest of the party spin doctors under his control, always spoke on the record whenever possible and went out of their way to ensure that their own quotes were properly attributed.

Instead Campbell took advantage of the commercial pressures which have driven down journalistic standards. He exploited the demand for exclusives by offering access and interviews in return for favourable coverage; he encouraged the trade in off-the-record tip offs; he destroyed what trust remained between the lobby and Downing Street; and he undermined the authority of the Speaker by blatantly trailing ministerial statements before they were announced in Parliament.

Control over the flow of information from the government to the media became Campbell's personal fiefdom. For example, as the Hutton Inquiry confirmed, he chose the six journalists who were the first to be given exclusive copies of the second, so called 'dodgy' dossier on Iraq.

At the height of his efforts to 'f\*\*\*' Andrew Gilligan, he was overheard suggesting to Geoff Hoon that the news that the source had come forward should 'be given that evening to one paper.'

Campbell was only too anxious to assist those journalists who were hell bent on outing Dr David Kelly and who showed a complete disregard for the NUJ's code of conduct and the requirement that journalists should 'protect confidential sources of information.'

No political correspondent would have had any doubts about the likely recipient of Campbell's hot tip about Gilligan's source; it would, of course,

## WITHOUT COMMENT

“ Campbell was on Radio Five Live the other day, criticising the fact that the British media does not know how to separate news from comment.

If anybody in the *Daily Mirror*'s reference library has copies of the pieces Campbell wrote for the paper when he was political editor in the early Nineties, would they please send them to him. The poor man seems to have forgotten all about them. ”

Vincent Graff, *The Independent*  
3 March, 2004

have been *The Times*, which along with the rest of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers enjoyed a steady stream of exclusives bearing Campbell's imprimatur.

In view of the one-way traffic from Downing Street to News International it came as no surprise to hear Campbell use his Royal Festival Hall appearance to salute Murdoch as 'probably the most powerful and influential media owner' in the country.

In describing his new life as a sports columnist, Campbell said he had taken his own 'journalistic wares' to *The Times* because it was the 'straightest dealing' paper which he had to deal with when he was in Downing Street.

When it come to the reasoning behind his outburst in *The Times* against the racist taunts which he had heard during the recent Milwall v Burnley match, Campbell failed to see the mote in his own eye.

His comper for the evening was Ross Kemp, whose partner, *The Sun* editor Rebekah Wade, was in the audience. Unfortunately our doughty defender of journalistic standards failed to rise to the occasion and remind Ms Wade that it is scare stories about asylum seekers in newspapers like *The Sun* which top up a well of the racism that find its voice among certain football supporters.

I agree with Campbell that political correspondents must be held to account. Our failings may well have contributed to declining levels of trust in the democratic process. That being the case, I would love nothing more than a chance to debate this with him.

If given the chance, I would seek to justify the assertion which I have made repeatedly in my books and articles that Campbell's regime in the No. 10 press office aided and abetted the decline in standards which he complains of.

However, on this issue, I know what his response will be: a firm 'No'. I have heard him rehearse his answer on so many occasions: he would not waste his breath addressing all that rubbish that I have written about spin and the process of political communication.

No Alastair it won't wash. If you want my opinion, I think you are right when it comes to examining your own conduct. I heard your appeal for 'a more honest debate' about the 'sourness and cynicism in the coverage of politics.'

You condemn political journalists for their 'culture of negativity.' What about your own negativity towards journalism? You had your chance to help journalists uphold the first rule in the NUJ's code of conduct—that of maintaining the 'highest professional and ethical standards'—and in my opinion you blew it.

Nicholas Jones is the author of numerous books on spin doctors. The article is based on his visit to An Audience with Alastair Campbell at the Royal Festival Hall on 1 March 2004.



# Katharine Gun is free...

**'It's quite appalling that a whistleblower who acted in good conscience should have been threatened with two years' imprisonment for exposing that the American government had asked our government to do something which was illegal, and would have undermined the deliberations of the United Nations'**

John Welch, Katharine Gun's solicitor.

BARRY WHITE

WEDNESDAY 25 February is a day Katharine Gun will remember for the rest of her life. She had expected the worst, but the weekend before the case was due to be heard at the Old Bailey, there were rumours that the charge against her would be dropped. And on script prosecution counsel Mark Ellison told the court that: 'The prosecution offer no evidence against the defendant on this indictment as there is no longer sufficient evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction. It would not be appropriate to go into the reasons for this decision.'

As the flack began to clear from the Old Bailey, Claire Short chimed in with revelations about bugging operations at the UN and calls were made for her to be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act. Questions about whether the government did co-operate with the US in their 'dirty tricks' operation aimed at discovering the voting intentions of certain UN delegations on the eve of war remain unanswered (despite attempts to get answers in Parliament); and the government still refuses to publish in full the Attorney General's legal advice which made the

legal case for war. Having avoided the prospect of revealing this legal case for war at Katharine Gun's trial, the government must have breathed a sigh of relief when on 10 March, lawyers acting for the attorney general succeeded in preventing it from being revealed in court, in the case of 14 Greenpeace activists charged with aggravated trespass for chaining themselves to tanks at a military port near Southampton.

It was David Shayler who succeeded in getting the defence of necessity on appeal to the Law Lords. It did not do him much good, but it was a godsend to Katharine Gun's defence. This meant that if the defendant could show they were acting out of necessity or under duress, the jury had to hear their case. Once the government realised that her lawyers would play this trump card, they knew that it would be almost impossible to get a jury to convict, so the case was dropped. But they came back with a sting in the tail, the ominous news of a review, initiated by Downing Street, of the 1989 Official Secrets Act.

It's not clear just who will be conducting this review, but with a raft of anti-terrorism laws behind, New Labour could well go for a further tightening of the law. Out could go the defence of necessity; out could go jury trials. In would come closed sessions, anonymous witnesses and a ban on reporting. Never mind the right to a fair trial under the Human Rights Act, no civil liberty must stand in the way of the government's war on terror. The right to freedom of expression and the public's right to know will be threatened unless a vigorous campaign is launched to counter the government's attack.

# ...but the sting is in the tail

## Judge drops Bloody Sunday threat

TIM GOPSILL

THE Bloody Sunday Inquiry has dropped its threat to prosecute two TV journalists threatened with prosecution for refusing to divulge their sources to the Bloody Sunday inquiry.

Lord Saville, the chairman of the tribunal looking into the killing of 13 people in Derry in 1972, said when the inquiry ended on February 13 that no action would be taken against Alex Thomson or Lena Ferguson.

Alex Thomson, chief correspondent of Channel 4 News, and Lena Ferguson, now head of political programmes at BBC Northern Ireland, had interviewed five former paratroopers for Channel 4 Reports. Filmed in silhouette, the soldiers said they had opened fire without being fired on - a crucial denial of the official line. They had only agreed to be interviewed on condition their identities were kept secret.

The journalists defied Saville's orders for them to name the soldiers - though they did agree to contact them and ask them to relieve them of their duty of confidentiality. Two of the soldiers agreed, and a third was already known to the inquiry, but the journalists still refused to name the remaining two.

The National Union of Journalists was backing the pair in their refusal to betray their sources.

### Where the money goes

(1) ACCORDING to the Financial Times (10/3/4) OFCOM will cost £164m in 2004-2005 compared with a combined £115m for the five bodies it replaced in 2002-2003.

(2) The Culture Media and Sport Select Committee publication Number 12 has this item in its comments on the DCMS Annual Report: 'External consultancy services have been used by DCMS. Spending on these services was £358,000 in 2001-02, £595,000 in 2002-03, and is expected to be £540,000 in 2003-04 and £444,000 and £340,000 in the following two years respectively. We were concerned by the amount of money that has been, and will be, spent on

Departmental administration and external consultants without it being clearly and transparently spelt out in the Annual Report.'

### Racism & the media

Update on FP 138

IN the last issue we highlighted the racist coverage of immigration in papers like *The Sun* and *Daily Express*. *The Express* carried headlines such as BRITAIN HERE WE COME and WE CAN'T COPE WITH HUGE GIPSY INVASION to accompany stories that all the gypsies in the states joining the EU in May would come to the UK and claim benefits.

Journalists on Express Newspapers in London have condemned their own paper's 'racist' coverage of immigration and demanded a 'conscience clause' to allow them to opt out of working on such stories.

At a packed chapel meeting a resolution expressed concern about the pressure put on journalists to write anti-gypsy articles and called for a letter to be sent to the PCC 'reminding it of the need to protect journalists who are unwilling to write racist articles which are contrary to the NUJ Code of Conduct'.

This is the second time the NUJ has complained to the PCC about racist coverage in the Express. In 2001 the union submitted a complaint after a revolt by the Express chapel over a week of splashes attacking refugees.

Journalists said, as they do now, that it was pressure from proprietor Richard Desmond that was driving such coverage.

### Redwatch, the BNP and the NUJ

THE British National Party (BNP) is to field over 600 local council election candidates this summer. *Searchlight*, the anti-fascist magazine comments: 'This year will either propel the BNP into the European parliament and dozens of local councils, like similar fascist organisations in other West European countries, or shove it back into the margins of political life, its bubble having burst.'

The BNP pay a good deal of attention to the media. Indeed there is clear evidence that they have a



concerted campaign to intimidate those members of the NUJ who publicise and highlight in the local, regional and national press the real policies and unpleasant characters behind the BNP. The Redwatch web site has the names, photos and other details of journalists on it, as well as other trade unionists active in organising against the BNP. The clear intention is to make people named on the site targets for attack.

On 16 February the BNP decided to protest outside the NUJ HQ in London. The mobilisation was a flop for them. A counter-demonstration leafleted passers-by. The leaflet contained an unequivocal statement applauding and supporting '...the journalists and newspapers around the country that do investigate and expose the BNP and their lies. We will resist all intimidation by the BNP - it is a fascist organisation.'

### No conscience clause

THE idea of a conscience clause, to protect journalists who refuse to write stories on moral grounds, will not be included in the revised Editors' Code of Practice.

A committee of editors looking at revisions to the code, which guides the work of the Press Complaints Commission, decided that it should be up to editors to be the conscience of newspapers and magazines, not individual journalists.

The idea of a conscience clause has long been supported by the NUJ.

## Freedom of Information: 'to deter malpractice'

MAURICE FRANKEL

'A GOVERNMENT which pursues secret aims, or which operates in greater secrecy than the effective conduct of its proper functions requires, or which turns information services into propaganda agencies, will lose the trust of the people.' Despite its contemporary ring this is not a recent quote: it comes from the 1972 Franks report on the old Official Secrets Act. It shows how long the dangers of excessive secrecy to government itself have been recognised.

The theme was taken up by the recent Phillis report into the government communications service. The report argued that, properly implemented, the Freedom of Information Act would deter partisan reporting and spin and provide an essential opportunity for the government to rebuild trust. But it warned that some of the Act's shortcomings could make things worse. In particular, it called on the government to voluntarily renounce the ministerial veto, which

allows ministers to overrule the Information Commissioner in key areas. Unfortunately, the government has refused to do so. The Hutton report did not directly refer to the issue of secrecy, but the openness of the inquiry itself made the point far more eloquently. By the time the report was published, the public had seen the evidence, understood its implications and appreciated how misleading the government's own account of its conduct had been. Remarkably, none of this was reflected in the Hutton report itself. But this only served to increase the scepticism of a public which had seen the material itself. As William Rees Mogg put it in *The Times*: 'Public opinion has overturned Lord Hutton on appeal.'

One of the purposes of an FOI Act is to deter malpractice in government and allow the public to check that authorities are doing their job properly. Many requests will be prompted by a suspicion - perhaps

unjustified - of some government shortcoming. An authority which fails to respond openly can only reinforce the belief that something disreputable is being hidden. But an authority which goes out of its way to answer properly, even if the news is not all good, has a real chance of persuading people that it is trying to address, not cover up, its problems.

Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's former press chief, in his post-Hutton statement may have put his finger on a real issue when he said: 'If the public knew the truth about politicians they would be pleasantly surprised.' If this is true, then the secrecy which too often characterises government's behaviour must be deeply counterproductive, serving only to conceal how conscientiously the system works. It can only be in the government's interests to let the public see more. Of course, if Campbell's dictum is not true, the case for FOI as a check on misbehaviour becomes greater than ever.

Maurice Frankel is Director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information

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allows it to. In which case Sky could be the only bidder for the Channel 4 contract.

Rupert Murdoch's newspapers have been the loudest and most consistent advocates of abolishing the impartiality regulations in broadcast news. Chris Shaw, programme controller at Five, also believes that the impartiality requirements on broadcast news should be relaxed. There is a great danger that sections of UK broadcast news could be subjected to the same treatment as Fox News in the US.

We have long argued that Rupert Murdoch's media power has given him an excessive and dangerous influence in UK politics. Politicians foolishly think they can do deals with him when the only sensible course is to challenge and limit his media power. Tony Blair may soon regret that he did not follow this course, if after all the attempts to ingratiate himself with Murdoch, the media mogul decides it is time to dump Blair before the next general election.

## Fund raising—a great start

GEOFF MASON  
CPBF National Treasurer

WE launched our appeal for £75,000 in the last issue of *Free Press*, and we're off to a great start. We have made a successful bid for £25,000 from UNISON, Britain's largest public service union. A meeting of UNISON's General Political Fund Committee in early March considered our detailed submission and agreed to support it in full. We are really grateful for this generous support.

We have also been receiving donations from our readers, supporters and trade union branches. Sums ranging from £2.00 to £35.00 have been received from individuals as well as donations of £25.00 from TGWU 1/735 Camden Acts branch and £100.00 from Croydon and Crystal Palace Amicus-MSF branch.

A collection at the very successful Leeds public meeting on 12 February raised over £127.00.

We are approaching other funding bodies and will know whether we are successful in the next few weeks. We are also launching an appeal amongst our affiliated trade unions in the spring.

Our campaign in support of the BBC and public service broadcasting is a key priority over the next couple of years. We've made an excellent start but we must not be complacent. We need to raise £75,000 to mount an effective campaign and we still have a long way to go.

## CPBF NEWS

### PUBLIC INTEREST TESTS

We have responded to the Department of Trade and Industry's consultation document, *Intervention in Media Mergers*. The document describes the procedures which will be followed when media public interest considerations arise as a result of newspaper, broadcasting and cross-media mergers occur.

These tests were introduced into the Communications Bill as a result of concerns about the drastic impact of the bill's proposals on media ownership and broadcasting standards.

The CPBF response highlights the need for possible interventions. On the newspaper test we argue that if either the Mail or Express group are successful in bidding for the Telegraph group where should be an investigation, particularly on the grounds of accurate presentation of news.

On the broadcasting and cross media test we cite as examples for possible intervention a possible Channel 4 and Five merger, and the

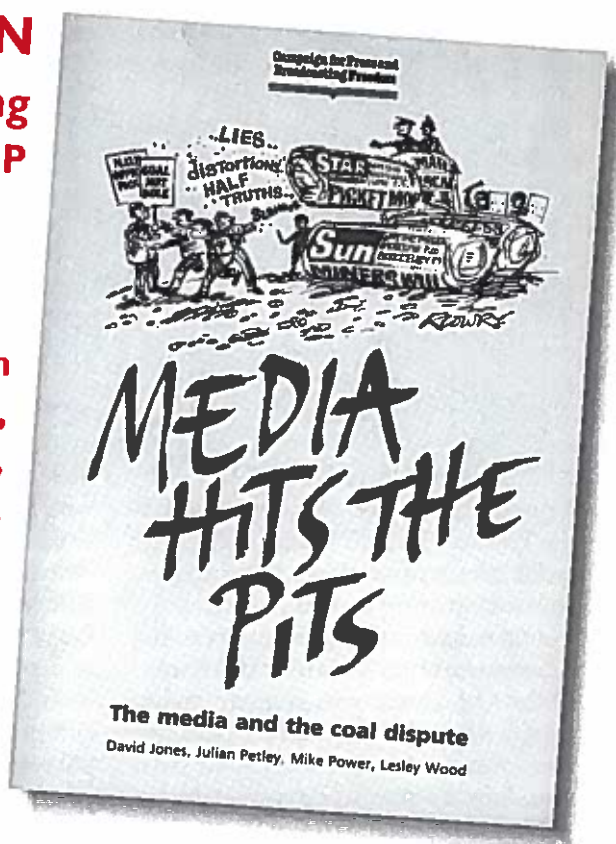
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award of the Channel Five news contract to Sky News.

We conclude that the tests must be robust and rigorous in their implementation otherwise they may be seen as 'just gestures to assuage the concerns of people about the threats to media diversity and broadcasting standards'.

The full text of the response is on the CPBF website: [www.cpbf.org.uk](http://www.cpbf.org.uk)



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