



BONUS CASE STUDY: THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

Events

The Leveson Inquiry, established in 2011, was the seventh time in seventy years that a report had been commissioned by the Government to deal with concerns about the press. The public, judge led inquiry was set up by David Cameron in response to the public revulsion at the hacking of a mobile phone of a murdered teenager by the News of the World. The remit of the inquiry included the culture, practices and ethics of the press in its relations with the public, with the police, and with politicians. The Leveson Inquiry report was published in November 2012 and the News of the World was shut down by its parent company, News International, in 2011 after the allegations came to light. The second part of the Leveson Inquiry was to investigate specific claims about phone-hacking at the News of the World and what went wrong with the original police investigation but this was placed on hold whilst three major police investigations took place.

In the middle of February 2019, May asked the Commons to endorse the government's negotiating strategy. It was defeated, with MPs voting by 303 to 258 - a majority of 45 – against. The defeat had no legal force and Downing Street said it would not change the PM's approach to talks with the EU arguing the PM would continue to seek legally binding changes to the Irish backstop, as MPs had instructed her to do in a Commons vote on 29 January.

Significance

The report reflected the importance of the free press as a cornerstone of democracy, and clearly stated that for a majority of the time the British press had served the country well. In particular the report referenced the investigative journalism that uncovered the Thalidomide scandal, the campaign to bring the murderers of Stephen Lawrence to justice and the exposing of the MPs' scandal. However the Inquiry found that on too many occasions the press had failed to live up to its responsibilities to the public interest; to obey the law, respect the truth and to uphold the rights and freedoms of individuals. In particular, it was felt that the body with the responsibility to deal with complaints against the press, the Press Complaints Commission, was not fit for purpose.

Leveson recommended the establishment of a new independent self-regulatory system, underpinned by legislation so that it would be recognised in the legal process. This proposal for legislation was opposed by much of the press and the Conservative party, seeing it as opening up the potential to restrict the freedom of the press in the future. In the end, rather than using statute law, a Royal Charter was created, which set up the Press Recognition Panel to ensure that the regulatory system set up by the industry is adequately independent and effective. The press industry meanwhile established its own new regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and it regulates around 95% of national newspapers by circulation. In 2016, an independent review of IPSO by the civil servant Sir Joseph Pilling, reported that IPSO was largely compliant with Leveson although IPSO has never sought recognition from the Press Recognition Panel and so has been described by the campaigning group Hacked Off as not independent, not transparent or effective as a regulator and not meeting the requirements of Leveson. A second body IMPRESS, was also established and as of 2021 regulates one hundred and nine publishers. IMPRESS has sought and received recognition for the Press Recognition Panel and so meets the requirements of Leveson.

In 2018, at the completion of all the police investigations during which forty people were convicted of a range of offences, the Conservative government announced that part of Leveson would no longer go ahead. Matt Hancock, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport stated that the police investigations meant that the

remit of Leveson 2 had already been met and that there had been extensive reforms to policing practices and significant changes to press self-regulation. He also stated that the government would no longer proceed with Section 40 cost provision laws that would have forced newspapers to pay both sides' legal costs, win or lose in court if they had not signed up to a Royal Charter regulator. Shadow Culture Secretary Tom Watson described the closure of Leveson and the failure to proceed with Section 40 laws as a disappointment, a breach of trust and bitter blow to the victims of press intrusion.