

The Leveson Inquiry into the British press - oh, what a lovely game

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Rupert Murdoch is a bad man. His son James is also bad. Rebekah Brooks is allegedly bad. The News of the World was very bad; it hacked phones and pilloried people. British prime ministers grovelled before this iniquity. David Cameron even sent text messages to Brooks signed "LOL", and they all had parties in the Cotswolds with Jeremy Clarkson. Nods and winks were duly exchanged on the BSkyB deal.

Shock, horror.

Offering glimpses of the power and petty gangsterism of the British tabloid press, the inquiry conducted by Lord Leveson has, I suspect, shocked few people. As the soap has rolled on, bemusement has given way to boredom. Tony Blair was allowed to whine about the Daily Mail's treatment of his wife until he and the inquiry's amoral smugness protecting him were exposed by a member of the public, David Lawley-Wakelin, who shouted, "Excuse me, this man should be arrested for war crimes." His Lordship duly apologised to the war criminal and the truth-teller was seen off.

Why Murdoch should complain about the British establishment has always mystified me. His interrogation, if that is the word, by Robert Jay QC, was a series of verbal marshmallows that Murdoch promptly spat out. When he described one of his own rambling, self-satisfied questions as "subtle", Jay received this deft dismissal from Murdoch: "I'm afraid I don't have much subtlety in me."

As the theatre critic Michael Billington reminded us recently, it was in the Spectator in 1955 that Henry Fairlie coined the term "the establishment", defining it as "the matrix of official and social relations within which power in Britain is exercised". For most of my career as a journalist, Murdoch has been an influential and admired member of this club: even a mentor to many of those now casting him as a "bad apple". His deeply cynical mantra, "I'm only giving the public what they want", was echoed by journalists and broadcasters as they lined up to dumb down their work and embrace the propaganda of corporatism that followed Murdoch's bloody move to Wapping in 1986.

More than 5,000 men and women were sacked, and countless families destroyed and suicides committed; and Murdoch could not have got away with it had Margaret Thatcher and the Metropolitan Police not given him total, often secret support, and journalists not lain face down on the floors of buses that drove perilously through the picket lines of their former, principled colleagues.

Cheering him on, if discreetly, were those now running what Max Hastings has called the

“new establishment”: the media’s managerial middle class, often liberal to a fault, that was later to fall at the feet of Murdoch’s man Blair, the future war criminal, whose election as prime minister was celebrated in the Guardian with: “Few now sang England Arise, but England has risen all the same.”

Leveson has asked nothing about how the respectable media complemented the Murdoch press in systematically promoting corrupt, mendacious, often violent political power whose crimes make phone-hacking barely a misdemeanour. The Leveson inquiry is a club matter, in which a member has caused such extraordinary public embarrassment he must be black-balled, so that nothing changes.

What jolly fun to hear Jeremy Paxman grass on Piers Morgan who, he gossiped, described to him how to hack phones. Paxman was asked nothing by Jay about the essential role of the BBC and its leading lights as state propagandists for illegal wars that have killed, maimed and dispossessed millions. How ironic that the lunch Paxman attended at the Daily Mirror appears to have been in 2002 when the Mirror, edited by Morgan, was the only Fleet Street newspaper uncompromisingly opposed to the coming invasion of Iraq: thus reflecting the wishes of the majority of the British public.

And what a wheeze it was to hear from the clubbable Andrew Marr, the BBC’s ubiquitous voice: he of the super-injunction. Just as Murdoch’s Sun declared in 1995 that it shared the rising Blair’s “high moral values”, so Marr, writing in the Observer in 1999, lauded the new prime minister’s “substantial moral courage”. What impressed Marr was Blair’s “utter lack of cynicism”, along with his bombing of Yugoslavia which would “save lives”. By March 2003, Marr was the BBC’s political editor. Standing in Downing Street on the night of the assault on Iraq, he rejoiced at the vindication of Blair who, he said, had promised “to take Baghdad without a bloodbath”. The diametric opposite was true. In hawking his self-serving book in 2010, Blair selected Marr for his “exclusive TV interview”. During their convivial encounter they discussed an attack on Iran, the country Hillary Clinton once said she was prepared to “obliterate”.

In the text messages disclosed by Leveson between Murdoch lobbyist Frederic Michel and Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, there is this one from Michel: “Very good on Marr as always”. In a cable leaked to WikiLeaks, the US embassy in London urged Hillary Clinton to be interviewed by the “congenial” Marr because he often “sets the political agenda for the nation” and “will offer maximum impact for your investment of time”. Inquisitor Jay showed no interest.

When Alastair Campbell “gave evidence”, Jay waved a copy of Blair’s *A Journey* and quoted Blair’s view of his chief collaborator as “a genius”.

“Sweet,” responded Campbell.

“And with great clunking balls as well,” continued Jay QC, awaiting the laughter. The silence of 780,000 Iraqi widows was a presence.

Not a single opponent of the institutional power of the media has been called by Leveson, though farce is welcomed. Richard Desmond, who owns the Daily Express and a section of the British porn industry, during his appearance damned the Daily Mail as “Britain’s worst enemy” and said the Press Complaints Commission “hated our guts”.

Shock, horror. Or just sweet.

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