

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

From the Chairman

The Rt. Hon. the Lord Luce, KG, GCVO
House of Lords London
SW1A 0PW

23rd March 2010

Dear Richard,

Thank you for your letter of 17th March. I should firstly point out that the Governance Review is being conducted independently of me, and the PCC. The Review made a public request for submissions last year, and the closing date was the end of January. I have still passed your letter to the Chairman of the Review so that it can take note of the contents, as it continues its examination of the PCC and its processes.

However, I would like to respond to some of your comments in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission. I am grateful to you for taking the trouble to get in touch, and I can ensure you that I have looked at what you have to say very carefully. I know the Governance Review will do the same.

You will forgive me for disputing some of your analysis, which is based – I have to say – on a somewhat superficial knowledge of what the PCC actually does. I notice that you were Minister for the Arts in the 1980s - things have changed radically over the past 25 years - and very much for the better!

I am pleased that we agree that an effective PCC is the most appropriate means of regulating the press, and that a press free from Governmental interference is a necessary part of a democratic society. However, I would like, if I may, to offer some information about the workings of the PCC, which may be useful in shaping your continued thinking on this subject. I have followed your letter in numbering my thoughts:

1. The PCC is interested in upholding and improving standards in the press, as defined by a specific Code of Practice. We cannot help, though, with concerns - often very subjective - that the press has become more downmarket or trivial. I am sure you would agree that such complaints cannot be an issue for a regulatory body like the PCC.

CHAIRMAN
Baroness Buscombe

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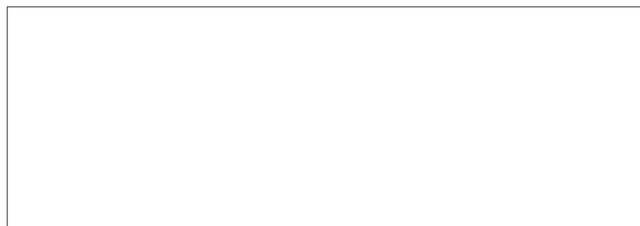
DIRECTOR
Stephen Abell



2. The PCC already has a clear majority of lay members (ten, including me; as against seven editors). A lay majority has been the prerequisite of the PCC since its inception in 1991! Indeed, the PCC has greater lay involvement than any press council in Europe.
3. The PCC is already far more proactive than you credit. We regularly, almost daily, approach people at the centre of news stories to offer assistance. Indeed, we contacted the McCanns themselves barely a day after the story broke. When individuals are faced with an unwelcome media barrage, we step in and ask the press to cease contacting them. We do this with both the print journalists and broadcasters (as, interestingly, OFCOM has no powers to engage at all pre-broadcast).
4. Much of the PCC's work is still taken up with complaints of inaccuracy. We require editors to put mistakes right quickly and prominently. Recent figures show that over 85% of PCC-negotiated corrections and apologies appear no further back than the original transgression, or in a designated corrections column.
5. You will see, therefore, that the "conciliation service" to which you refer is already very much in place. We are committed to making it even better.
6. The sanction of the PCC currently is publicly to criticise the editor, and make him or her publish those criticisms prominently in the paper itself. Editors, as you might imagine, are terribly concerned about facing up to making mistakes. An upheld PCC adjudication is a blot on their record. It can also lead to disciplinary action, as adherence to the Code is written into most journalists' contracts.
7. The PCC is currently funded by the newspaper industry (as it should be; the taxpayer should not pay for it). As Chairman, one of my duties is to ensure that our funding matches our requirements, and I take that very seriously.

I would be happy to talk over any of these issues with you, if you would like. In any case, your thoughts will be conveyed to the Governance Review for further consideration.

With kind regards.



Baroness Buscombe

