



Belfast Telegraph

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From the Editor

9 July 2012

Kim Brudenell
Solicitor to the Inquiry
The Leveson Inquiry
Royal Courts of Justice
Strand
LONDON
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Dear Kim Brudenell

Thank you for your letter of 29 January 2012. I enclose my statement below

My name is Mike Gilson. I am the editor of the Belfast Telegraph.

I was not personally involved in the Lord Black proposals but I was consulted at an earlier stage when the plan was less fleshed out. I sent copies of my response to both Bob Satchwell at the Society of Editors and Lord Hunt at the Press Complaints Commission.

My opinion on whether the Belfast Telegraph joined a new regulatory system based on contractual obligations would be important but not the only one. Chief Executive of Independent News and Media (Northern Ireland) Michael Brophy would make the final decision but would take guidance from myself. Once we had discussed such a move and made our decision that would be communicated to INM head office in Dublin. The Republic would of course remain outside the remit of any such new system so would be unaffected.

Briefings and negotiations are of course still ongoing and more meetings with representatives of the Press Standards Board of Finance and the Newspaper Society are arranged for very early August so we are not in a position to "push the button" just yet. Specifically we will, within the next few weeks, want to see more detail of the cost of these proposals. While we willingly contribute to the cost of running the Press Complaints Commission and, in principle, have absolutely no objection to funding a new body we would want to understand the financial implications of supporting what is in effect a more powerful body with potential attendant higher costings.

Of course we would also be seeking our own legal advice about the nature of the new contract and how it would affect our company and its operations in Northern Ireland. At this stage we would also need to identify the senior figure within the company responsible for overseeing and monitoring compliance with the new codes. My view is that this person should be the editor. Anything that removes him or her from the forefront of this process should not be taken lightly.

I would also add that we would be slightly concerned about representation on the Complaints Committee. A case is made for a separate member to be present on behalf of Scottish newspapers (presumably because of the slightly different nature of its legal system) but Northern Ireland is to be included in the provision of just one representative for the entire UK regional press. This ignores the different nature of the press here and the separate identity of its government and legal system. We would want further discussions on this.

Fundamentally there would be little difference at the Belfast Telegraph between now and under the proposals set out. Our systems here are strong. Under the Managing Editor and with the support of the Group Editorial Executive compliance with the PCC's code of conduct is rigorously enforced. Every reporter and freelance journalist is given a copy of the code and regular updates and briefings both by email and in person are conducted by the aforementioned senior members of staff. All decisions that may involve either ethical or legal considerations are passed to the editor, myself, for final decision.

One clear area of change would be within our administration. All correspondence with statutory bodies, members of the public and the courts concerning complaints are carefully filed. However in honesty our systems for recording the route of decision making over particular stories would have to be improved in order to satisfy the the demands of an annual audit. I do not think this would take much. The foundations are in place.

In a nutshell I think Lord Black's proposals are the most convincing I have seen so far. I believe they would satisfy the public demand for tougher self regulation while staving off the spectre that no-one wants to see, statutory intervention. The injection of more members of the public into the Regulatory body, including the Code Committee (on which I sat between 2003-09), is a welcome move towards transparency. Together with the full publication of minutes, the annual audit under the compliance arm of the body and the many checks and balances put into the system there is plenty to give one faith that this is indeed a new start and not a rehash of the old order to get the monkey off our backs.

To some extent this is a leap into the dark for newspapers, especially given the stormy financial waters in which we sail, given that we cannot know how tough or otherwise the financial sanctions might turn out to be. In many ways this will depend on the nature of the personnel at the new Regulator. In that it shows a deal of good faith by our industry. I'm not sure many others would take such a step into the unknown. I have one or two issues with the fine detail which as I have explained earlier I have not yet had the chance to discuss with the proposers of the new system. I have my doubts about the sanctions for not signing a contract. Withdrawal of PA services feels a bit "left field" to me and I am not sure would be effectively binding. Newspapers would simply do without it to the obvious detriment of PA itself.

I do not think it is wise to try to implement a sanction involving the withdrawal of private "major advertisers" but the placement of public sector advertising only with media that has signed contracts may well be a sensible option. Overall there is much to recommend within Lord Black's proposals. However the Belfast Telegraph reserves the right at this stage to consider and consult further before fully committing itself.

If I can be of any further help please do not hesitate to contact me

Yours sincerely



Mike Gilson
Editor