

SUBMISSION TO THE LEVESON INQUIRY

From Quentin Letts, freelance journalist

As one of the armpit scratchers of Fleet Street who have been writing articles about your inquiry, I was reluctant to make a formal submission on the grounds that I am already having my say in print. However, a brief exchange I had with Robert Jay QC made me feel I should make a tiny point about this much-chewed "fusion between fact and comment" in newspapers.

I am a political sketchwriter. I first tried my hand at this long-established genre at the end of the Thatcher Government. At present my sketches appear in the Daily Mail, though I submit these remarks to you as a freelance.

Mr Jay, during evidence, has heard occasionally about Westminster's "lobby" journalists. But does he understand what the term means? In the courtroom one morning, as we gathered before play, I amiably explained to Mr Jay that we sketchwriters are not in the "lobby". We are "gallery" reporters. This seemed to come to him as a revelation.

What is the difference? Well, "lobby" reporters have daily interaction, sometimes over lunch or tea, with politicians. They have passes which admit them to the lobby outside the House of Commons. They seek exclusive news stories.

We "gallery" specimens have access only to the gallery of the Commons and Lords. I do sometimes bump into MPs but seldom dine or drink with them. I generally try to avoid them because it is harder to write about them freely if one becomes acquainted with them. The editor of the Mail does not lean on me to take any "line" in my sketches. Nor does anyone else.

Political sketches may appear on papers' news pages but they are laden with adjectives. They groan with opinion. In sketches you will find more "fusion" than in a nuclear scientist's test tube. Quite right, too! When writing these "fusions" I take the approach of a member of the public writing a letter to friends. I suppose I could as easily sit in the public gallery as in the press gallery but there used to be a rule that notes could not be taken in the public gallery.

MPs may tell you that sketches are unfair. One Speaker of the Commons threatened to ban me from the premises after I tweaked his purpling hooter (in the metaphorical sense). A Labour MP, Jim Sheridan, complained on the floor of the House about sketchwriters "abusing the facilities". By that he meant that we wrote unkindly about our legislators. We had not been generous enough to these great Solomons. Menaces are not one-way traffic in the press-political world.

Sketchwriters certainly suck hard on the character traits of parliamentarians rather than on the small print of parliamentary Bills. Lord Justice Leveson, on June 11, spoke warily about "the politics of personality" but if a sketchwriter avoided the personalities in politics he or she would use little ink. Our readers - voters, most of them - are interested in those personalities. The human theatre of parliament engages them in the civic process. Kill that and you will not only put a few mouldy-corduoyed scribes out of beans and beer. You will also snap a small toothpick in the struts of our democracy.

The inquiry has, to my ear, been pejorative about the "fusion of fact and opinion". To lawyers, such a melding may be distasteful. The lawyer likes to sterilise fact as the better barbers sterilise their combs. But in the Grand National of Westminster politics, things are less orderly and need to be so, if that parliament is to reflect the country it rules. There is, in journalism, a perfectly ethical place for sketchwriting, despite its subjectivity, its bias, its dreaded "fusion". If we failed to convey the clamour and verve of the Commons, we would be failing our readers and failing the kingdom. But you may not start to comprehend that until you grasp the difference between a "lobby" reporter and others in the fourth estate.