

Comment

If anyone, then, is to practise deception, either on the country's enemies or on its citizens, it must be the Rulers of the commonwealth, acting for its benefit; no one else may meddle with this privilege.

Plato. The Republic Book III

On 14 January the British government was forced to rush into print the long-awaited report by Sir David Calcutt Q.C. on the effectiveness of voluntary self-regulation by the British press. The urgency of the government's action points out the liveliness of the debate on the question of the censorship of the press which the report seemed to promise. Undoubtedly, significant and distasteful invasions of the privacy of individuals have taken place in recent years. In general it is the tabloid newspapers which have been blamed for such escapades. The 'quality' press has often found itself in the satisfactory marketing position of repeating the substance of tabloid stories, but only in order to condemn them; a peculiar form of journalistic *delectatio morosa*. Needless to say, much of the newspapers' opposition to political moves towards regulation has stemmed from the concern to preserve the freedom of the press.

The freedom of the press has long been counted one of the glories of Britain. However, the decline in the number of newspapers and the concentration of ownership in the hands of about six wealthy people or financial institutions must prompt us to treat these claims with a degree of caution. Given the recent revelations about the financial dishonesty of some newspaper proprietors we should be wary of regarding the entire class as bastions of integrity. *The Daily Mirror* seems to have become much keener on the freedom of the press once its staff members had discovered how their pension fund had been ruthlessly plundered by their employer. It did not take long for the Maxwell story to be re-written. Neither can we have too much confidence in the Conservative press whose owners and editors have been liberally rewarded with peerages and knighthoods, the last vestiges of an 'honour society' which has misplaced its code of honour. Given all of this why was the press right to press its opposition to Sir David Calcutt's proposals?

Part of the argument must turn on access to information. The British political establishment has long realised that knowledge is power. Why is it that any moves towards a freedom of information act are routinely dismissed as unnecessary or dangerous to the security of the state? Why is it that it is possible for a government to gag, perfectly legally, elected Members of the Westminster parliament? Admittedly, the member in question happened to be associated with extreme Irish republican

organisations, but what our unwritten constitution allowed in his case could easily be extended to others. If the press appears to enjoy a dangerous degree of licence why was Robert Maxwell's activity allowed to escape press investigation for so long? Might it not have something to do with our stringent libel laws and the indulgence which establishment judges appear to treat the great, if not necessarily the good, who appear before them? An argument advanced in favour of the regulation of the press was that the ordinary people of this country have suffered from painful and inaccurate reporting of their private lives. However, a minority of such complaints has been received by the Press Complaints Council. The principal victims of tabloid journalists have been far more significant figures: cabinet ministers and members of the royal family. All of these have the education, financial resources and professional contacts to ensure adequate access to the courts if they believe they have been unjustly treated. On past experience the courts have proved themselves more than willing to dish out exemplary libel damages against newspapers. Ironically, the press is presently being pilloried for telling the truth in many cases. Moreover, it is now only too clear that the press itself has been a victim, willing or unwilling, of manipulation by both the Princess and Prince of Wales in their distressing and bitter feud with each other. If it were not for the press would we have heard that £4,700 of public money had been dispensed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to help him with his legal fees in regard to the eviction of an undesirable tenant from property he owned? The industry of the Public Audit Commission uncovered this sum 'hidden' in a larger item of 53 million pounds. The remainder of the Chancellor's legal bills was paid by an anonymous donor, so we are told. The anonymity of the donors apparently dispensed him from the obligation of declaring this support on the House of Commons' Register of Members' Interests. It has now been disclosed that Conservative Central Office picked up the Chancellor's legal bills.

It is clearly in the public interest to know how and by what kind of people we are governed. The public should be credited with a greater degree of intelligence and discernment than presently displayed by the political establishment. It is certainly true that some measures must be brought in to give reasonable safeguards to privacy. However, one of the penalties counterbalancing the many rewards and compensations enjoyed by those who venture into public life is a diminution of the private sphere. The current debate should not simply focus on the question of the integrity of institutions, but also on the matter of standards in public life. Those who wish to be treated with honour must be seen to behave honourably.

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