

## CMS Select Committee Report on Press standards, privacy and libel

After a long investigation, conducted throughout 2009, the Parliamentary Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee released its Report on Press standards, privacy and libel in February 2010.

It made a number of recommendations with regard to the reform of libel laws, press standards and regulation. The Committee's inquiry sought to address concerns amongst the media that the operation of libel laws and the impact of costs were stifling press freedom, as well as considering the balance between personal privacy and freedom of expression, and the increased use of injunctions and super injunctions. It also examined press standards in the UK, considering two recent cases: the reporting of Madeleine McCann's disappearance; and the suicides in and around Bridgend in 2008.

The Select Committee took the view that self-regulation of the press is greatly preferable to statutory regulation. It criticised some of the work of the PCC, and recommended that the Commission should be seen to take a far more active role in ensuring that standards are upheld, and that it should have the power to impose financial penalties on newspapers that breach the Code of Practice.

The level of scrutiny which the Select Committee has applied to the PCC's practices was welcome, and the Commission – while not agreeing with some of its assertions – has responded to the report on that basis. By necessity, the Select Committee's report focused on a limited period of time and a few individual cases, which – of course – contrasted with the Commission's ability to rely on an archive of thousands of cases and the experience of its varied Commissioners. However, the PCC values the Select Committee's shared commitment to self-regulation which is firmly embodied in the Report, and is very willing to engage with the Select Committee in dialogue to continue its development for the future.

The Select Committee also reopened its inquiries into allegations about phone message hacking conducted at the News of the World prior to 2007 (which had led to the imprisonment of Clive Goodman and Glenn Mulcaire). Articles in July 2009 by the Guardian newspaper contained further information about the practice, most notably the fact that

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the News of the World had made a confidential settlement following a legal action by Gordon Taylor (who had been one of the victims of the message hacking).

In July 2009, the PCC reconsidered its own inquiries and recommendations in 2007 (following the trial of Goodman and Mulcaire), when it had sought to ensure that internal controls had been improved at the News of the World and to establish industry-wide guidelines on the issue of subterfuge. The Commission examined whether it had been misled by the News of the World in 2007, and whether there was any evidence to suggest the practice of phone message hacking was ongoing.

The PCC considered that the answer was “no” to both questions, and published a report to that effect in November 2009. The Select Committee report of 2010 was critical of the News of the World (saying its executives suffered from “collective amnesia” in giving evidence to the Select Committee), but stated that it could not determine the extent of alleged phone message hacking. It also said that there was no evidence that phone message hacking is ongoing.

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[www.pcc.org.uk/news/press-2010.html](http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/press-2010.html)

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