

Q Can you explain a little about what you do as your day job?

I am a member of the Criminal Cases Review Commission, investigating possible miscarriages of justice from deepest Birmingham. So, if you're a reader of The Independent I am a freedom fighter for human rights, and if you're a Daily Mail reader I let villains out of jail at public expense.

Q What motivates you to serve on the PCC Board?

As a regulator you must, I think, in principle approve of and support the thing you're regulating, because then you will be most moved to adjudicate sternly when you see some of the participants letting the side down.

I wouldn't sit on the PCC if I didn't believe it was the appropriate agency to keep standards high, while preserving freedom of expression. This means being tough on lapses of judgment when they arise.

Q What function do you feel the PCC performs?

I think the PCC performs a public service of holding editors to account when challenged by their readers. That service is delivered quickly, without fear or favour and free of charge. It is the same service whether the complainant is royalty, an MP, a celebrity or an ordinary member of the public.

Q Can you explain the weekly work you do for the PCC?

I contribute to the adjudication of thirty or forty cases every week. The paperwork that Commissioners have to read, review and judge is huge, and this is the aspect of our work that most surprises new members. The postman doesn't speak to me any more. The wodge of papers from the PCC office won't go through the letter box. He rings the doorbell, I answer and we smile ruefully at each other. I think it tactful not to ask how his latest hernia operation has gone.

Much of the weekly material comes from a world far away from national issues and celebrity gossip. The solution to the problem identified by GK Chesterton – that journalism largely consists in saying “Lord Jones Dead” to people who never knew Lord Jones was alive – can still be solved by finding the local or specialist angle. Hence the legendary headline from a Yorkshire newspaper in 1912: “Titanic Sinks – Heckmondwike Man on Board”.

Q What qualities should lay members bring to the PCC?

They should be reasonably bright, take their roles seriously, have a fair sense of how the media business works, and be completely independent. Beyond that we each have our own individual skills. From my criminal work I have developed a pretty good internal twaddle-o-meter, letting me spot when people are trying it on or taking me for a ride. And in my time I have also done a lot of work with vulnerable and damaged people, which means that I am especially sensitive to the issues involved in complaints involving sexual issues, crime and suicide.

People who work at the PCC might say that my ultimate personal specialisation lies in esoteric typographical corrections of Commission work. I follow in the footsteps of the journalist George Mair, who is said once to have telephoned a semicolon from Moscow. My obituary, if any, will be: “He was quite good with apostrophes”. Or, more probably – given the effect of cost cutting on the subeditor's art – “He was quite good with apostrophe's.”

In fact, each Commissioner will have his or her own particular key dislikes in the articles that come for review. I really hate headlines that bear minimal relation to the stories that follow them, and above all sloppiness – those occasions where the journalist has made barely a half-hearted attempt to get the true story.

Q Do you think editors should sit on the PCC? What do they bring to the table?

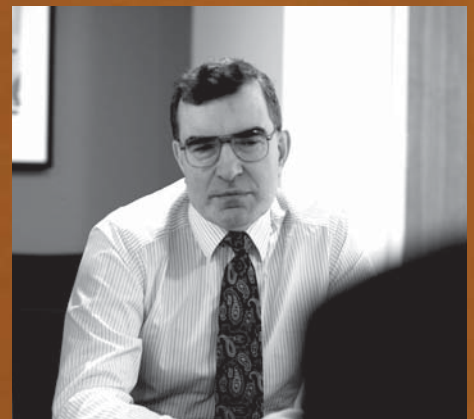
It is right that there is an independent majority of public members of the Commission (10 out of 17) but it's right too that editorial knowledge and expertise are brought to the table. Editors can often be tougher than the lay members because they can spot a lame excuse a mile off. I can tell you that there is no conflict of interest because editors leave the room when there are judgments relating to their own newspaper groups.

Q What happens at Commission meetings?

We meet every six weeks to consider complaints, and discuss broader issues affecting what we do. Discussions are always vigorous. Commissioners bring their own knowledge and expertise to the table whether police chief, bishop, former MP, academic, union official or newspaper editor. Most of the time, at most of our meetings, you'd find it hard without prior knowledge to identify who was a lay member and who an editor.

The cut and thrust of debate are important, and people change their minds during the meeting, before agreement is reached. One of the most high profile complaints in recent times concerned that much-lamented article written by a columnist about the late singer Stephen Gately. In a parallel universe I'm sure I would have joined in with the fury of the thousands of Twitterers it provoked. But what I personally find tasteless has no relevance to my PCC job. It is not my role, and should not be that of any regulator, to force our respective standards of decency on to anyone else. The PCC doesn't do censorship. Either freedom of expression means the right to publish something unpleasant, or it does not really exist at all.

Q&A with a public Commissioner



Q How would you improve the PCC?

I want it to be better known, and better resourced. I also await keenly the outcome of the independent governance review of the PCC. I must express the hope that we don't go down the road of detailed procedural reforms, much lengthening of the Code, and an appeal and audit structure so refined and complicated – sorry, sophisticated – that the time taken to resolve any particular complaint would probably treble. News happens and photographs are taken in a world that is fluid and fast moving – conditions that suit professional guidelines based on a set of principles rather than prescriptive and exhaustive regulations and bureaucracy. More rules don't always mean less speed, but they certainly would in the case of the PCC.

Q How would you reassure potential complainants that their concerns will be taken seriously?

I might offer up my wife to reassure them. She has to endure my reactions as I work through the paperwork for each week's complaints from the PCC office, marvelling at the variety of ways in which newspapers can mess up their stories, and – to balance that – the unreasonable expectations of some complainants, such as when they'd like their criminal past to be covered up. Mrs Nichol will confirm that I take my complaints very seriously and very much to heart. To my mind, the hours of robust and principled debate at formal PCC meetings show that all Commissioners share this approach, though not necessarily with the associated destruction of furniture that we see in the Nichol household.

Ian Nichol
Commissioner, PCC

Ian Nichol is a public member of the Commission - appointed in March 2006. Ian is a qualified accountant and is presently a member of the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

