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Leveson: 'No state regulation of the press'

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Chris Bryant, Labour Party MP for Rhondda addressing the press outside the Queen Elizabeth II Centre, regarding The Leveson Report. Photo: © Sinister Pictures/Demotix/Corbis



An independent watchdog, set up in co-operation with the press will “protect public interest” and maintain press freedom, but will not require state regulation, Lord Justice Leveson said on 29 November at a press conference, after the publication of his long-awaited recommendations.

He urged the media industry “to work together” to “establish a new regulatory body” which is independent of the press, government and politicians, “to promote a high standard of journalism and the rights and liberties of individuals.”

Lord Justice Leveson praised the British press for serving the country well the “majority of the time” with “countless examples of great journalism and great campaigns.” He however added that evidence had shown that ethical codes of conduct had been ignored in some cases and the Press Complaints Commission had failed.

“The press acting freely and in the public interest is the safeguarding of true democracy. It holds

politicians and powerful people to account in our society. But the UK press has not performed that vital role in the case of its own power," he said.

Lord Justice Leveson's 2,000-page document, **The Leveson Report: An Inquiry Into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of The Press** was commissioned in response to the phone hacking scandal which had led to the closure of *The News of the World* and the arrest of several high profile journalists and editors including Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson.

Debate among media experts and specialists has centred around two very different schools of thought in response to the scandal: state regulation — which would involve a licensing system with an official regulator — or self-regulation with legal backing.

Describing the inquiry as "the most concentrated look at the press this country has ever seen," Lord Justice Leveson told a packed conference room at the QEII Conference Centre. "For over 40 years, I have watched the press in action. I know how vital the press is — all of it — as the guardian of the interests of the public, as critical witness to events, as standard bearers for people who have no one else to speak up for them."

It was for this reason, he said, that he believed that self-regulation via an independent body would best serve the interests of the public whilst maintaining press freedom.

Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations build on the existing system with vast improvements. They also add an additional layer: an arbitration system, which would allow victims of press intrusion to seek legal redress without having to go through the courts. A wholly independent, non-partisan system with an obligation to the public interest is at the root of his recommendations, which are based on eight months of hearings, 337 in-person testimonies and nearly 300 statements.

The report also recommends: the publishing of story sources, the establishment of a whistle-blowing hotline, the addition of specialist police officers to record every dealing with the press, and a transparent relationship between politicians and members of the press.

Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg have since clashed over the inquiry. Mr. Cameron said he agreed with the recommendations in principle but refused to back the legislation required to enforce some of them, whilst Mr. Clegg told the Commons that the inquiry was 'workable.'

But Lord Justice Leveson said during his speech that his model — based on contractual obligations among press organisations — already had a lot of support, thanks to several emails he'd recently received which strongly indicated that most of the industry would be prepared to sign self-regulation contracts. However, he said it was the Coalition that would have the final say in regards to implementation.

"I firmly believe that these recommendations for self-regulation are in the best interest of the public and the press, based on what I believe is fair and right for everyone." He concluded: "The ball is now in the politicians' court. They must decide who guards the guardians."

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