

'The Brief Humbling of Rupert Murdoch'

Hack Attack: How The Truth Caught Up With Rupert Murdoch

Nick Davies

London: Chatto and Windus, 2014

In his memoirs, Damian McBride describes Rebekah Brooks as 'the most powerful person in Britain' during the years he was Gordon Brown's press adviser: 'she exercised her influence over government and society with a day-to-day determination and zeal that could be downright intimidating'.¹ Can it be true that our political leaders allowed themselves to be dictated to by Rupert Murdoch's representative in the way he suggests? Surely he must be exaggerating. If true, it makes a mockery of any notion of democracy and we are instead confronted with the grim truth that we are ruled by a collection of oligarchs, courtesy of their pet politicians. And, of these oligarchs, by far the most powerful since the early 1980s has been Rupert Murdoch.

Unfortunately Nick Davies's tremendous *Hack Attack* demonstrates quite conclusively that far from exaggerating, if anything McBride understated Murdoch's influence, the extent to which modern Britain has been shaped in his image, and the way politicians, both Labour and Conservative, were willing to be of service.

Most of the reviews of *Hack Attack* have focussed on the dramatic story of how Davies and the *Guardian* hunted down the truth of the hacking scandal despite all the obstacles put in their way by News International, Scotland Yard, the Press Complaints Commission, the rest of the media, and a varied cast of kept politicians. Certainly the story is gripping; but as Davies himself observes, what started out as a 'simple crime story turned out to be a story about the secret world of the power elite and their discreet alliances'.

What he has to tell is a story of a quite incredible degree of collusion between Scotland Yard and News International. To all intents and purposes, the police refused to investigate the

¹ Damian McBride, *Power Trip*, (London, 2014), p. 427

hacking of the voice mails of senior politicians up to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. Their first loyalty seems to have been towards Murdoch's people rather than the elected government (although in their defence this was probably no more than recognising where the real power lay in contemporary Britain). Particularly telling is an episode as late as February 2010 when Assistant Commissioner Yates told Alan Rusbridger, the *Guardian* editor, that there was no evidence that Prescott had been a target, when they knew for a fact that he had. Yates just could not be trusted – an incredible state of affairs. As Davies puts it:

'It was as if now there were two versions of reality. There was the official version, aggressively promoted by News International and endorsed by the police and the PCC and the Conservative Party and most of the rest of Fleet Street. Then there was the version which was being shown to me by a small collection of nervous off-the-record sources – journalists, private investigators, the managers and lawyers of various celebrities – who told a very different story.'

The close relationship between senior policemen and News International that Davies reveals is quite shocking, even to those of us who already have extremely low expectations of the Met.

What about the Press Complaints Commission? As Davies points out, you could not really expect much from a body that had Murdoch's right-hand man, Les Hinton, as chair of its Code of Practice Committee. This was like putting a syphilis bacterium in charge of a VD clinic. You really could not make it up! Instead of taking steps to root out the routine criminality at News International, the PCC continued to deny that there was any until the *Guardian* was able to establish incontrovertibly that there was.

While the story of how the *News of the World's* criminality was finally exposed makes for compelling reading, the meat of the book has to be what it tells us about Gordon Brown's relationship with Murdoch and his representatives and what Cameron had to do to get Murdoch to change sides. As Davies

points out, since 1979,

'no British government has been elected without the support of Rupert Murdoch....Thatcher, Major, Blair and Brown have consistently cleared their diaries and welcomed him to the inner sanctum of their governments (and then disclosed as little as possible of what passed between them).'

Brown, in this respect, was no different from his predecessors, continuing 'to cuddle up to News International'. At one point, when Rebekah Brooks became involved with her future husband, Charlie, an Old Etonian racehorse trainer,

'she personally told the prime minister that the government should abolish the horse-race levy....Two Downing Street advisers say that Brown asked them to look into it and to speak to Charlie Brooks "to make him feel involved".'

It was Rebekah Brooks, we are told, who dictated Ed Balls' illegal sacking of Sharon Shoemith, the head of Haringey's child services department, at the end of 2008. And such was Brown's desire to please, he even appointed Les Hinton's partner as a Downing Street policy adviser.

All this is pretty revelatory; but most shocking is Davies' chronicling of Murdoch's influence on government health policy while Brown was still Chancellor. When Brown announced a boost in health spending in 2001, the *Sun* attacked the decision. This

'panicked Brown who contacted the *Sun* and agreed to rearrange his diary so that he could go to their office that day in order to make peace....Brown sat down with the *Sun's* outspoken right-wing political editor, Trevor Kavanagh, for an interview which, according to one of those present, rapidly became a negotiation about policy. Kavanagh insisted that Brown should accept the advice in that morning's *Sun* for the NHS to start buying in services from private medical businesses.....Kavanagh won.'

Later when Brown was opposing Blair's policy on foundation

hospitals, it was Murdoch who insisted that he drop his opposition if he ever wanted to be prime minister. According to one of Davies's sources, 'Rupert Murdoch personally told Brown that he must support the "marketisation" of the health service'.

Why did a whole generation of political leaders pay court to Murdoch? Davies sees fear as the decisive factor and, while this is obviously important, arguably he does not give enough weight to the fact of ideological congruity, the extent to which Thatcher, Major, Blair, Brown and, of course, Cameron shared his world view. The question of context is also obviously important. The defeat of the trade union movement in the 1980s has left big business pretty much unchallenged. The days when the *Sun's* socialist predecessor, the *Daily Herald*, could be banned from holding a rally at the Albert Hall and the electricians' union could force the management to back down by threatening to turn the lights off throughout the whole of Kensington are sadly (and hopefully only temporarily) gone. It is the shift in the balance of class forces that has left the country in the hands of the likes of Murdoch.

Where did it all go wrong for Brown? After everything he had done, why did Murdoch decide to support David Cameron, someone he affected to despise as an over-privileged toff? Both Rebekah Brooks and James Murdoch² were urging Murdoch to back the Tories, something that he did with great reluctance. He recognised that Brown was a hard-nosed right-winger who could certainly be trusted to take whatever measures were necessary to protect the interests of the rich and super rich during the recession. Brown had proven himself more than amenable to furthering the interests of News International. What seems to have persuaded Murdoch to ditch him was the Tories' readiness to take measures to inflict serious financial damage on the BBC by freezing the tv licence, weakening Ofcom and waving through the Murdochs' take-over of BSkyB. It was not that Brown would have balked at such measures so much as that he did not realise how

² According to one of Davies's sources, the seriously weird James 'is so paranoid that he keeps a gun under his bed in London, in case the proletariat try to break in and do him an injury'.

important they were to News International.

On 29 September 2009, the *Sun* announced its change of allegiance, launching a sustained campaign of ferocious abuse that rivalled its earlier character assassination of Neil Kinnock. Brown was savaged for the failure of British forces in Afghanistan, made personally responsible for the death of every soldier killed, in brutal front page attacks. The *Sun's* anti-Brown offensive was so vicious that Brown actually complained to Murdoch that the *Sun* was damaging the war effort in Afghanistan. In an unprecedented step, he arranged for Murdoch and Brooks 'to be given an off-the-record briefing by the then head of MI6, Sir John Scarlett..... Sir John warned them that the Taliban were using *Sun* stories as propaganda and that they were damaging British military morale'. Brooks apparently was having none of this, but Murdoch promised to tone the attacks down. It never happened. Getting Cameron into Downing Street took priority. The peculiar morality of the super patriotic *Sun* is completely captured by its willingness to undermine the military effort in Afghanistan for political advantage.

After Brown's defeat, Murdoch, Brooks and co must have felt that their power and influence had reached new, triumphant heights. With Andy Coulson at No 10, with Brooks having established herself as Cameron's best friend and riding partner³ and with their creature Gove at the Department for Education, potentially opening up vast new opportunities for profiteering from the privatising of state education, an unprecedented domination over British society and politics seemed possible. It was not to be; and for this we all have to be duly grateful to Nick Davies.

The *Guardian's* revelations, Leveson, the hacking and bribery trials, surely these have brought Murdoch's domination of British politics to an end. Certainly the BSkyB take-over has had to be put on hold and the planned move into education

³ Rumours of an affair between Brooks and Cameron can be safely dismissed as tabloid gossip and as for the idea that when Cameron signed off texts to Brooks with 'lol' he did not mean either 'lots of love' or 'laugh out loud', but 'leg over later', well this is just so much nonsense.

provision, which Murdoch believed was potentially as lucrative as satellite tv, has been abandoned. But while Coulson has been jailed, Brooks was acquitted with the assistance of a defence team that in terms of funding and resources simply outgunned the prosecution. And as Davies acknowledges, what we have seen is only 'the brief humbling of Rupert Murdoch'.

My own view was and still is that as long as he controlled the *Sun* any damage inflicted would be temporary. This was also clearly the view of the likes of Michael Gove and Boris Johnson who have both continued courting the man as if nothing has happened. Indeed, Davies ends on a decidedly downbeat note. He writes that the fact is that 'very little has changed' in the aftermath of the scandal and even more pessimistically that

'when Rupert Murdoch dies, another chairman will replace him. It might not be a man or woman from his bloodline, but that chairman's power will be the same. Or if Rupert Murdoch sells every newspaper he owns in the UK – or if he sells every newspaper he owns in the world – there will always be another ambitious businessman waiting to fill his place, some Russian oligarch or Middle Eastern oil magnate or Chinese billionaire. For a while, we snatched a handful of power away from one man. We did nothing to change the power of the elite.'

The truth does not set you free. It merely makes you aware of the conditions of your enslavement. This is a necessary first step, however, and *Hack Attack* is an important contribution to this endeavour.

John Newsinger

John Newsinger is a semi-retired academic working on a new edition of his book, British Counterinsurgency.

