

Jun/Jul 2013

LEVESON FREE

What next for press rules?

WHAT'S HAPPENING about press regulation after the Leveson Inquiry? Our speaker at May's meeting of London Freelance Branch was Tim Gopsill, who's been following "Leveson" as editor of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom's publication *Free Press*. He'll be familiar to many Branch members as a former editor of the *Journalist*.

Currently there's a complicated constitutional impasse, with two rival "post-Leveson" draft Royal Charters on press regulation before the Privy Council, which can accept neither of them. One Royal Charter was agreed by all parties at a Downing Street gathering and then rejected by PM David Cameron. The other Royal Charter – the Pretender Charter, perhaps – was drawn up by some newspaper editors.

But the issues involved are simple: press regulation has become a "straightforward power struggle," says Tim.

The Leveson inquiry into the culture, ethics and practice of the Press was "set up because the overwhelming political power big media had accumulated meant it was unaccountable." It was "not just phone hacking": the core issue is accountability to the public – whether those who are intruded on or maligned have any comeback.

The current Press Complaints Commission (PCC) self-regulatory system actually makes things worse, according to Tim. It "defends editors from criticism, removes editors from having to deal with the public." The PCC would routinely "fix the meanest possible redress they could get away with." Regrettably, it looks as if new arrangements to replace the PCC won't be much better.

The NUJ was "pretty impressive at the Leveson inquiry" – its counsel John Hendy QC interrogated Murdoch and got him to agree that the NUJ's proposed conscience clause was "a good idea."

"The Leveson process was good; nothing's come out of it. We gave it our best shot... Every decent thing

we tried to put forward is no longer on the table." The editors' recent hysterical "Free Speech Network" adverts carried pictures of Castro, Mugabe and King John: but no one has ever suggested that press regulation should include censorship.

Tim reminds us that "Leveson" was a response to "cops taking bungs from journalists, accepting bribes." All journalists arrested in connection with these investigations are out on bail, "all charged with specific offences that have nothing to do with anything they've written."

Immediately Leveson's recommendations came out, "Cameron said he wouldn't have it, although most MPs want it". Cameron's Downing Street office "dreamt up this scheme for a Royal Charter", on the model of those which cover organisations like the BBC which are "not controlled by Parliament." The Press had a generally "quite reasonable constructive

– the Press Board of Finance, the body that collects the money to run to old PCC – editors produced their own version of a Royal Charter, in which signing up to the new regulatory body isn't compulsory.

What's unfolding now is not self-regulation, says Tim: it's "regulation by editors and owners." Free speech" is turning into "the 'free speech' of the editors... the 'freedom' to act under the instruction of owners".

What happens next? The impasse caused by the editors' rival Royal Charter could "antagonise people so much that [the editors] get something imposed on them." And there's still widespread dissatisfaction at the unchecked malign influences of powerful media owners, presenting vote-winning opportunities for the Opposition in the 2015 election.

Tim's own suggestion was for a tribunal system, which would negotiate an agreement on a correction,



Tim Gopsill speaks: photo © Matt Salusbury

reaction to Leveson – the *Times*, the *FT*, the *Indy*, the *Guardian* got together and produced a "quite good" proposal for self-regulation, with a conscience clause.

The "sensible paper editors" were "excluded from discussion, then with the support of the *Mail*, the *Telegraph*, News International and of Pressbof

which would have to be published, by law. Reasonable, ethical journalists, given the freedom to make their own honest efforts to respond to complaints, informed by the NUJ's Code of Conduct, can do a better job of it, in Tim's view.

© Matt Salusbury

• More links in the online story

Copyright a-go-go: battle re-joined, again

REPORTS of the death of copyright have been greatly exaggerated. Yes, the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act received Royal Assent on 25 April. No, the law hasn't changed yet. Meanwhile, there's yet another Bill before Parliament.

It's not dead, Jim

Despite alarmist messages spread when the ERR Act passed, publishers

or broadcasters that want to use a journalist's work must still ask, and negotiate a fee, under the new Act. Nothing changes at all this year. The Act allows the Minister to make "Regulations" that will, later, actually change the law on copyright.

The NUJ regrets that these powers were tacked on to the end of a Bill, rather than having the separate debate they merit. The NUJ would

have preferred to see more clarity in the Bill text that was debated, and less left to the Minister. But it could have been far worse.

The NUJ, in co-operation with other organisations in the Creators' Rights Alliance, worked hard to remind Parliament, particularly the House of Lords, of the importance of fair payment for creators. Com-

See COPYRIGHT on p3

LFB meetings

8 July

Paying no more tax than you have to and managing what's left

August

No meeting

See back page &
www.twitter.com/NUJ_LFB