

THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW BEST

BACK in June 2007, David Bell and Julia Middleton were given a significant boost in their campaign to neutralise the 'excessive power' of Britain's popular press.

Shortly before leaving office, Tony Blair, whose hatred of large sections of Fleet Street was by now mutual, launched a bitter attack on the 'feral beast' press — ironically singling out the high-minded independent newspaper — and called for tighter media regulation.

Blair ignored the fact that his Government was notorious for spin — the manipulation of the media through dissembling and sometimes downright lying — that had reached its apogee in the Iraq war 'dodgy dossier'.

His spin-doctor-in-chief, Alastair Campbell, the former red-top journalist and ruthless orchestrator of the media, favoured any paper that gave supportive coverage.

Campbell and Blair were the architects of the baleful New Labour/News International axis. The Rupert Murdoch-owned Times sometimes seemed to be New Labour's house organ. Campbell also reportedly dictated favourable headlines and editorials to friendly Sun executives, while ostracising critics such as the Daily Mail and Telegraph.

Our current Prime Minister David Cameron once dubbed himself 'the heir to Blair'. Perhaps this misplaced admiration goes some way to explaining why the Tory leader made the biggest mistake of his political career — the appointment in 2007 of Andy Coulson as his party's new Director of Communications.

Only months before, Coulson had stepped down from the editorship of Rupert Murdoch's News of the World after his royal correspondent was jailed for phone hacking. His arrival at Conservative Central Office set in train the 'perfect storm' of events leading to the Leveson Inquiry.

Coulson became the focus for bodies such as The Guardian and the BBC, which had an ideological and commercial antipathy towards both the Conservative Party and the Murdoch empire.

For Bell and Middleton, Blair's speech and Coulson's appointment must have been manna from heaven.

While Bell apparently had the idea as early as 2003, the pair had incorporated the 'Media Standards Forum' in 2005 and changed its name to the Media Standards Trust the following spring.

Now, in late 2007, the organisation held a high-profile event, in direct response to the Blair speech. It was entitled 'Is The Media Having A Seriously Adverse Impact On Public Life?'

One participant was Dr Martin Moore, the MST's director and later a founder of Hacked Off. A consultant-cum-academic rather than a journalist, Moore is, perhaps, typical of a new breed of media 'experts'.

On its website, the MST said of the debate that it had gathered 'without the distraction of politicians, figures from public life, the military, the Civil Service, the Church and a figure who acts on behalf of the general public'.

SPIN AND THE KILLING OF AN OLD LADY

BUT who was this figure acting 'on behalf of the general public'?

None other than lawyer Sue Stapely, an MST trustee and expert in 'reputation management'.

One example of how Ms Stapely has acted 'on behalf of the general public' was her part in the furore which followed the killing of an elderly resident in a Newcastle care home. The pensioner had been battered to death by another resident who had a long history of violence and mental illness. How had this been allowed to happen?

The city council called in Stapely to finesse the publicity fallout. Internal correspondence leaked to the local press showed that Stapely had advised the council on how to head off calls by a local MP for a full public inquiry into the affair. She described those calls as a 'self-interested salvo'.

A case review — Stapely 'blaised' with its author — had previously exonerated all the organisations involved. But that report was condemned as 'spin with few answers' by one councillor and the

authority later had to apologise for comments Stapely made in emails.

For this, Stapely was paid £23,000 from the public purse.

Stapely's website says her work is primarily 'discreetly defending and maintaining the reputations of organisations'. In other words, in this case, *not* defending the interests of the general public.

A VERY SHODDY PIECE OF RESEARCH

THOUGH only five of the MST's 18 trustees had worked as journalists in the British print media — and none in the popular press — the Trust continued to lobby and network, and on February 9, 2009, produced its first major report: A More Accountable Press — The Need For Reform.

A devastating critique of the print media and the Press Complaints Commission, its implicit conclusion was that the free press was out of control.

Some might argue the same about the MST, because a number of issues arose that significantly undermined the report's credibility, including:

- THE shoddiness of its research and fundamental flaws in the statistical conclusions;

- THE MST's claim to have consulted with the Press Complaints Commission, when it had not;

- THE make-up of the so-called 'independent, non-partisan' review panel that had compiled the report;

- THE extraordinary prominence that the BBC gave to the report on its publication.

Most questionable was the report's claim that it had been written in 'consultation' with an 'independent review group'.

Several of these independents are familiar figures from Common Purpose and the Media Standards Trust board. These are Julia Middleton's and David Bell's people.

The panel included three New Labour peers, including Baroness Helena Kennedy QC — one of Middleton's top ten 'inspirational leaders' and an MST trustee (now acting Chair) — and Dame Suzi Leather, the 'Quango Queen' who took flak from the press for championing IVF treatment for lesbians and who was interviewed by Julia Middleton for a film which appeared on the Common Purpose website.

Also on the panel was Richard Hooper, at the BBC before he joined media regulator Ofcom, where he was deputy to David Currie, now one of the Leveson assessors.

Only three national newspaper journalists were on the panel. One was Martin Dickson, deputy editor of David Bell's Financial Times.

Of the other two journalists, neither attended more than one meeting. Neither had a role in the report's drafting. Both were deeply unhappy with the finished report.

One was the Independent Group's then editor-in-chief Simon Kelner,

A nuclear bomb that dropped on the press — and the motley crew who seized their chance

who has said: 'I attended only one meeting and on presentation of the draft report pointed out my serious reservations about the flaws, inconsistencies and lack of balance in the report. I can understand why they wanted my name attached to the report.'

The other was David Seymour, a former Daily Mirror leader writer who says he was invited to join the group at the last minute to act, he believes, as a fig leaf.

Mr Seymour describes the report as 'unnecessarily antagonistic', says its conclusions did not reflect what had been discussed at the meeting and expresses his disappointment that the Press Complaints Commission was not given a chance to respond to the allegations about it before the report was published

— which, he points out, is a basic tenet of journalism.

Mr Seymour explains: 'There are things wrong with the PCC, but we have to remember that it currently only has a very limited budget compared to Ofcom, a Labour-created beast with countless millions at its disposal. I think that journalism is a unique profession and needs to be treated as such.'

The Media Standards Trust was then a very obscure body — one of thousands which produce studies every year. However, this report was given a prime slot on the BBC Radio 4's agenda-setting Today programme. (The only other news organisation which covered the report's publication was perhaps, unsurprisingly, Sir David Bell's Financial Times.)

Sir David Bell was himself interviewed on the programme and had a short but heated exchange with Sir Christopher Meyer, the then Chairman of the PCC.

The report's dramatic assertion that only one in 250 complaints were upheld by the PCC was 'wholly misleading', wrote Sir Christopher in a letter afterwards. He pointed out that only one third of complaints received by the PCC actu-

ally fell under its jurisdiction. Duplicated complaints about the same article were counted individually in the statistics, despite there being only one formal ruling for them.

Worst of all the MST had confused 'adjudications' with 'rulings'. All adjudications are rulings, but not all rulings are formal adjudications. Rulings increasingly included the settlement of complaints by mediation — a factor not taken into account by the MST which, had 'presumably' based calculations on the ratio of formal adjudications to the gross number of complaints.

The Press Complaints Commission had no idea that the MST report existed until it was sent the finished copy on the Friday afternoon before the following Monday's publication.

Sir Christopher described it as 'an absolute outrage' that the MST had not come to talk to his organisation prior to publication, and went on to call the report a 'cuttings job masquerading as a serious inquiry'.

The irony was clear: a body campaigning for responsible journalism stood accused of gross inaccuracy and ignoring the basic journalistic principle that

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