

An Essay on Press Freedom v Accountability
By Bob Bennett

The elected Mayor of Doncaster, facing serious criticism of the child protection for which he is finally responsible, told a BBC reporter to stop playing silly games - and refused to be interviewed about the situation.

Government departments are increasingly refusing to provide anything other than a statement on issues which reflect badly on them and for which they should take responsibility.

Neither the local nor national governments can be accused of undermining press freedom in these cases but the question that has to be asked is why they no longer feel that they have a duty to accept public accountability as mediated through the 'Press'.

For any media to be truly free, it must be able to question those in power - and to do so directly. The replacement of such direct questioning with carefully prepared statements negates the dialogue between the media and government which, many believe, is vital to the functioning of any democracy.

That might not be such a problem if there was a genuine and open political dialogue in the formulation of policy - but that has disappeared both at local and national level and without it, one wonders what value press freedom has.

Consider the contrast between the policy making bodies of the national parties thirty years ago and today. Imagine the uproar there would have been if a Labour Party member had been hustled out of a conference for voicing his dissent in 1975. The 'new' Labour Party has accepted it with a collective shrug of the shoulders and an apology some time after the event.

Today the national conferences of the political parties are nothing more than window dressing. There may still be bitter debates about policy but they no longer take place in public and that excludes the media and the public from a dialogue with the political process.

And that allows government to manipulate and obfuscate. The 'dodgy dossier' affair is, admittedly, an extreme example of this tendency. It should be a matter of shame not only to those who manufactured the dossier - but to the media which allowed them not only to get away with it but also to persecute those who questioned its origin and veracity.

The hounding of the BBC, of Andrew Gilligan and of Dr Kelly, was a direct attack on media freedoms and it is a matter of shame that some newspapers participated in the hunt - while others did little or nothing to defend the freedom of BBC News against a high handed Government.

The dossier itself was one of the prime examples of the growing power of the executive and the Prime Minister in particular. It has been clear for some time that successive Prime Ministers have operated through 'kitchen cabinets' - reducing the level of dialogue even within the cabinet and allowing them to exert influence over individual departments.

The fact that the media is complacent about the situation is the result of the Government's apparent responsiveness to Press campaigns on issues such as crime, education and the NHS.

Government by initiative, the knee jerk response to some of the louder voices within the media has given us the impression that our media is free to influence government policy - but it is only an impression.

There is no real dialogue; no attempt to argue the case for - or against - such initiatives.

The lack of genuine debate of Government policy is reflected in what has happened to local government.

Before cabinets and directly elected mayors were thought of, local government was an arena for debate. Each and every policy initiative was subjected to argument and discussion enabling the media to report both the pros and cons of decisions that would affect their readers.

The debate - more often than not - also provided the background and insights which provided a context for the reporter. The system fuelled a dialogue not only between the media and the council but between the council and its voters and between the media and their readers, listeners or viewers.

It also gave the media an insight into the personalities of councillors which in turn allowed them to develop the kind of relationship which could lead to early warnings of new policy.

Cabinets and mayors have put paid to that. Neither system allows for public democratic debate. Cabinet meetings are little more than a rubber stamping mechanism and, despite some inventive role playing, there is little or no debate about the issues and policies being approved.

Scrutiny committees can occasionally throw up the kind of debate that democracy and the media needs but because they rarely overturn the cabinet decision, because they reflect the political make up of the council and because their meetings take place at least a week after the event, they rarely produce a news story worth the name.

Cynics have been known to allege that they are simply a sop to the ordinary council member who, outside planning and licensing committees, has very little public presence.

Indeed they have a diminishing role to play as public figures. The 'outsourcing', the 'best value' regime, the privatisation of services (call it what you will), has broken the direct link between councillors and the services they are responsible for.

The days when a local councillor would contact the media to complain about a service on behalf of constituents have long gone - as have the days when they would storm into a director of service's office and berate him or her for the fact that the service had failed one of his or her electors.

Most services now operate at arms length from the council and the councillors. The only issue is the detail of the contract and even that may be hidden behind the veil of "commercial confidentiality".

One large city council had occasion to fine one of the best known private sector companies after it took over its housing benefit system - and made such a mess of it that dozens of people faced eviction for non payment of rent - a non payment which was entirely the fault of the private sector company.

Despite the considerable publicity given to this cock-up, despite the anger it generated, the level of fine levied on the company was not revealed because of "commercial confidentiality".

This distancing of services - and day-to-day responsibility - is nowhere better illustrated than in what many used to regard as the jewel in the crown of local government - the education service.

Until 1988 local councils were education authorities. They had direct responsibility for schools, FE colleges, polytechnics, careers, adult education and the youth service.

Meetings of the education committee were lively debates on everything from educational theory to staffing to curriculum to finance. Committee agendas reported any and all problems within the system - and when they didn't, it was not unknown for committee members to raise them.

Today that superstructure which fostered democratic dialogue and which fuelled local and national media has gone. Colleges, and what were the polytechnics, careers and the youth service, are run by quangos.

Schools are their own masters reporting publicly to no-one; free to become failures with no public notice until Ofsted calls or the league tables are published.

It is chaotic and reporting on these public institutions is like reporting on private business. When private businesses bother to publicise anything, it is only the good news until, that is, they start making people redundant. Now schools and colleges do the same and it is only when they are pilloried by inspectors that the reality surfaces. By then it is often too late - at least for the students involved.

Much of the reform of local government has been carried out in the name of efficiency. It is for others to decide whether local services are now more efficient but it is quite clear that the reforms have undermined the direct relationship between councils, the services they provide and the electorate.

One result of that is that the local media - and the national media which so often feeds off it - is now largely 'out of the loop' and has only a minor role to play in the scrutiny of our democratic institutions.

This country has a 'free' media but its ability to play its traditional role has been progressively undermined by the reforms of local government and the conduct of national government. That role was crucial to the maintenance of a genuine democratic dialogue and such a dialogue is vital if the concept of Press freedom is to mean anything.