

No New News of the World

A great brouhaha is going on about illegal hacking and tapping by journalists on the staff of *The News of the World*. Criminal invasions of privacy are alleged, the paper is to be summarily closed down by its owners, and there will be several public inquiries. There will not be any inquiry, however, into why what used to be known as the gutter press is politically influential and courted by the political élite. That the paper in question is disreputable had not before troubled the Prime Minister, who as well as having employed a former editor as communications director is said to be a personal friend of the present chief executive of the parent company, herself a former editor of *The Sun*. (Where she never, as far as we can discover, appeared on page three.)

The historical logic: the mass media develop as one of the less culture-enhancing results of universal education and the one-person-one-vote system known as democracy; so that there is always a downward pressure to get circulation by celeb-sensation rather than by reporting and commenting on news. At present the *News of the World* and *The Sun* are about as low as it gets, though no doubt there are depths as yet unplumbed. The ruling classes have to get the support of these papers because they can affect election results. The police have to give press conferences and brief journalists, as part of what we understand “democracy” to be, as in the phrase *democracy-and-the-rule-of-law*, which we hope to donate to the Arabs. Only when it becomes unmistakable that democratic freedoms need not be the same as the rule of law is any embarrassment caused in Downing Street. This is because the mass media, from being necessary if undesirable, have become the green pastures of the ruling classes, where politicians can browse contentedly provided only that they have disclaimed any intelligence or education they ever had.

We have been some of the way here before. When Alfred Harmsworth (founder of the *Daily Mail* and taker-over of *The Times*) and Horatio Bottomley (*John Bull*) were powers in the land the politicians had to beware of them. (Bottomley ended up in gaol, Harmsworth in the Lords.) But the politicians, with the possible exception of Lloyd George, did not speak the language of the mass media, which were in any case not in those days so singlemindedly focused on the sexual activities of celebrities and the private thoughts of the murdered and the bereaved.

The present scandal is not phone-hacking. It is that the leaders of all the mainstream parties are *at home* in papers like *The Sun* and *The News of the World*, and quite often contribute articles. It is the news of their world. The rumour is that there is to be a replacement paper, the *Sunday Sun*, a catchier title, but there is nothing new under *The Sun*.

The relations between police, politicians and tabloid press explain why we are governed by the uneducated, the stupid and the ignorant; the present Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition all being all three. Nothing but diseducation, stupidity and ignorance can get anyone to power.

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