

Daily Mail

COMMENT

The perils of lurching towards a secret State

FINALLY. The Mail welcomes the belated decision by the Care Quality Commission to name Cynthia Bower, Jill Finney and Anna Jefferson as the executives who tried to cover up the watchdog's failure to properly investigate the deaths of 14 babies at an NHS hospital.

Public accountability demanded nothing less.

But isn't it chilling that the CQC initially tried to keep their names secret, on the spurious grounds they were entitled to anonymity under the Data Protection Act? It was only after newspapers and the Information Commissioner challenged this false claim that the CQC was made to see sense.

Indeed, the Press has played a hugely important part over the past two years in helping the tireless campaigner and bereaved father James Titcombe to expose the lethal incompetence being practised on the maternity wards at Furness Hospital, in Cumbria.

The CQC - which unforgivably judged the hospital 'safe' - certainly wasn't going to do its job, and blow the whistle.

Alarming, however, the row over data protection laws is typical of how, in the post-Leveson world, it is becoming ever harder for the Press to expose and scrutinise State wrongdoing.

Consider today's revelation by the National Audit Office that departments across Whitehall have signed 1,000 severance deals, at a cost of £28million to the taxpayer, which prevent ex-staff from speaking out.

With whistleblowers being so routinely silenced, outrages like Furness and the subhuman treatment of patients by the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust will surely remain hidden in future.

Inevitably, there are now demands for police to investigate whether the CQC cover-up constitutes the criminal offence of 'misconduct in a public office'.

How richly ironic that this is the same charge levelled against police and other officials who, in recent years, passed information to journalists so that it could be put *into* the public domain.

In these cases, police working on Operation Elveden moved with brutal speed to arrest the accused - dragging reporters and their contacts from their beds at dawn.

One woman, Detective Chief Inspector April Casburn, who telephoned a newspaper because she was angry at the way terrorism officers' time was being wasted on the hacking of celebrities' phones, was jailed for 15 months.

How the same State machine now responds to the CQC's appalling attempt to cover up its failure to do its public duty over a string of baby deaths will speak volumes about its sense of priorities.