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## Democracy depends on a free press

**T**he assault against the tabloid press is over. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has said that no more prosecutions will be brought over alleged phone hacking at publications owned by the Mirror Group Newspapers or News Group Newspapers – bringing to an end a criminal investigation motivated far less by the needs of justice than by the demands of politics.

The saga began with the phone hacking revelations. These prompted the Leveson inquiry, the closure of the *News of the World* and the arrests of dozens of journalists. Since 2011, taxpayers are estimated to have spent around £40 million on investigating activities ranging from phone hacking to inappropriate payments to police and public officials. Even some senior police officials, including Sir Paul Stephenson, former chief of the Met, are now asking if this represents value for money. Indeed, the conviction rate has been paltry. There have been 12 prosecutions for phone hacking under Operations Weeting, Pinetree and Golding – leading to nine convictions. Operation Elveden, which took 29 journalists to court, only resulted in one being convicted by a jury for corruption.

Of course, there are legitimate public concerns about the behaviour of a handful of individuals. But any genuine problem was distorted out of all

proportion by political activists. The Left saw an opportunity to settle old scores with newspapers they believed had long agitated against them. There was an element of snobbery in this: distaste for those who made their living reporting on celebrity and show business, but also a hope that isolated examples of wrongdoing could be used to make a case for control of an entire industry.

Hence the idea gained currency that there needed to be regulation of the press by statute – handing politicians the theoretical power to censor what is written. This threat has had a rather chilling effect upon much of the press, which relies upon whistle-blowers being willing to talk and upon having confidence in its freedom to publish important stories without facing the wrath of those they are investigating. This newspaper's work on the MPs' expenses scandal, for example, could have been imperilled had such a regulatory climate existed.

The Left often complains that it is powerless. It is true that it is not very good at winning elections, a problem that it needs to think harder about resolving. But outside of government, it wields enormous institutional and cultural influence. Having whipped people into a frenzy over tabloid journalism, the Left turned its attentions towards accusations of historic child abuse.

The names of those involved in both campaigns are strikingly similar. Again, they related to allegations that certainly had to be taken seriously. But the credibility of Alison Saunders, the head of the CPS, has been called into doubt over the service's handling of historical sexual abuse cases. Likewise, the hounding of Leon Brittan proved tragic. The former Tory home secretary died from cancer without being told that an investigation into an allegation against him of rape had been found to contain no evidence. The CPS had come under pressure from Tom Watson, now deputy leader of the Labour Party, to persecute a gravely ill man – pressure that he also applied on another case when the head of the CPS was Sir Keir Starmer, who now sits on Labour's front bench. Sir Keir was involved in the prosecutions of the tabloids; Mr Watson played their inquisitor-in-chief in Parliament.

For the past few years, the Left has tried to use the law politically to discredit those who happen to disagree with it. This has cost taxpayers a great sum of money, hurt innocent people and undermined public faith in Britain's institutions. An unfettered press is essential to democracy. This newspaper will not be deflected from its calling. We have a job to do and we certainly intend to get on with it.