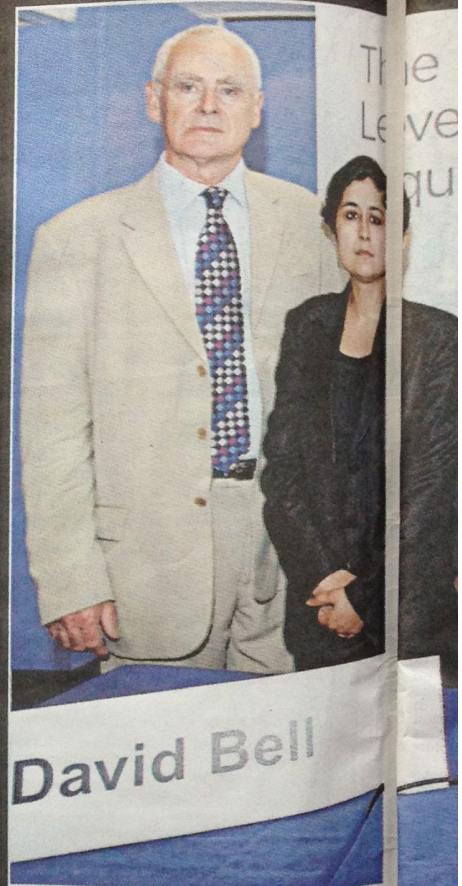


A coup by the Left

The Leveson Inquiry has momentous implications for free speech. But this Mail dossier raises disturbing questions about the influence of a quasi-masonic nexus of the 'people who know best'



THIS has been an extraordinary week for the BBC as it tears itself apart over one of the most catastrophic journalistic errors of modern times.

False allegations of paedophilia against an elderly Tory Party grandee have led to the resignation of the Director-General, the possible demise of the flagship Newsnight programme, the paying out of substantial libel damages and, worst of all, perhaps a shattering blow to BBC News's reputation for integrity.

How could this happen? Why did no one carry out 'basic journalistic checking' of facts? Why weren't those 'facts' put to the other side — the first rule of journalism?

We don't know, but we do know that behind this farrago is the work of a self-regarding body which calls itself the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ), the organisation that took their 'McAlpine exclusive' to the BBC and whose managing editor resigned after gleefully tweeting about being ready to out a politician who was a paedophile.

In its recent submission to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, the BIJ declared that its 'output and editorial processes' would 'be a masterclass, a gold standard for evidence-based journalism... journalism of an outstanding kind.'

To describe this as hubris would be an understatement.

And at the centre of the story is an obscure but immensely well-connected member of Britain's liberal Establishment, Sir David Bell, one of five BIJ trustees.

As we shall see in this Special Mail Investigation, Bell's campaign, which began almost a decade ago, to control Britain's raucous popular press and, in the process, promote what he regards as ethical journalism, has had momentous consequences.

ONE evening in January 2005 at the central London headquarters of Pearson Group — owner of the Financial Times — an extraordinary working dinner took place.

The host was Julia Middleton, a friend of David Bell's and a brilliant networker, and the guests were a select group, drawn from the New Labour-era Establishment. We know this thanks to an account of the event written for the left-of-centre New Statesman magazine by one of the attendees, the financial journalist Robert Peston, now the BBC's Business Editor.

Peston described 'a debate on media standards — with two editors, another BBC executive, an investment banker, a Bank of England luminary, academics and a bishop, inter alia — (which) was more practical than most. We'd been summoned to dinner... by Julia Middleton, the unrecognised toiler for the rehabilitation of the concerned, engaged citizen.'

'One of Middleton's great skills is to persuade police constables, youth group organisers, permanent secretaries, FTSE chief executives and head teachers that they can learn from each other and could even cure some of society's ills. However, almost all her meetings end up with a collective wail about the irresponsibility and excessive power of the media.'

'So she herded us into Pearson's art-deco palace on the Strand in the hope that we could find an answer or two. Something may come of the proposals that were offered. Meanwhile, the discovery of the evening for me was that Pearson's executive washroom is unisex, a la Ally McBeal. What is Marjorie Scardino, Pearson's personable chief executive, thinking of?'

Peston was unerringly prescient about one thing.

Something has come of that soiree seven years ago.

That something is the Leveson Inquiry into Britain's beleaguered newspaper industry. Its conclusions, which are to be published imminently, could have huge implications for a press that has been free of government control for 300 years, and for freedom of speech itself.

SIR DAVID BELL'S certainly a very busy bee. A greying, dishevelled figure in an ill-fitting suit, he appears to have been by far the most assiduous

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

by Richard Pendlebury



of the six 'assessors' appointed by the government to advise Lord Justice Leveson and his Inquiry.

Bell is an ideological bedmate of the aforesaid Julia Middleton — another very busy bee who has been described as the best-connected woman you've never heard of.

But while some of the Leveson assessors have patchy attendance records at the Inquiry, Sir David — whose unbridled eagerness to join the judge in his private rooms when the sittings rise has been remarked upon by observers — seems to have barely missed a day of the public hearings that began almost a year ago.

Public-spirited you may say. Except that an investigation by the Daily Mail raises serious questions about the suitability of Bell as an assessor and the impact this may have had on the objectivity and neutrality of the Inquiry itself.

BELL is a trustee and a former chairman of a leadership training organisation called Common Purpose,

whose thousands of 'graduates' have been described as the 'Left's answer to the old boys' network' (though not all share the same political views). Their identities are well protected.

FOUNDED by Ms Middleton and registered as a charity, Common Purpose boasts a 'considerable reach' throughout senior positions in public life. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have been spent on sending public servants on its courses.

THREE of the six Leveson assessors have Common Purpose connections, either through direct participation or through senior colleagues within the

organisations they lead or have led.

BELL and Middleton set up the Media Standards Trust, a lobby group which presented a huge amount of evidence to the Inquiry. The Media Standards Trust, whose chairman was Bell, gave its 'prestigious' Orwell Prize for political writing to a journalist who turned out to have made up parts of his 'award-winning' articles.

THE Media Standards Trust established Hacked Off, the virulently anti-popular-press campaign group which has boasted of its role in significantly increasing the Inquiry's terms of ref-

erence. The Media Standards Trust shared the same headquarters address as Common Purpose. It then shared an address with Hacked Off, whose funding it controlled.

MANY of those who provided the most hostile anti-press evidence to Leveson are linked to senior figures at the Media Standards Trust and Hacked Off.

THE Media Standards Trust has strong links with Ofcom, the statutory media regulator which, despite its denials, some suspect has ambitions to regulate Britain's free press. Ofcom's ex-chairman Lord Currie is a Leveson assessor.

MUCH of the financing of the Media Standards Trust comes from a charity of which Bell is a trustee — a practice that, while legal, would seem to many to be inappropriate.

DESPITE being formed by the Media Standards Trust, which is campaigning for 'transparency' and accountability in the news, Hacked Off refuses to make explicit the sources of its own funding.

AND, of course, Bell is a trustee of the now notorious Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which has wreaked such damage on the BBC.

Indeed, like some giant octopus, Common Purpose's tentacles appear to reach into every cranny of the inner sanctums of Westminster, Whitehall and academia — bodies that often view Britain's unruly, disruptive press with disdain and distrust.

Lord Justice Leveson has already said that he hoped his report would

There are serious questions about the impact Bell's had on the Inquiry's neutrality