The Hacked Off Leveson Bill — Kryptonite for the press?

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CATEGORY:
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Christmas is over, we've survived the New Year celebrations, the weather is taking a turn for the worse, and the post excess January Blues are hanging around as they always do. What is there to drag us out of our funk? Well, for those previously addicted to the Leveson inquiry on press ethics, with the celebrity circus of evidence-giving over and the long-awaited report of Lord Justice Leveson done, the answer might appear to be, not much.

David Cameron's immediate 'shock' response to Leveson's proposal for statute backed independent regulation – which he apparently found deeply troubling – was followed shortly by reports of hurried meetings amongst the cartel of national Fleet Street editors. Their aim, to find a way forward that is both acceptable to a media to whom the very word 'statute' is like kryptonite to Superman, and that will retain at least the semblance of independence sufficient to restore the trust of the paper reading public. But despite the initial flurry of activity, what is actually happening?

The Hacked Off campaign is doing what it can to keep up the momentum. Drafted by Hugh TomlinsonQCand Daniel Greenberg, Hacked Off has published its proposed Leveson Bill intended '_to put into law Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations on press regulation_'.

There was some considerable hue and cry when the Leveson recommendations were handed down that any bill would be impossible to draft and/or would leave the media with hands bound and lips gagged. But the Hacked Off offering runs to fewer than 30 pages and at first blush, starting as it does with the words, 'A bill to protect the freedom and independence of the media', does not appear to be overly chilling of the free speech, so precious to the media and so vital in a functioning democracy.

The bill intends to do the following:

- Enshrine the freedom of the press in statute for the first time
- Make illegal attempted ministerial or other state interference in the media
- Specify the standards which a voluntary independent press self-regulator must meet
- Propose a transparent, democratic system to appoint a Recognition Commission to verify that the press self-regulator is doing its job properly
- Give legal effect to the proposals of Lord Justice Leveson incentivising publishers to join the self regulator through access to reduced costs in court proceedings.

According to Hacked Off, it is also intended to be '_a faithful representation of the Leveson Report, sticking so far as possible to the intention, content and language of the Inquiry conclusions, with the bare minimum of wording changes and additions required to meet the requirements of legislation_'.

The Bill is available for review on the Hacked Off website and those interested in getting involved in the debate as to the future regulation of the media and contributing to the consultation process, can access it, here. Perhaps the media may find that the word 'statute' may not after all, be as deadly as they fear.
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