

# Blair admits being too close to Murdoch

LONDON, UK: Former British prime minister Tony Blair told a press ethics inquiry Monday that he got too close to Rupert Murdoch's media empire, in evidence disrupted by a protester calling him a "war criminal".



(Image: I-Net Bridge)

A middle-aged man burst into the courtroom where the Leveson Inquiry is held and shouted "this man should be arrested for war crimes" while Blair was speaking, before being hustled out.

The reference was to Blair's decision to take Britain to war in Iraq and Afghanistan during his time in office from 1997 until 2007.

Judge Brian Leveson, who is heading the inquiry, apologised to Blair and immediately ordered an investigation into how the man had gained access to a "secure corridor" into the courtroom.

In his evidence, Blair, who is godfather to one of Rupert Murdoch's children, was asked about his close relationship with the media baron whose tabloid The Sun Britain's top-selling newspaper gave Blair its backing.

Blair said he had made a strategic decision not to take on the power of the press during his time in office, despite calls for tougher media regulation following the death of Diana, princess of Wales in 1997.

He said he had taken care to court the press because if media groups had turned against him, it would have been a "huge and sustained attack".

## Too close to Murdoch

Asked whether he had got too close to Murdoch's News International, he replied: "Yes."

However, he added, "I don't know a policy that we changed as a result of Rupert Murdoch. Part of my job was to manage

this situation so that we didn't get into a position where we were changing policy."

The biggest problem in the British press, he said, was blurred lines between news and comment in some papers, where reporting becomes an "instrument of political power".

Blair, now a Middle East peace envoy, identified The Sun and the right-wing Daily Mail, owned by Associated Newspapers, as Britain's most powerful newspapers.

"Once they are against you, that's it. It's full frontal, day in, day out; basically a lifetime commitment," he said.

"The fact is if you fall out with the controlling element of the Daily Mail you are then going to be subject to a huge and sustained attack," he added.

"There is a substantial power there. In my view not simply in the Murdoch media. The power is significant.

"If you've got a readership of three to four million... that's power."

## **Close interactions 'inevitable'**

He said it was inevitable that top politicians and senior media executives would have close interactions.

Among the main media blocs, "Murdoch's are most powerful," he said, and "you have to take that into account with your strategy."

It was "absolutely" important to "try and get The Sun on board" as he tried to oust the Conservatives from office after 18 years at the 1997 election, Blair said.

He faced questions about claims of back-room deals with Murdoch on policies such as maintaining restrictions on trade unions and rejecting tougher media ownership rules.

Blair said he "understood why these conspiracy theories arise" but added:

"Our views may have coincided but I believed in what I was doing. I didn't need anybody else to tell me what to do."

In three phone calls with Murdoch in March 2003 ahead of the US-led invasion of Iraq, Blair said he would simply have been explaining his viewpoint.

"I wouldn't say there's anything particularly unusual or odd about that when you're facing such a huge issue," he said.

"It wouldn't have been about the tone of the coverage."

On being godfather to 10-year-old Grace Murdoch, the second youngest of the media baron's six children, he said: "I would never have become godfather to his child on the basis of my relationship with him in office."

Blair also admitted a friendship with Murdoch's former close aide Rebekah Brooks, who has been charged along with five others over the phone-hacking scandal at Murdoch's now-closed News of the World tabloid.

The Leveson Inquiry was set up by current Prime Minister David Cameron in July 2011 as the phone-hacking scandal escalated.

The inquiry is currently probing the links between politicians and the media.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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