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An unacceptable assault on a free press

For the past three days on the freezing streets of Warsaw, thousands of people have taken part in a series of protests in front of Poland's parliament. Inside the session hall, opposition MPs occupied the speaker's podium for several hours and blocked a vote on the 2017 state budget. The cause of these demonstrations are plans by the ruling Law and Justice party to restrict the access of reporters to the legislature.

In a country that threw off the Soviet yoke less than 30 years ago, freedom of the press is inextricably bound up with democracy. Control of the media is a certain sign of incipient autocracy. After all, why would those in power want to constrain the press unless they are doing something that they do not want the public to know? Newspapers are simply a conduit of information to the people. Our rulers may not like the way some in the media transmit what they say or comment upon what they do, but in a free country that is something they just have to put up with.

For the Poles, freedom of the press matters because it is the very essence of liberty in a country where it has been snuffed out all too regularly throughout history. For the British, however, it is taken for granted. We imagine ourselves to be a mature democracy in which the media can pretty much say what they want. This has never been entirely true, of course. The laws of libel constrain reckless journalism and strict rules govern what can be said and written about court cases. Moreover, criminal activity by journalists is rightly punished: the press is not above the law and does not seek to be.

When legislation is introduced which would serve to undermine press freedom, then it has to be opposed

But when legislation is introduced which would serve to undermine press freedom, then it has to be opposed, not only by the press who are directly affected by it but by all who believe in this country's liberties, rather than just paying lip service to them.

Many readers may not appreciate that just such a law is on the Statute Book. It is Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, introduced as a response by Parliament to the phone-hacking scandal and the subsequent Leveson inquiry into the press. In essence, it means that newspapers that continue to subscribe to an independent regulatory system and refuse to recognise an officially sanctioned body called Impress leave themselves exposed to severe financial penalties. If they are sued, they would have to pay their own costs and those of the complainant – even if they win the case.

Most newspaper organisations, including the *Telegraph*, have declined to join Impress precisely because it is a state-approved body. The great majority have signed up instead to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipso), which has powers to require newspapers to carry apologies or corrections and fine those that show excessive carelessness.

Section 40 has yet to be triggered, because the Government was waiting for various legal actions to finish and for Impress to be recognised as the official regulator, both of which have happened.

It will inevitably stay the hand of newspapers that might want to investigate suspicious goings-on

There is now every expectation that Parliament will be asked to reaffirm this law and bring into play the draconian penalties that go with it. A further consultation is currently taking place, but this has the feel of marking time.

Our politicians need to consider what they are doing before they proceed with a pernicious attempt to blackmail newspapers to join a regulator that is bankrolled by Max Mosley, who has waged war on the press ever since the now-defunct *News of the World* ran an exposé of his taste for orgies. The intention of the measure, in other words, is to stop newspapers prying into the lives of wealthy and powerful people such as Mr Mosley. Supporters of the Royal Charter that underpins the regulatory system claim that it operates in the public interest. It doesn't; it operates in the interests of a few and to the detriment of the many.

Moreover, it exposes publications that had nothing to do with phone hacking and have little interest in celebrity tittle-tattle to exactly the same punitive regime, with claimants facing no risk if they take newspapers to court or to arbitration. This will inevitably stay the hand of newspapers that might want to investigate suspicious goings-on in, for instance, their local council. How is that in the public interest?

Supposedly, these laws will achieve an equality of arms between allegedly wealthy newspapers and people who feel they have been harshly treated. Yet they completely disregard the parlous financial circumstances faced by the print industry and especially by local newspapers, which will simply stop following leads that run the risk of litigation. It is a charter for miscreants to evade accountability.

No country that calls itself a democracy should seek to impose crippling costs on its press because it refuses to submit to state regulation. This legislation needs to be repealed because it is an unacceptable assault on free speech. This is something the Poles instinctively understand. We need to show that we do, too.

Letters to the Editor

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Retired British soldiers face prosecution while IRA men go free

SIR – Two former soldiers, members of the British Army, are to be prosecuted over the killing of Joe McCann, an Official IRA commander who was shot dead in central Belfast in 1972.

He was a Republican legend even before his killing. Photographed amid flames in Eliza Street, holding an M1 carbine rifle, McCann's image during the gun battle became one of the earliest iconic images of the Troubles.

According to the US *Irish Echo,* "by 1971, McCann was officer commanding the Official IRA's third battalion in Belfast, which covered the Markets area. In a gun battle in Cromac Square on May 21 that year, McCann and his unit ambushed and killed a British soldier, the first to die at the hands of the Officials."

As part of the Northern Ireland peace process, Tony Blair's representatives told 200 suspects that they were unlikely to face prosecution unless new evidence came to light. The alleged terrorists would not face arrest because they had received "comfort letters". If the IRA agreed to accept this, the Government must give the same protection to the military who served in Northern Ireland.
Robert Boorman
Cambridge

SIR – Current investigations into events in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan are unfair in the extreme. Service personnel put their lives on the line at the behest of our politicians, who very rarely get their hands dirty.

One has to ask why anyone would serve on the front line in the current climate when there is a real possibility of investigation many years after the event. Who would want to live with that hanging over their head?

You cannot ask Servicemen to think twice before they pull the trigger when their lives are on the line. They deserve at the very least the full support of the Government.

There is a clamour in this country for this wrong to be put right, yet it seems the Government is not listening. The damage that is being done to our Armed Services is immense and will undoubtedly have a negative impact on operations for many years to come.
Stephen Powne
London SW1

SIR – The latest persecution of military and ex-military personnel must give comfort to this country's adversaries, whether state or terrorist-based.

A combination of weak political leadership (terrified of casualties or the International Criminal Court) and rapacious human rights lawyers funded by the British taxpayer means that no enemy of the United Kingdom need worry about Britain's Armed Forces. They will either not be deployed or, if they are, will be looking over their shoulders in case they are prosecuted for shooting the Queen's enemies .

How long before we see prosecutions of the Falkland campaign heroes on behalf of Argentine citizens?

It makes me very concerned for the defence of this country.
Harry Knowles
Ulverston, Cumbria

I spied for Russia

SIR – As a regular member of the Cambridge "spy seminar" (report, December 17), I do not believe that our proceedings or funding have been influenced by the Russians.

The seminars take place under the aegis of the history faculty of Cambridge University, and offer balanced presentations from Russian and many other perspectives. I have listened to informative lectures by former heads of the KGB and senior members of the CIA and the FBI.

I spied for the Russians on Britain's nuclear waste disposal facilities for four years from the mid-Nineties – with a little help from MI6. Possibly the SVR – the rebranded KGB – could have got the same information that I gave it by knocking on the doors of Whitehall, but it preferred a more clandestine approach.

So what? Don't we all want the Russians to solve their nuclear waste problems?

But my actions could easily be interpreted by the Rightist media were I to give a presentation at the Cambridge Intelligence seminar. (I was never asked to sign the Official Secrets Act, though I was requested not to identify my MI6 minders.)

As one of the contributors to the first edition of the new *Journal of Intelligence and Terrorism Studies* cited in your report, I do not believe that there is any Russian bias in its articles, some of which I reviewed.

The main purpose of this worthy and much-needed publication is to correct misinformation – which in my view is the most urgent and laudable view for any academic media outlet in today's confused and unstable world.
Rev Dr David L Gosling
Cambridge

No trains? That's £400

SIR – Many commuters renew an annual ticket on January 1. To travel from the south coast to a London office costs, say, £4,400 for the year.

This payment is credited to the Government, which adds on taxpayer money to meet a pre-agreed fee that it then pays to Southern railway.

Each time you are more than an hour late, or there are no trains, you can claim from Southern. If its office at Ashby-de-la-Zouch passes your claim (and it doesn't seem very eager), you can receive an 11th of what you paid in advance for that week.

If no trains run all year and you put in a claim for every journey, then the Government will receive your £4,400 and you will be refunded £4,000 (as you cannot claim for commuting on Saturdays). This will leave the Government £400 up, though you never got to work the whole year.
Simon Dunton
Westham, East Sussex

SIR – Unions have stated that this wave of strikes is meant to "topple the Tories". Edward Heath called a general election to answer the question "Who runs Britain?" He got a bloody nose.

I suspect that Theresa May would fare rather better.
Roger Smith
Meppershall, Bedfordshire

SIR – Two words spring to mind when considering the airport and airline strike over Christmas. *Selfish* and *pigs*.
Louise Broughton
Bowness-on-Windermere, Westmorland

Prison riots

SIR – Prison governors and ministers should read Jeffrey Archer's *Prison Diaries*. He described the problems of overcrowding and he highlighted the use of drugs and mobile phones.
Barbara Whitehouse
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

First to swear

SIR – Since most senior civil servants seem wedded to the European Union, they should be the first to take a new oath of allegiance to British values.
Rev Philip Foster
Hemingford Abbots, Huntingdonshire

SIR – Stop this banging on about British values. It's so un-British.

Incidentally, the UK driving licence card would look more dignified and, dare I say, more British with a simple royal coat of arms, rather than the flag.
John Barstow
Pulborough, West Sussex

Engaged: a sheep shelters in the shell of a red telephone box on the Isle of Skye

ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Planting Wi-Fi in a British country phone box

SIR – One solution to the proposed reduction by a third of the existing 45,000 phone boxes, due to non-use, would be to turn them into free Wi-Fi hotspots. Especially in rural areas, this would reduce the number of Wi-Fi black spots.

The infrastructure is there: an iconic landmark, a power source and a connection to an exchange that could be upgraded to 4G.
Adrian Pickering
Springwell Village, Co Durham

SIR – Reports of digital deserts for mobile phone coverage come as no surprise to Britain's farmers. Our member survey showed that 70 per cent of smartphone users have no access to 4G at all. Where there is coverage, farmers often report voice signal being lost.

The Government needs to commit itself to providing superfast broadband infrastructure for all farmers and rural communities and ensure that plans for 5G are "rural-proofed".
Guy Smith
Vice President, National Farmers' Union
Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire

Unexpected Christmas visitors – not expected

SIR – In the run-up to Christmas, we are constantly being urged to stock up on extra food and drink for "unexpected visitors".

Where are these people? I have never seen them.

Are they exempt from stocking up their own larders, because they are paying unexpected visits to others and eating them out of house and home?
Rosemary Aldridge
Poynton, Cheshire

SIR – Is the tradition of groups of door-to-door carol singers consigned to nostalgia?

The sound nowadays in the evenings leading up to Christmas seems to consist only of the rattle of the Ocado or Tesco delivery vans. Not a carol singer in sight.
Linda Bos
Midhurst, West Sussex

SIR – For Christmas circular newsletters (report, December 18), we give a "prize" to the best in the following categories: Most Miserable; Most Smug; Most Badly Written; Most News About People We Have Never Heard Of.

Of course, the one we send out is always scintillating…
Janet McNeill
Upper Basildon, Berkshire

SIR – Last Christmas we received an unsigned Christmas card from somebody who commented: "Hope you are well. Still taking the tablets."

This year another unsigned card in the same handwriting has arrived with the comment: "Have had to give up golf." Presumably the tablets stopped working.
Wendy Strathdee
Burnham, Buckinghamshire

Scott's race to the Pole

SIR – Alex Michaels (Letters, December 16) was quite right to emphasise the scientific priorities of Captain Scott's 1910-13 expedition. Whether or not he truly "called off the race", however, is, I believe, more of a grey area.

On learning of Amundsen's plan to use dog sledges, he called it a "serious menace to ours". When he reached the South Pole on January 17 1912, only to find that Amundsen had got there a month earlier, he wrote in his journal: "Great God! This is an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority."

This plaintive statement surely indicates disappointment that he had not reached the Pole first.
Julian Salisbury
Vice President, The Captain Scott Society, Cardiff

Online bank fraud

SIR – I was glad to read that banks will provide instant computer warnings to online customers that they may be transferring funds into a spurious account.

It is disappointing that it will take until 2018 to introduce the system. The technology is not new, so the delay must be caused by the need to build a database of scammers.

Only this week, I received a warning by a school bursar alerting parents to a scam email asking for school fees to be paid into a new (scammer's) account. This came one day after 700 of us had received the bill for next term's fees.
Angus Ward
Wantage, Oxfordshire

Heel, Trump, heel!

SIR – The best thing by far to come out of this year's turmoil is that it has given us two splendid new dogs' names – Brexit and Trump.
Penny Adie
South Molton, Devon

The easiest way to read Corbyn's bid for power

CHARLES MOORE NOTEBOOK

Just occasionally, politics really is simple. I believe there is a simple, overarching explanation for everything Jeremy Corbyn wishes to do. He wants to refight all the battles that the Labour Left lost in the Eighties. The only question is whether, this time, he can win them.

His first aim, as Labour leader, was that extremists could take over the grass-roots of the Labour Party and undermine moderate MPs. He has largely succeeded. His second was to reforge the trade union movement as the spearhead of the Left and the party's main source of financial support. This, too, has happened. The unions' share of party funding has risen to 79 per cent (compared with 59 per cent under Gordon Brown). The current rash of mainly public-service strikes, led by those on Southern trains, is not "wildcat", but planned.

The trade union movement used to have a supposedly unbeatable combination known as the Triple Alliance. Thanks to the incompetence of Mr Corbyn's old friend Arthur Scargill, Mrs Thatcher defeated the miners' union in 1985. That left only a Double Alliance. But those two – the unreformed railway unions and the mighty Unite – are doing their worst to make Mr Corbyn prime minister.

Sean Hoyle, president of the RMT rail union, has explicitly declared that the purpose is to "bring down this bloody working-class-hating Tory government". This is useful for the rest of us to know.

But if Mr Corbyn's convictions give him a sense of purpose, they also mean that his political opponents can read him like a book, though admittedly not the sort of book one would want to give anyone for Christmas. We know, for example, that he will always support any enemy of Britain or the West in general. Hence his recent appointment of an ex-IRA worker to his team, his grief at the death of Fidel Castro, and his otherwise inexplicable *tendresse* for sexist Islamist militants. Hence his longing for any form of inquiry – the latest would have been into the Battle of Orgreave – which might somehow put the hated Tories in the dock.

Hence, right now, his support for Putin's Russia, despite Putin's fascistic nationalism. For all his oft-expressed horror of killing civilians, Mr Corbyn has not yet condemned the Russian bombings in Syria. Only imperialist aggressors bomb civilians, says his ideology, formed roughly 40 years ago. Then he thought the Soviet Union was a force for good. He thinks Putin is a continuation of that force by other means (he may well be correct), and so he blindly supports him.

If I am right about Mr Corbyn's completely predictable ideology, it follows that it should be possible to stop him. He has two groups of serious supporters. The first – mainly over 60 years old – are those who wish to rejoin him on the barricades of their youth. The second – mainly under 30 years old – are those who know nothing about what he really thinks. They believe that, in a world of spin, he is a breath of fresh air. In fact, his is the stalest air to waft to the top of politics since Michael Foot became Labour leader in 1980.

At present, thank goodness, these two groups do not add up to a majority, but they could grow if other things – the economy, for instance – go wrong.

◇ I doubt whether the latest suggestion by the communities secretary, Sajid Javid, will reduce their number. Mr Javid says he is "drawn to" the recommendation by Dame Louise Casey, the Government's community cohesion "tsar", that "fundamental British values" should be included in a new oath for all holders of public office.

I have no idea what "fundamental British values" are. How do they differ from, say, fundamental Danish values? Where does the "British" bit come in?

"I'm talking about belief in equality," Mr Javid goes on. No doubt most of us believe in equality in some respects – equality before the law, for instance. But we live under a hereditary monarchy, with an established Church, and the right to inherit wealth. All of these defy equality, yet are cherished parts of our way of life: you might almost call them British values. Must we repudiate them?

I see no virtue in vain oaths. Those who hold public office should be loyal to the head of state in whose name they serve and the lawful institutions of her government. There doesn't seem to be much more to say.

◇ There can't be many Anglican bishops on whose memorial the public regularly leave flowers. Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury is almost the only one who springs to mind.

Another, however, is George Bell, Bishop of Chichester during the war. He is remembered as the chief outside supporter of German Christian resistance to Hitler, who condemned the blanket bombing of German cities. His admirers frequently leave tributes.

Last year, nearly 50 years after his death, Bell was accused of child sexual abuse. This column has argued that the process that found against him was flawed. Now there is an inquiry into how his own Church condemned him.

In the meantime, the present Dean of Chichester has taken it upon himself to order the removal of all potted plants placed beside Bishop Bell's memorial in his cathedral.

If you're passing Chichester Cathedral this Christmas and you drop in and decorate the wronged man's shrine with a sprig of holly, to commemorate unjust suffering, a higher authority than even a dean will surely forgive you.