

Treat journalism as a profession with its own ethical charter

by Francis Bennion

Note: The Times published a further critical article on the plans for a Royal Charter to regulate the Press on [2 November 2013](#).

{The} Leveson {report} is a failure because it does not give us a free press. The answer is to treat journalism as a profession. ~~{I am a member of the legal profession and was also for a time head of staff of the professional body for surveyors, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). I am the author of the book *Professional Ethics*, which was written using my professional experience. From all that I would say that}~~ {and} the best way to regard misdemeanours by journalists is to treat them as breaches of professional ethics.

The hallmark of a profession is that it has a code of ethical conduct drawn up by its professional body, breach of which is punishable by that body. I suggest the formation of a professional body called the Chartered Press Institute (CPI). As with ~~{the RICS and many}~~ similar bodies, ~~{the CPI}~~ {it} would be set up by a royal charter overseen by the Privy Council, an ancient body descended from the “wise men” who were advisers to the monarch before Britain became a constitutional monarchy. ~~{Its website says:~~

~~“Much of the day-to-day work of the Privy Council Office is concerned with the affairs of Chartered Bodies, the 900 or so institutions, charities and companies who are incorporated by Royal Charter. The Privy Council also has an important part to play in respect of certain statutory regulatory bodies covering a number of professions and in the world of higher education.”~~

~~I know from my RICS experience that}~~ the Privy Council Office has a very light touch and seldom interferes. Its supervision could not be said to prejudice the freedom of the press.

~~{The members of the CPI would be trained journalists who had undergone qualifying courses set by the CPI. As is the case with surveyors and surveying, non-members would be free to practise journalism, but the charter would make them subject to the CPI code of conduct and its penalties.}~~[†]

Comments on the above

Lord Fowler (Conservative) ‘As the House may remember, I am not an unreserved supporter of royal charters. As I have noted before, the charter website says: “New grants of Royal Charters are these days reserved for eminent professional bodies or charities which have a solid record of achievement”. I have never thought that that totally includes the British press, particularly not at this moment, after the scandals that we have had. I observe also, in passing, that the royal charter is described as the bright idea of Oliver Letwin MP. In fact, the idea came - as all these good ideas do - from the *Times* letters column 5 December 2012. It was suggested by a correspondent from Budleigh Salterton, who also wrote to me. As with so many things in this debate, you could not make it up. He wrote in the *Times* that a press body could be set up by, “a royal charter overseen by the Privy Council, an ancient body descended from the ‘wise men’ who were advisers to the monarch before Britain became a constitutional monarchy”. It is certainly one way of defending a royal charter. It is not entirely my way of looking at it, but I do not wish to be rude in any way to the writer of that letter, Francis Bennion, whom some of us may even remember as a parliamentary counsel here . . . [The

[†] Published in *The Times* 5 December 2012. Matter struck through was omitted. Matter in brace brackets was added.

royal charter] is a compromise and no one should claim anything more, but it gives us the opportunity of a new beginning and an end to the deep misconduct which has affected some newspapers. It deserves support and, above all, I hope that the press will now co-operate in making it a success.' HL Deb, 18 March 2013, c442, Report (5th Day) of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill.

See also FB's article in *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 March 2013

(<http://www.francisbennion.com/2013/009.htm>)

© 2011 F A R Bennion

Website: www.francisbennion.com

Doc. No. 2012.025

The Times 5 December 2012

Any footnotes are shown at the bottom of each page

For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website

References:

None