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Press Complaints Commission

From the Director

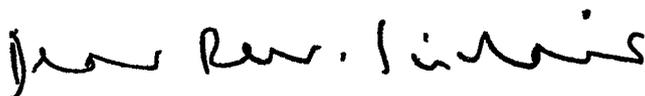
1 September 2004

Rev Dr David I Sinclair
Secretary
The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland
Committee on Church and Nation
121 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 4YN

Chairman
Sir Christopher Meyer

Members of the Commission
Matti Alderson
Roger Alton
Professor The Lord Chan
Edmund Curran
Paul Dacre
Jane Ennis
Mary Francis
Dr. Arthur Hearnden
Vivien Hepworth
Peter Hill
Paul Horrocks
Charles McGhee
Adam Phillips
Eve Salomon
Dianne Thompson
The Right Rev. John Waine KCVO

Director
Tim Toulmin



I write further to Sir Christopher's letter of 12 July and would like to thank you once again for sending us a copy of the report on Media and Privacy that was received by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland at its meeting in May.

Now that Sir Christopher and I have had a chance to digest the contents of the report there are some comments which we would like to make in response. The first thing to say is that we wholeheartedly agree with your analysis as to how a free media has enormous power to be an agent for good. While you are right that, on occasion, it has also caused pain, it is the central aim of the Commission to raise standards in the press by protecting the public from possible abuses. And it is our job to balance those difficult factors to which you refer: freedom of speech and the protection of the individual.

It is certainly interesting to hear your views on the way the media has sought to alter the boundaries of where private and public life begin. The fact that the PCC has dealt with increasing numbers of privacy cases is, I would suggest, a sign that we are recognised as being a tough defender of individuals' rights in this area.

Indeed, the power of the critical adjudication is something that has, if anything, grown over the years. Editors do not like to be told that they have broken their own industry's rules and their desire to avoid possible criticism ensures that we are able to resolve over 95% of those complaints where there may have been a breach of the Code of Practice.

Nonetheless, we are not complacent and recognise that we must constantly strive for improvement. Since his arrival as Chairman, Sir Christopher has initiated a programme of reform that has led, among other things, to an increase in the number of lay representatives on the Commission and the institution of a Charter Compliance Panel – a three member panel that works independently of the PCC and has the authority to inspect case files and to make recommendations about how our service can be improved.

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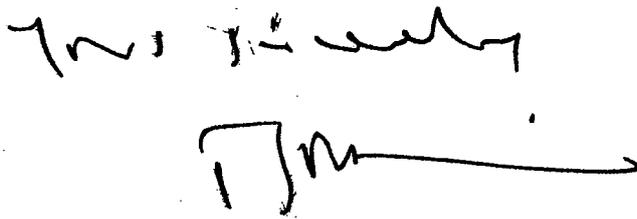


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I am, of course, sorry that you believe self-regulation not to have served society as well as it should have – our customer satisfaction surveys would certainly suggest that most complainants are happy with the service they get from the PCC. However, I am pleased that you remain of the view that legislation in this area is not inevitable. I certainly agree with that – it would be disastrous for freedom of expression and for the freedom of people to receive information freely.

With regard to the reporting of the conflict in Iraq, you may be interested to know that the PCC has just written to the Daily Mirror in relation to the publication of photos apparently showing Iraqi prisoners being abused by British soldiers. We hope to conclude our investigations over the coming weeks.

Thank you once again for sending us your report.

Handwritten signature of Tim Toulmin, consisting of a stylized 'T' and 'M' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Tim Toulmin