

House of Lords Debate on Media Plurality: Calling for Government Action

Efforts are being made to address the issue of media plurality at both the **UK** and **European** level. Concerns about excessive concentration of media ownership rose to the surface in the aftermath of the hacking scandal, and **Leveson's recommendations for reforming plurality rules** propelled the issue up the political agenda.

A recent **House of Lords debate** on media plurality in light of the Leveson Report featured more unanimity than disagreement, with several common points made among the speakers:

On Transparency of the Government's Position:

Several members welcomed the Government's attention to plurality but objected to its lack of transparency. Lord Inglewood criticised DCMS's response to the recent House of Lords **consultation** on media plurality as "disappointing" and "a bit thin". Given the **scrapping** of the Government's Communications Green Paper and the uncertainty about when the forthcoming White Paper might be released, Lord Inglewood argued that it is even more important that "we need to know with certainty what this timetable is going to be." Lord Whitty echoed this concern, pointing out that it is "getting fairly close to the Summer Recess, but we have heard nothing."

On a Workable System for Measuring Plurality:

"Simplicity" was the word of the day during discussions about implementing a system for measuring plurality. Lord Sharkey argued that "a complex system of ensuring plurality simply will not work." Lord Sharkey praised the proposals put forward by **Claire Enders and Professor Barnett** with simple rules based on market revenues. Lord Parekh added that media coverage should be audited periodically by an independent body, and that Parliamentary Select Committees can hold further public hearings with newspaper proprietors and journalists, if necessary. Lord Parekh also suggested creating rules governing disclosures by journalists of any conflicts of interest or hospitality received in the course of newsgathering.

On Pre-emption by the European Commission:

Lord Lipsey noted the Commission's **growing interest** in taking a more proactive role in areas of media freedom and plurality, and cautioned that delaying implementation at a UK-level might result in a system that is non-conducive to the British media environment: "I trust, therefore, that we will find a home-baked solution to this and not wait for Brussels to impose a Brussels-based solution".

On Treading Carefully:

Lord Gardiner of Kimble expressed more patience with the Government's progress, and argued that measurement systems based on thresholds "may not actually address the issue in the most skilful way". Exposure to a greater array of news sources is of course positive, but the advent of search engines for internet news increases the risk that users will selectively modify news intake, perhaps resulting in **opinion reinforcement**. Lord Gardiner of Kimble also suggested giving the Government some leeway so that it may consider the work and findings of the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications' recent consultation, and appeared confident that "the Government will set out this summer how they plan to seek views on these issues."

Lord Inglewood concluded by responding to these words of confidence, asking Lord Gardiner for clarification about the Government's timetable: "Can he tell the Committee when the last day of

summer comes?”

To this, Lord Gardiner of Kimble answered: “I will reply to [this] point by saying that I know when the first day of autumn is”.

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