



After dinner speech to the Society of Editors' conference

Carlisle, October 2016

There is, if you think about it – and after all why should you – something not merely traditional but quaint about the ritual after dinner speech.

There you are: you have enjoyed (or at least I hope you have enjoyed) a thumpingly good meal and drank an inordinate amount both before and during (and no one could or should suggest that that noble Society of Editors when times are if not hard at least somewhat spongy, stint themselves).

If you are lucky and filled with a wine-driven optimism, getting on rather well with your beautiful neighbour, that this promise of an eventful evening should so suddenly so startlingly be interrupted...and interrupted for what? A speech – and a speech to what end? You have spent the day with earnest and sometimes anxious discussion and debate, you want if not to let your hair down at least to loosen the tresses...and the danger is that an evening, however enjoyable, however filled with promise, is paused not for the benefit of those who wish for nothing other than to be entertained but for the benefit rather of the entertainer. He who filled with the false optimism triggered by one little glass too many. And why does he do it? He does it for this reason: to establish his credentials.

Now, I speak from experience. Lawyers, judges especially, know all about speeches. Nothing they love more than the sound of the human voice – not particularly the voice of others but especially the sound of their own. And thus no legal dinner is complete without some aging lawyer or some even older judge in his (and it usually is *his*) anecdotage rounding off the evening with a few smug tales of triumphs of his youth, or worse, an attempt to descend into a popular arena with a dirty joke coming up trumps with some sort of locker-

room tale of the Englishman the Irishman and the Scotsman and the mermaid at Blackpool pier, or even worse some legal jokes.

Now I don't know how many of you have heard a legal joke (if that is not oxymoronic). They are much repeated amongst lawyers, so much so that the legal audience will probably be able to recite them from start to finish long before the speaker has come to an agonising end where the punch-line is inevitable fluffed or dished, and which, inevitably is designed to show how clever the speaker was in his youth...and remains.

So what is your regulator to do in Carlisle? What indeed is your regulator doing in Carlisle? Can a regulator fulfil the all-important task of establishing his credentials in Carlisle...or anywhere? To this so obvious a question there is, like any good question, more than one answer. Of course, Carlisle has an attraction. It is your executive director Bob Satchwell. From Carlisle, educated in Carlisle, and he asked me – and who could or should resist an invitation from Bob. But there is another, and it is less obvious but I venture no less persuasive. There are two themes which link this regulator to Carlisle and Cumbria as a whole: sheep and shit. But before I explain, let me, like all lawyers, be guilty of giving you a faint glimpse into the bleeding obvious. Carlisle is far away from London. A proud independent border city and the importance of being away from London for you all is clear if worth repeating. It is here and in other regional centres that the significance of what we are in danger of losing is most apparent...a vibrant local and regional press which bears the true mark of what makes it viable and precious...its independence. That independence is what your public, your readers, most value and it is they and all of us, who have most to lose and who will suffer without a press free from control, regionally and nationally.

What as regulator I see more and more clearly is what we risk losing, in the London-based whittering and burble, from those who wish to pursue their aim of establishing the very thing that represents the greatest risk to that precious independence, and that is control. You should be very wary, very wary indeed of anything that looks like an attempt to corral you into submission:

government, the powers that be, want to goad you, prod you into doing what they want. The real and underlying danger of section 40, designed to make you pay up even if you have proved someone to be a liar in court, lies not in the purpose which it proclaims...that your regulator should be recognised by a body paid for by the State – last week it asked for more money from the State – but a far more fundamental and underlying current: that it is intended to herd you, force you into something you do not want to do. The essence of our press is that it cannot and should not be forced into doing anything it does not choose to do. If it acts under compulsion it is indeed doomed.

The essence of successful press regulation, I believe, is that it is voluntary. It is something you choose to do, not something into which you are driven. Regulation of the press will never work if it is compulsory. Of course with that freedom comes the risk and dangers of abuse, but those dangers must be balanced against what I believe to be the far greater dangers of a country and of regions without an independent untamed regional and national press.

There is always the temptation that the regulator will seek to establish his credentials in the border country by likening his tasks to crutching and dagging...vital skills with which up here you will all be familiar. Yes, those whom I might term the daggerman may superficially be likened to your regulator – taking the sheep shears and cutting away the shit covered fleece from a sheep's backside – but I don't think of IPSO's task is or should be limited to cleansing. I believe it is to preserve and underline your strength and importance.

There is a curious paradox about the press: however good you are at communicating, however fearless you sometimes show yourselves to be, you are not so good at communicating about yourselves at telling your readers what life without you would be like in a world of unedited, unskilled unjournalistic piss and wind. As you face so uncertain a future, I fear far too many of you have paid far too great attention to tales from old Russia. I surely hardly need, do I, to remind you of the old Russian peasant making his way from Riazan to Pskov. As he shuffled through the snow he saw a small robin on

the icy drift at the side of the path: poor robin, he thought, caught in the freeze and he gently picked the small bird up and placed it in a warm and freshly delivered cow pat. Saved from the cold, and nicely blanketed the bird sang and flapped its wings as the peasant strode away. Coming in the opposite direction, another serf heard and saw the bird in the cow pat...poor bird he thought covered in shit...I shall recuse it and he took the bird out of the pat and placed it on the snow....where it promptly fell over and died.

There is, as in all good Russian stories, a morale: it is not always your enemies who put you in it, not always your friends who pull you out of it and if you are in it, don't sing and wave your arms about. Not so: We need you. Despite the threats to your existence, you must wave your arms about and for God's sake – sing.