

BBC constrained by need to avoid political bias, admits Lord Patten

As Leveson inquiry starts, former Tory chairman says there are areas where corporation needs to be particularly careful



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The BBC is unable to conduct investigations into some of the most important stories of the day – including phone hacking – if they could be construed as having a political bias, the chairman of the BBC Trust, Lord Patten, has admitted.

As the Leveson inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press begins on Monday, the former Conservative party chairman said the broadcaster has its hands tied by the regulator Ofcom and the ethics code of the Trust itself.

In a speech given at the Society of Editors' annual conference on Sunday, Patten said: "As a publicly funded broadcaster whose output is so directly intrusive, there are some areas where we ought to be particularly careful in our journalism or even decline to follow where newspapers or online journalism may properly lead," he said.

"Despite the BBC's tradition of investigative journalism, it could not have paid for the information on MPs' expenses as the Daily Telegraph did, nor pursued the hacking story at News International as remorselessly as the Guardian campaign did.

"The hacking story inevitably coloured the debate about News Corp's bid for full ownership of BSkyB," he added. "That's not something I want to comment on as chairman of the BBC Trust."

Patten also used his speech to take a side-swipe at politicians who criticise the BBC over alleged breaches of its impartiality. "We have been attacked from both the left and the right," he said, pointing out that the frequency with which the broadcaster is accused of political bias justifies its choice to not engage in some vital journalism.

"When this hacking story broke, some suggested that we were giving it excessive coverage, as it were, leading the hue and cry," he said. That was found not to be true, he added.

Patten also argued for continued self-regulation of the press. Statutory regulation would, he said, "threaten democracy".

One solution to the current crisis of confidence in the media, he suggested, would be a form of Hippocratic Oath – "a watermark to distinguish proper, ethical journalism from the mass of intrusive and unregulated material."

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