

TIME

Britain's Phone-Hacking Scandal and the Rise of Louise Mensch

The Conservative politician Louise Mensch attained a high public profile as a member of the parliamentary committee investigating phone hacking in Britain. An outspoken critic of the media, she nonetheless voted against the committee's report on May 1 because of its hardline position on Rupert Murdoch -- a surprising turn in what has been a dramatic public inquiry.

By [MEGAN GIBSON](#) | [@MeganJGibson](#) | May 1, 2012 |



Conservative Member of Parliament Louise Mensch attends the Department of Culture Media and Sport press conference announcing a cross-party report on phone hacking at Portcullis House in London, May 1, 2012.

Louise Mensch has a lot to say about the British media and as with many of her opinions she's quick to share. "I think it's clear that there needs to be a change," she says decisively, sitting in the courtyard of Portcullis House, the office building for MPs adjacent to London's Houses of Parliament. "A self-regulating press simply didn't work. And we saw that as a result of the phone-hacking inquiry."

The inquiry she's referring to, of course, is the one led by the parliament's Culture, Media and Sport committee, of which Mensch is member. Last summer, after the phone-hacking scandal engulfed News Corporation's *The News of the World*, the committee was tasked with interrogating the company's top executives, including Rupert Murdoch, James Murdoch and Rebekah Brooks, to determine if illegal activity had been intentionally concealed.

(LIST: [Who's Who in the U.K. Phone-Hacking Scandal](#))

The committee's latest report was released on May 1. Senior figures from News Corp., such as former chief executive Les Hinton and former *The News of the World* editor Colin Myler, were excoriated for misleading Parliament on the phone-hacking scandal, while James Murdoch was slammed for not investigating the issue more thoroughly. And the report found his father to have been willfully blind to the hacking, [concluding](#) that "Rupert Murdoch is not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company."

That was a conclusion that Mensch and her fellow Conservatives on the cross-party committee did not share. The Tory members of the committee all voted against the report but stated that they were satisfied with it apart from the conclusion on Murdoch's ability to run his company — a line,

Mensch claimed during a press conference, that was “stuck in on the basis of no evidence presented to the committee, whatsoever.” While it may seem like a case of party politics, Mensch maintains that when put before the House of Commons on who intentionally misled parliament, the committee will be unified in its decision. Still, Mensch’s refusal to take a hard line against Murdoch seems somewhat surprising considering her previous statements at the inquiry.

The inquiry, which was televised live, wasn’t short on drama — and Mensch was right in the middle of it. Americans most likely remember her claim that Piers Morgan, the CNN anchor and former British tabloid editor, had detailed the media’s use of phone hacking in his memoir. (She later apologized to Morgan, saying she’d “misread” the quotation.) Those in Britain, meanwhile, were struck by the way Mensch, a relatively new backbencher in David Cameron’s Conservative party, had quickly become one of the inquiry’s most persistent interrogators. At one point, she asked News Corp. founder Rupert Murdoch if he had considered stepping down as “the captain of the ship” that had broken the law. When he said that he hadn’t, she responded with a cold and measured, “Why not?” Her assertiveness garnered much media attention in the U.K. The *Daily Telegraph* praised her “determination” in pursuing answers and the *Economist* dubbed her a “surprise star.”

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Louise Bagshawe was born in 1971 — two years after Murdoch first acquired *News of the World* — and like many British politicians was privately educated, first at boarding schools and later at Oxford. Her first steps into the workforce, however, didn’t exactly follow the beaten political path. After graduating college, the heavy metal fan pursued a music career, working first as an intern at MTV and then as a publicist with EMI Records and in marketing for Sony. (After appearing at the inquiry, a journalist,

presumably hoping to spark a scandal, accused Mensch of having been spotted using drugs in a nightclub during this time. She boldly responded by admitting that it was likely true.) In 1995, at the age of 24, she launched a second career as a romance novelist – writing saucy, quick reads with titles like “Venus Envy” and “Tall Poppies,” published under her maiden name. She also met and married her first husband, an American property developer, and the couple had three children. After a divorce and another career shift, this time into politics, Mensch started to build a name for herself in right-wing circles as a new face – and a female one at that – in the notoriously traditional Tory party.

Before the phone-hacking inquiry, media coverage of Mensch was largely limited to local papers in Corby, her small East Midlands constituency, or tabloids like the Mail Online, the online arm of the right-wing paper the *Daily Mail*, which dubbed her a “Cameron cutie” and enthusiastically reported on her second marriage to Metallica manager, Peter Mensch. After the inquiry, however, Mensch was propelled into the political spotlight. “As a result of the committee, I got more attention than I deserved,” she admits. The *Guardian* once described her as an example of the new Tory feminist. The U.K. edition of *GQ*, meanwhile, likened her to one of her idols, Margaret Thatcher, despite the fact Mensch has only won one election and has been in parliament for just two years.

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Yet while the attention has brought fame not often achieved by a junior politician, it’s been a double-edged sword. She’s not only become a judge of the media; she’s been judged herself. “There has been a focus on looks, which is regretful,” she says of the coverage she’s received. She’s not just referring to the nauseating “Cameron cutie” nickname, either. During a *Guardian* interview, she was asked if she’d had a face-lift. When she refused to answer the question, the non-response was featured prominently

in the article and re-reported by all the tabloids. Another story in the Murdoch-owned *Times* of London described her as having a “smooth face and clear complexion, pert but modest-sized breasts, a lithe and toned body,” which supposedly indicated her social class. And in her interview with *GQ*, she complained about being constantly appraised for her looks. In the accompanying photo shoot, however, she was photographed in designer clothing and heavy make-up – and was lambasted by the daily newspapers for appearing too glamorous.

This isn't to say that some of the focus on Mensch hasn't been of her own design. She's often been accused of being publicity-hungry and of grandstanding. Her name frequently appears in the media by way of her own byline. She also has a tendency to engage in high-profile media feuds, such as her row with comedian Brian Limond. In November, Mensch angrily objected when the comic, who had a show on BBC Scotland, began tweeting his excitement over a rumor that Thatcher had died. When Limond switched his avatar to an image of the Iron Lady with the words “Die Now” scribbled across it, Mensch took to the *Telegraph* with an op-ed on why she found it “disgusting.”

Yet when Mensch argues that “women [politicians] have to sort of trudge through this nudge, nudge, wink, wink, sort of puerile, 10-year-old boy culture of the British press,” it rings true. Of the facelift question from the *Guardian*, she says, “[it's] entirely my business and not the point of any woman politician.” She also cites the example of Page 3 – the tabloid tradition, perpetuated in part by Murdoch's papers, of featuring a topless model on the third page of each edition. “There are some British institutions that should go the way of the dinosaur like the hereditary House of Lords – and women being laughed at on Page 3.” Asked whether she believes Britain is sexist, Mensch is unequivocal. “Yes,” she says firmly.

Unsurprisingly, the issue of Page 3 came up during the other major inquiry into the British press this year – the one led by Justice Brian Leveson on

the ethics of media practices. On Jan. 24, four representatives of British women's groups testified that the media played a significant part in perpetuating "sexist stereotypes" that might "condone violence against women and girls," citing everything from the photos of topless women — ironically censored from the inquiry — to sensationalized descriptions of violence and describing 12-year-old rape victims as "Lolitas." Mensch herself has encountered threat of violence when, after appearing at the inquiry, she received emails from a man who implied he was going to kill one of her children. (He was later convicted.) But while the media's role in the treatment of women is likely to be an enduring issue — the Leveson inquiry is still ongoing — it's an aspect that's out of Mensch's jurisdiction. She's pleased that Leveson touched on sexism in the press — even for just a day — but the Culture, Media and Sport inquiry was limited to the *News of the World* and the phone-hacking issue.

Like any Tory worth her salt, Mensch also points out that sensationalist media only exists because there's a market for it. In other words, although the tabloids seem quite obviously slanted against women, people are buying what the Murdochs and others are selling them. Maybe it's not just the media that needs to be examined, says Mensch. "Perhaps we need to look a little more at ourselves."

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