

## **Public Safety Meeting – 11 March 2003**

Notes from the Meeting attended by Peter Rhodes from the Express and Star looking at Social Responsibility in relation to the Press.

Jim Speakman, Chair of the Wolverhampton Over 50 Sub Committee for Public Safety introduced Peter to the Group and thanked him for his attendance.

Peter talked to the Group about the history of the Express and Star. He told how it was founded at the end of the last century by young radicals who felt their views should be represented.

Thomas Graham, a pork butcher originally from Scotland dreamt of starting a paper but had no money. In the early 1870's he met a fellow Scott, Andrew Carnegie who provided the money for a string of newspapers across the country. Carnegie had American ideals and it was felt he was conspiring to remove both privilege and the Royal family. People bought into this because it was at the time when Queen Victoria removed herself from the public eye although she did re-emerge and the Royal Family re-invented itself.

The Express and Star appeared as a liberal newspaper. The Graham family still own and run the paper and it is the biggest Regional paper in Britain. The Express and Star attempts to represent the views of all parties.

Peter then went on to discuss his role on the newspaper of columnist and explained he has to write the Leader column commenting on the big issues of the day on behalf of the newspaper. Occasionally as a leader writer a dilemma occurs where you don't always agree with what you are writing.

Peter then posed the question, does a leader column change people's points of view. He gave an example where a joy riding incident had occurred in the north of the country several years ago and read out the report. A short time after a further joy riding incident occurred in Staffordshire and the police there used the same words in their Statement about the incident that the Express and Star had used.

Peter stated he felt "Social Responsibility" can be subjective, depending where you are coming from.

It is often said the tabloid newspapers are getting worse although Peter feels there is little evidence of this. He quoted an example of how a few years ago if a Newspaper wanted a photograph of you or a family member for a story they would come to your house and take a photograph which would be displayed without permission. The following day the photograph would be returned with a cheque and a 'Thank You' for the use of. Most people cashed these cheques. Peter said this would not happen today.

There are now many Acts of Parliament that need to be considered by the Press before printing anything. The Press is now restrained and made to be socially responsible.

Peter went on to give examples of situations where "Social Responsibility" could be examined.

He referred to Ron Davies, a politician, who five years ago was caught on Clapham Common, a notorious meeting place for homosexual activity but denied being there but eventually the truth came out and he resigned.

It has recently happened again, Ron Davies has been caught in a Gay Sex situation, first he denied being there, then he said he went occasionally to look for Badgers and now he has resigned

Peter posed the question, is this social responsibility reporting, is it an intrusion or is it to sell Newspapers?

Peter then looked at the case of Matthew Kelly's recent arrest. From the moment of arrest all the details became public knowledge. This could potentially damage his career permanently. Some would say it was not socially responsible. The police feel it useful to release stories to help them gain information to solve crimes.

There is the view that Celebrities should expose stories immediately because it can help prove/disprove and in the end it always come out.

Peter asked is this "Social Responsibility" or "Mud Racking"?

Peter went on to the issue of war on Iraq; depending on which newspaper you read The Sun is for a war, The Guardian is against a war. "Who is being socially responsible"?

Peter went on to tell the Group about issues of the Express and Star which carried out an in depth look at the issues of Asylum Seekers. This was decided due to the sackfuls of mail received at the Express and Star from readers which were full of allegations and fears.

These articles received commendation from all sections of society and was welcomed as a Socially Responsible article in Wolverhampton.

The Times, however, came to Wolverhampton and examined the Express and Star Asylum Seeker articles. They printed a piece in the Times Media section stating it was uncomfortable signs of 1968 and Enoch Powell.

Where you stand on the issue of Asylum Seekers will depend whether you feel the Asylum Seeker articles were Socially Responsible.

Peter explained the paper was founded on the principles of Social Responsibility and accountability but Social Responsibility is variable depending on your position.

Peter then invited Members to ask questions and a general debate on the issues raised took place.

Q. The Express & Star some years ago printed a story of a lottery winner who was away on holiday. The story stated this fact and printed the full address. Three attempted break-ins were suffered, was this right?

A. No, it is not right or acceptable.

Q. Do you have threatening letters about your views?

A. Not really

Q. Will you talk about the Wolverhampton Over 50's in your column.

A. Possibly

Peter stated that some people like the "Queen Mother" seem to be above criticism.

Q. Do you think this is because there is a lack of real analysis?

A. Possibly, but we need people who are above criticism.

A member told of a programme where Mo Mowlam was a panel member, the programme was offensive and full of bad language.

Peter stated there seemed to be a gradual coarsening of society over time. Some people find programmes associated with "Red Nose Day" offensive for example:-

Trevor told of an offensive programme on television which involved a young woman giving her underwear to a man. He stated this is not entertainment.

A debate on the Asylum Seekers ensued.

Q. The articles on Asylum Seekers in the Express and Star were good. Are you still getting letters?

A. Yes, but the most letters came from the issues on Burglary.

Q. Did anyone from the Express and Star go and look at the Asylum Seekers sites.

A. Yes, reporters writing the articles investigated.

A further discussion took place on the issues around how to teach Social Responsibility.

One view was that Social Responsibility can only come from education and communication.

Another view was that it can start in schools but it cannot be imposed, it can only come from grass roots.

Another view expressed was that education is not enough, if policy is wrong it won't work.

The point was made that the Forum was founded to make life better for Older People in Wolverhampton.

It was pointed out by John McGinley that members should be careful not to take everything they hear as the truth. The Forum needs to be careful not to lose their "Middle Ground". They have a strong influence in the city but this could be lost if they lose their middle ground approach.

Q. A member stated we could talk all night about Equal Rights, Social Responsibility etc. but is anything happening? Does anyone stand up and say things are out of control?

A. Peter agrees Equal Responsibility needs to be taken.

Peter left the meeting with a promise to attend the main Forum Meeting to address all members at sometime in the future.