



NEWS RELEASE

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GOVERNMENT MUST COME CLEAN ON SECRET BLAIR-MURDOCH MEETINGS – AVEBURY

As a result of a campaign by the Liberal Democrats, the Government was today urged to disclose timings of discussions between Rupert Murdoch and Tony Blair under the Freedom of Information Act or provide a more robust explanation for its refusal

Following questions by Liberal Democrat peer Lord (Eric) Avebury, the Information Commissioner's Office ruled that the dates of some discussions between the Prime Minister and Mr Murdoch should be revealed, as the Prime Minister's ability to engage in free and frank discussions is outweighed by a stronger interest in understanding more about the way government operates.

Commenting, **Lord Avebury** said:

“People have every right to know about the meetings the Prime Minister has with Mr Murdoch, who has strong views on the Iraq war and ownership of TV stations.

“The Prime Minister was determined to keep his contacts with Rupert Murdoch secret, but the public should be able to form their own opinions about the extent of the media magnate's undemocratic influence.

“I was not asking for the content of the discussions to be revealed. It would still be for the public to judge what subjects Mr Murdoch may have raised with the Prime Minister.

“The Cabinet Office twisted the arm of the Information Commissioner to alter this decision behind closed doors. I will take further action to protect the integrity of the freedom of information process.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

- The letter to Lord Avebury containing the ICO’s decision received on 4th July 2006 is attached.
- Amendments of substance were made to the Information Commissioner’s Draft Decision Notice following complaints from the Cabinet Office. Lord Avebury has not been able to review the changes made.
- Lord Avebury submitted a request for details of telephone conversations and meetings between the Prime Minister and Mr Rupert Murdoch on 21st October 2003 [Official Report, House of Lords, 21st October 2003, col WA157]. He made a further request for the information, following the Freedom of Information Act 2000 coming into force of at the beginning of 2005, in a letter to the Lord Privy Seal [Baroness Amos] dated 15th April 2005. On receiving a further refusal he requested an internal review under the FOI on 22nd May 2005.
- The Prime Minister’s office confirmed, in a letter dated 19th May 2005, that they held the information requested, but they claimed exemption under S 36(2)(b)(i), (ii) and 36(2)(c) of the Act (prejudice to the effective conduct of public affairs, but added that this exemption was subject to the balance of public interest.
- Lord Avebury then complained to the Information Commissioner’s Office [ICO] in a letter dated 27th July 2005, who referred the complaint to the Freedom of Information Officer at the Cabinet Office for comment, on 8th August 2005.
- The Cabinet Office responded on 30th September 2005 reiterating and paraphrasing the letter from the Prime Minister’s office, but omitting the reference to the public interest. Lord Avebury wrote again to the Information Commissioner’s Office on 3rd October 2005, formally requesting them to overrule the Prime Minister’s office and the Cabinet Office, and to compel the disclosure of the information on public interest grounds.
- On 13th June 2006 the ICO wrote to Lord Avebury saying that the Cabinet Office had asked them to agree to unspecified amendments to the draft letter deciding Lord Avebury’s complaint. This meant that Lord Avebury would be unaware of the changes made, and this could itself form grounds of a request for disclosure under the Act.
- Lord Avebury has today written to the Information Commissioner’s office and the Cabinet Office asking them for copies of correspondence, emails and

minutes of meetings between them about this Decision. He has also tabled a Parliamentary Question asking for the information originally refused.