Re: Complaint by Geoff Hoon (ref: 19/08/2022)
Date of complaint: 19 August 2022


Date of publication: 29 July 2022

Decision

Introduction

1. Throughout this decision, Geoff Hoon will be referred to as “the complainant” and the above-mentioned article as the Article. Guardian News & Media will be referred to as “GNM”, the former Press Complaints Commission Code as “the Code”, the readers’ editor as RE and review panel as “the Panel”.

The Article

2. The Article complained of is an obituary of the late Sir Christopher Meyer which was published online and in print pm 29 July 2022.

Complaint to the RE

3. The Complainant first complained to the RE on 1 August 2022 on the grounds that Article contained an inaccurate portrayal of Sir Christopher Meyer’s view of the Complainant as being “scathing” based on quotations from Sir Christopher’s book “DC Confidential” (referred to hereafter as “the Book”):

He will be best remembered for his indiscreet memoirs, DC Confidential, published in 2005 and serialised in the Guardian and Daily Mail, in which he produced a series of unflattering portraits of senior figures in the Blair government. It was unusual at the time for a civil servant to publish a book so soon after leaving government and to make such caustic personal remarks about ministers.

He spared Gordon Brown, then chancellor, and John Reid, a defence secretary, but said such capable ministers tended to be an exception and “stood out like Masai warriors in a crowd of pygmies”. Among those he was scathing about were the then foreign secretary Jack Straw, another defence secretary,
Geoff Hoon, and the deputy prime minister John Prescott. He ridiculed Blair’s Middle East envoy, Lord Levy, for having pretensions to be “a latter-day Kissinger”.

4. The Complainant pointed out that the criticism of him was both of marginal relevance to the Article and did not accord with his recollection of the Book, in which he had been mentioned only three times.

5. The RE rejected the complaint. Her reasons were, in summary:

i) The use of the word “scathing” to characterise Sir Christopher’s view of the Complainant was a matter of “one writer’s assessment of another writer’s characterisation”.

ii) As such, the question was whether this could reasonably be considered to be an accurate characterisation or was significantly misleading.

iii) Taken in context, the reader would understand the word “scathing” as meaning “caustic” or “withering” about the Complainant’s political performance. Having read the Book, and considered other writings by the author of the Article in which the RE concluded that the use of the word scathing was, in context, reasonable and not significantly misleading.

The Complaint to the panel

6. The Complainant complained to the Panel on 19 August 2022 in substantially the same terms as his complaint to the RE. He also claims that there has been a failure to distinguish between fact and comment as required by Article 1(iii) of the Code.

Relevant aspects of the Code

7. The Complaint gives rise to issues under Clause 1 of the Code which provides as follows:

---

1 Due to a technical error, the Panel did not in fact receive the Complaint until 8 September 2022.

The Scott Trust Ltd
Registered in England No. 6706464
Registered office: Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG
“Accuracy

i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or
distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by
the text.

ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once
recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence,
and - where appropriate - an apology published. In cases involving
the Commission, prominence should be agreed with the PCC in
advance.”

iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given,
when reasonably called for

Discussion

8. The Panel has considered correspondence between the RE and the
Complainant and has read and considered the relevant extracts from the Book
which refer to the Complainant. It notes at the outset that there are only three
references to the Complainant in the Book and that these are often focused on
others rather than the Complainant directly. Although the Book is not glowing
in its praise of the Complainant, none of the passages which refer to him could
be reasonably described as offering anything more than mild criticism. For
example, there is a reference to the Complainant in the context of his
interactions with the former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld: “It proved
harder to find a common wavelength between Rumsfeld and Robertson’s
successor, the amiable Geoff Hoon. In fact it was like getting pandas to mate.
Hoon got nervous in Rumsfeld’s presence.”

9. The Panel does not agree that references to the author’s earlier writings on the
subject are of relevance to the accuracy of his characterisation of Sir
Christopher’s views of the Complainant in the Article as expressed in the Book.
However, the Panel has considered in context the passage of the Book quoted
selectively in an earlier 2005 piece by the same author in which Sir Christopher
describes capable ministers as “standing out like Masai warriors in a crowd of
pygmies”. Contrary to the suggestion in the earlier article, this passage does
not in fact refer to the Complainant at all.
10. The Panel therefore does not consider that the word “scathing” is a reasonable characterisation of Sir Christopher's views of the Complainant insofar as those views are set out in the Book. “Scathing” is a strong word which suggests to the reader that the Complainant was held in extremely low regard by Sir Christopher. Its use in the context of the Article is clearly drawn from the references to the Complainant in the Book. Having considered these extracts, the Panel is of the view that it is misleading to attribute the word “scathing” to Sir Christopher’s opinion of the Complainant as set out in the Book.

Conclusion

11. Given the Panel’s conclusion, it recommends that the online version of the Article be amended to remove the following text: “Among those he was scathing about were […] another defence secretary, Geoff Hoon” and to include a note at the foot of the Article reflecting the fact that it has been amended following a complaint to the Panel.

Dated: 16.11.22

Signed:

[Signature]

John Willis, Chair review panel.

Signed:

[Signature]

Elinor Goodman, panel member.

Signed:
Richard Danbury, panel member