

Dates of Blair-Murdoch meetings to be freed

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Downing Street may be forced to reveal details of Tony Blair's contact with Rupert Murdoch, the media magnate, despite its view that political concerns outweigh the public interest.

The Information Commissioner last week considered a complaint from Lord Avebury who has been seeking details on the duo under the Freedom of Information Act for more than a year.

At the time, the Lord was told disclosure of the dates and details of Rupert Murdoch's meetings with Mr Blair would hurt the Prime Minister's "free and frank discussions" with other people.

Critics of Mr Blair claim the information is vital as the News Corporation chairman has exerted too much influence on a range of policy issues, ranging from Communications to European affairs.

Political opponents of the Prime Minister agree, claiming Mr Murdoch's ownership of The Sun and The Times has been used to repay the influence with Labour-friendly headlines.

Reviewing the refusal to release the information, Richard Thomas, the information commissioner, has ruled that the dates of some discussions between the pair should now be disclosed.

In a decision notice posted by the ICO, Mr Thomas states, "on balance there is stronger public interest in understanding more about the way in which government operates."

"The Commissioner is not persuaded that the Prime Minister will automatically be inhibited from talking to whoever he considers to be appropriate because of fear that the fact that any discussion which has taken place will be made public," the notice adds.

Reflecting on the green-light from the ICO, Lord Avebury said his extraordinary persistence had started to pay off.

"It's only because it's part of my job that I can carry these things through, but I think an ordinary citizen would find this almost insuperable," he told the trade magazine.

"I can't believe that many people would be persistent enough to go through all these delays."

The Lib Dem peer reportedly said he was interested in the dates of Tony Blair's meetings with Murdoch between 2002 and 2005 because of their possible proximity to Government decisions in which Murdoch is known to have an interest, such as the Iraq war and the Communications Bill.

The ICO also said the Cabinet Office failed to give a sufficient explanation to Lord Avebury as to the reasons why the information should remain private, as spelt out by section 17(1) of the Act.

See <http://www.freelanceuk.com/1787.shtml#>