I write on behalf of the World Press Freedom Committee, of which I am the acting director and its longstanding European Representative. We have been watching your inquiry from a distance with keen interest. That interest is heightened by our perception, which I believe to be widely shared, that what happens in the United Kingdom serves as by far one of the most important examples in the rest of the world. This is especially so in the Commonwealth. The weight of the British constitutional example elsewhere cannot be overstated, given your country’s history and tradition of free speech.

It is quite understandable that excesses by part of the press in Britain have elicited calls for a new dispensation. While I have no doubt that whatever recommendations emerge from your inquiry would be put into practice in Britain with the necessary prudence and restraint in the light of its history and tradition, the same cannot be necessarily be expected in much of the rest of the world. One shudders to think how any recommendations for a statutory or quasi-statutory regulatory regime which your inquiry might recommend could be exploited in any number of countries with far weaker press freedom records, including in the Commonwealth.

Whatever recommendations come from your inquiry, it seems important that a worst case analysis be made of the language in which they are couched. I say this because one can be certain that worst-case use of their language is likely to be applied elsewhere. There will undoubtedly be temptation to reply that recommendations for Britain should not be constrained by possible misuse in other contexts. Yet, the British example does indeed count in the rest of the world.

I refrain from pointing fingers at any particular repressive countries as examples of worst practices, but I recall an experience in Kazakhstan in 1992, during a Unesco conference there on promoting a free and independent press. A Kazakh historian who was a frequent contributor to the local press was serving a long prison term for having allegedly insulted the president of the republic in print. Participants in the Unesco conference made a point of raising the historian’s case.

The criticisms grew so intense that a group of conference members was taken to see the chief public prosecutor and later the president himself. The prosecutor noted that the president himself. The prosecutor noted that the title was being used as a cat’s paw by one or another family member against other members and that the faults originated with the sources, not the journalists.

Having served as a correspondent at the International Herald Tribune, the Washington Post, and the Boston Globe, and as Foreign Editor of the Washington Post, I can attest that the overwhelming majority of journalists I have worked with view journalism as a calling devoted to the public interest. Nor do most journalists wish to risk harm to their societies. Nobody wants to be seen to be irresponsible. At the Washington Post, it was established routine to consult security authorities to insure that legitimate sensitive operations or personnel would not be endangered by our reporting.

I subsequently spent a great deal of time in WPFC working with journalists in the emerging democracies and found that the public service ethos dominated there, too. Subjecting such journalists to regulatory regimes suggesting mistrust could only serve to undermine the spirit of dedication that has permeated journalism.

With the advent of new information technologies that have enabled the creation of a whole new class of “citizen journalists” – amateur volunteers among the public – it is more important than ever for the standards of professionalism that are extant amongst working journalists to be recognised and upheld as examples. It would be a disservice to democracy to lead the public to a mistaken belief that ethical standards are low in the journalism community.

While recent developments have shown that journalists as a group are indeed not entirely immune from indefensible law breaking, the laws that apply generally can be brought to bear against illegal actions. There is no need for special laws or legal regimes to be enacted against the press.

The World Press Freedom Committee groups 45 journalistic organisations on five continents, including groups representing labour and management and print and broadcast press. They include the London-based Commonwealth Press Union Media Trust and FIPP, the International Federation of the Periodical Press, as well as our other partners in the Coordinating Committee of Press Freedom Organisations – the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Inter-American Press Association, the International Association of Broadcasting, the International Press Institute, and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

Sincerely, Ronald Koven kovenronald@sol.com

Ronald Koven, European Representative of the World Press Freedom Committee, based in Paris, wrote this response to the Lord Justice Leveson in July this year.