

28 May 2009

Aleksander Boyd Esq

Dear Mr Boyd

I write further to my letter dated 13 May.

The Commission has now received a response to your complaint from the Guardian newspaper, a copy of which is enclosed.

As you can see, the newspaper had addressed each of your points in turn. It maintains that there has been no breach of the Code and have explained its position on each of the inaccuracies you identified. I would be grateful for your thoughts on this. Also, it would be most useful if you could clarify whether you have attended a meeting with Ms Bray.

Before a decision can be made as to how this matter might be taken forward, I should be grateful to receive any further comments you may wish to make. In particular – given that the Commission's primary aim is the resolution of all substantive complaints wherever possible – do please let me know any suggestions you have which would help to resolve this matter to your satisfaction.

I should be pleased to receive your response within seven days, or sooner, if convenient. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any assistance to you.

Yours sincerely



Rebecca Hales
Complaints Officer
rebecca.hales@pcc.org.uk

CHAIRMAN
Baroness Buscombe

MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION
Matti Alderson
Spencer Feeney
Colleen Harris MVO
Vivien Hepworth
John Home Robertson
Ian MacGregor
John McLellan
Ian Nichol
Lindsay Nicholson
Esther Robertson
Eve Salomon
Simon Sapper
The Right Rev.
John Waine KCVO
Tina Weaver
Peter Wright

DIRECTOR
Tim Toulmin



Rebecca Hales
Press Complaints Commission
Halton House
20/23 Holborn
London EC1N 2JD

May 22, 2009

Dear Ms Hales

Thank you for your letter of May 13, 2009 regarding the complaint brought by Aleksander Boyd over a article headlined Friends in Low Places, which was published in the Comment is free section of guardian.co.uk on September 1, 2007.

Mr Boyd alleges that the piece contains six inaccuracies, which I will address in the order he has presented them.

1. That he is not "the de facto London-based representative of the Venezuelan opposition movement in Britain," as the article's author, Calvin Tucker, asserts. Mr Boyd is arguably the most prominent Venezuelan oppositionist in London. He founded the English-language opposition blog vcrisis.com in 2002 and remains its editor. Vcrisis is, according to the site, "the personal endeavour of someone whose discontentment, towards the politicians of his country (Venezuela), reached such unbearable levels that he decided to take action, and provide a counterbalance to the official multi million dollar propagandistic effort, rolled out by the Hugo Chavez regime". In point 6 of his letter to the PCC, Mr Boyd even says he represented the group of oppositionists in requesting to meet the GLA's Conservative leader Bob Neill. The term "de facto" is not an official designation but refers to a perception of practice. It is Calvin Tucker's view that Mr Boyd fulfils the role of the opposition's representative in London and within the context of a clearly labelled opinion piece it is fair comment to describe him thus.
2. That he has never met Angie Bray. Here we would like to seek clarification from Mr Boyd. In a comment piece for the Guardian in August 2007 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/aug/23/anoilstainonlondon>), Angie Bray wrote: "On the day last year when City Hall was overtaken by mysterious men in dark glasses heralding the arrival of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, the Conservative group invited along one of the many dissident groups in the country whose members have had to flee abroad since he took office. Of course, Ken banned them from the building. So, in an office across the road, I saw something that put into very sharp focus the people with whom our mayor chooses to associate himself and, by proxy, London." We assume Ms Bray is referring here to a meeting hosted on May 15, 2006 by the GLA's Conservative leader Bob Neill. In his letter to the PCC, Mr Boyd says that as part of a group he attended a meeting with GLA

Guardian Newspapers Limited

A member of Guardian Media Group PLC
Registered Office
164 Deansgate, Manchester M3 3GG
Telephone 0161 832 7200
Registered in England Number 908396

officials including Bob Neill. Mr Tucker assumed it was the same meeting attended by Angie Bray. It would be helpful to know if there was another meeting with Mr Neill that Mr Boyd attended and Ms Bray did not.

3. That Mr Tucker and the Guardian have no evidence that Mr Boyd travels regularly "between London and Caracas to drum up support for his extremist views". Mr Tucker points to Mr Boyd's activism, including his many polemical writings on Venezuelan politics from both London and Caracas, and the fact that Mr Boyd was assigned to the opposition presidential candidate's campaign during the last Venezuelan elections, as evidence that he seeks to "drum up" support for his views. Given the violence found in Boyd's language (see below), Mr Tucker reasonably regards these views as extreme.
4. That it was wrong to say he was "consistently promoting terrorism" against the Venezuelan government. In March 2005, Mr Boyd wrote in a blog: "Re: advocating for violence yes I have mentioned in many occasions that in my view that is the only solution left for dealing with Chávez." Mr Tucker provides three links in his article to this and other examples of Boyd's violent language. Unfortunately the PCC cannot inspect these samples because, as Mr Boyd points out in his letter to the PCC, the links all point to error pages. We presume he has since removed the pages. However, in the following press statement on the GLA website (http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=8568), the PCC will see a quote from Mr Boyd that runs: "Yesterday I had a conversation with someone about Venezuela and its problems. Given the peculiar characteristics of our crisis, my interlocutor asked "what's the solution then?" And I replied: "when elected politicians treat one as an animal, how on earth can be expected that one behaves like a gentleman? The solution in my view is clear and simple: violence."

Another press statement (http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=8290), provides further quotes from Boyd, including: "The more the time elapses, the blunter the constitutional violations of the regime, the more I become convinced that the sole way of effectively opposing Chavez is through violence." (10/10/04). Several links to the full texts all now lead to error pages.

If examples of his advocacy of violence have disappeared, instances in which he fails to condemn the prospect of the violent overthrowing of the government remain. In a blog written on August 16, 2007, Boyd writes: "I just can not understand, so late in the game, the state of utter denial in which some live, convinced that Chavez can be defeated in his own game at the ballot boxes. It's patently clear that the only way Chavez will, ever, leave office is through violent means as he will never be defeated so long as his non-auditable Smartmatics are in place. Either that or a sustained nationwide civil uprising which he has no logistical manner of countering."

5. That the GLA's Conservative group did not "invite" Mr Boyd's group to brief them, rather Mr Boyd's group asked to meet the Conservatives. This seems a trivial and almost semantic point that also overlooks convention. Lobbyists will ask to meet politicians and politicians may then invite them to do so.
6. That Mr Tucker mostly basis his claim for Mr Boyd's advocacy of violence on a nightmare he once wrote about. The violence in Mr Boyd's work is dealt with in point 4 above.

In conclusion, we accept no breach of the code but look forward to receiving clarification on the meeting mentioned in point 2.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elisabeth Ribbens', written in a cursive style.

Elisabeth Ribbens

Managing Editor