

Number One Priority?

by Geoff Aigner, July 2011

THE story of unethical practice in the Murdoch media gives us an opportunity to understand the purpose and use of power. But first we may need to stop enjoying the spectacle so much.

As I watched the News of the World story unfold there was one very small news item which particularly infuriated me. On arriving back into London to deal with the fall-out Rupert Murdoch was asked outside his apartment what his number one priority was. He pointed to the (then) Chief Executive of News International, Rebekah Brooks, and said “this one”.

I wondered how I would have felt hearing this if I was one of the bereaved families whose phones had been hacked by the News reporters. Or how I would have felt as a customer, shareholder or employee? With people losing jobs and shareholders facing a slide of over 10% in share value in the two weeks the story has been in the news, why is the wellbeing of reportedly one of the most powerful women in the UK his number one priority?

Brooks has now “resigned” and the non-Murdoch press, the public and the recently-emboldened politicians are all having a field day demonising Murdoch and his clan. We are railing at the nepotism, greed and lack of ethics. The belated apology to families from Murdoch over the weekend can now unfortunately be difficult to see as anything but a cynical media exercise. And perhaps rightly so.

But isn't it wise to be cautious when we find ourselves enjoying someone else's downfall too much? Shouldn't we be questioning our collective Schadenfreude a bit more? Who really needs castigating here? After all it is our patronage of News products and the largesse and lack of courage of politicians we elected that has allowed the Murdoch family to prosper. Murdoch joins a long parade of many other flawed and seemingly ethics-free characters and organisations in the last few years in Australia.

And who are these people, actually? What might they teach us about ourselves before we hurry to ostracise them, I wonder? What conflicted values might they represent that exist in all of us? It is

very easy for me to project all my less-noble traits and failings onto people like Murdoch and Brooks. Yet to be honest, I too can be selfish, nepotistic and short-sighted. I too can think of myself first at the expense of others. I hope most of the time my better self wins – sometimes it doesn't. I am perennially in a battle between what's good for me and what's good for the whole.

This is a challenge that confronts all those who come into some kind of power in our society. If we hope to maintain or build a civil society we might need to think more deeply about what our power means and how we use it. And instead of feeling self-satisfied and self-righteous right now maybe we have an opportunity to learn something. As one of my teachers used to say to me, "if you can't be a good example, at least be a terrible warning". So we have had another warning about what it looks like when those in power lack the maturity to own that power and the responsibility that comes with it: the responsibility to think about their impact on all of society not just their chosen few.

Perhaps this also gives us an opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges we face in Australia. An interesting case in point right now is the carbon tax. This "debate" is taking up a lot of energy and generating a lot of heat. I would say this is also an ethical issue – we are struggling to work out how to respond to global warming in an ethical way. Similar to the Murdoch story, do we put short term personal comfort and looking after my own, ahead of the greater good and the future? In the face of this personal dilemma we project the problem onto others. In the Australian instance, we can demonise or support either the Prime Minister or the Opposition Leader. In a way they have come to represent caricatures of our own internal struggle. So much so that we can't talk about the issue anymore but, rather are more concerned with their personalities and styles.

It's a great way for us to get out of learning about the problem we face and (not) doing something useful about it.

Maybe if we own our power as citizens, leaders, parents, bosses and employees we can work out what really are the "first priorities" in our society. Ultimately the question of trade-off between me and the whole is flawed. What's good for all of us is actually good for me.

Geoff Aigner is a senior manager and teacher at Social Leadership Australia. His book, *Leadership Beyond Good Intentions – What It Takes To Really Make A Difference*, was published by Allen & Unwin in June 2011.