

At inquiry, Rupert Murdoch defends 50-year record

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In this image from video, News Corp. chairman Rupert Murdoch appears at Lord Justice Brian Leveson's inquiry in London, Wednesday April 25, 2012 to answer questions under oath about how much he knew about phone hacking at the News of the World tabloid. Murdoch is being grilled on his relationship with British politicians at the country's media ethics inquiry, while a government minister is battling accusations he gave News Corp. privileged access in its bid to take over a major broadcaster. (AP Photo/Pool)

(AP) -- News Corp. chairman Rupert Murdoch said Wednesday that his globe-spanning TV and newspaper empire doesn't carry as much political sway as is often believed, telling a British inquiry into media ethics that he wasn't the power behind the throne often depicted by his enemies.

Speaking softly, deliberately and with dry humor, Murdoch sought to deflate what he described as myths about his business, his agenda and his friendships with those at the pinnacle of British politics.

"If these lies are repeated again and again they catch on," he said. "But they just aren't true."

The 81-year-old media baron denied ever calling in favors from British leaders and dismissed the oft-repeated claim that his top-selling daily, The Sun,

could swing elections.

"We don't have that sort of power," he testified.

Murdoch was being quizzed under oath before an inquiry run by Lord Justice Brian Leveson, who is examining the relationship between British politicians and the press, a key question raised by the phone hacking scandal that brought down Murdoch's News of the World tabloid in July.

Revelations of widespread illegal behavior at the top-selling Sunday publication rocked Britain's establishment with evidence of media misdeeds, police corruption and too-cozy links between the press and politicians. Murdoch's News International - the tabloid's publisher - has been hit with over 100 lawsuits over phone hacking and dozens of reporters and media executives have been arrested.

Showing little equivocation, Murdoch batted away challenges to his ethics by inquiry lawyer Robert Jay.

Asked whether he set the political agenda for his U.K. editors, he denied it.

Asked whether he'd ever used his media influence to boost his business, he denied it.

Asked whether standards at his papers declined when he took them over, he denied it - and threw in a quip about his rivals.

"The Sun has never been a better paper than it is today," Murdoch said. "I won't say the same of my competitors."

The inquiry was set up by Prime Minister David Cameron following the scandal's resurgence in July. Murdoch's testimony was among the most heavily anticipated - not least because of his close links to generations of British politicians, both from

Cameron's Conservatives and the opposition Labour Party.

Murdoch made few concessions to his inquisitor.

He denied that former Prime Minister Tony Blair of the Labour Party had consulted with him on how to discredit French leader Jacques Chirac in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He denied strategizing with Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, on whether to call a snap election. And he denied lobbying Cameron on issues including broadcasting regulations, the ins-and-outs of which have since helped feed the scandal.

He did reveal a tense telephone exchange with Brown in September 2009, after the tycoon had decided to throw The Sun's support behind rival Cameron.

"Well, your company has declared war on my government and we have no alternative but to make war on your company," Murdoch quoted Brown as saying, adding he did not think that the prime minister "was in a very balanced state of mind."

Brown released a statement Wednesday characterizing Murdoch's version as false.

"I hope Mr. Murdoch will have the good grace to correct his account," Brown said.

Murdoch also owned up to having made a colorful joke first reported by Blair: "If our flirtation is ever consummated, Tony, then I suspect we will end up making love like porcupines, very very carefully."

But he denied that his personal friendship with Blair had led to any favors, thumping the table to punctuate his sentence.

"I never. Asked. Mr. Blair. For anything," he said.

Media-watchers have speculated that Murdoch would seek to inflict political pain on the Cameron's Conservatives, rumors which gained force when his son James gave damning testimony about British Olympics czar Jeremy Hunt on Tuesday. The younger Murdoch released documents that

suggested that Hunt, a Cameron ally, had secretly smoothed the way for News Corp.'s bid for full control of the British Sky Broadcasting Group PLC, a lucrative satellite broadcaster.

The bid was contested by Murdoch's competitors, who feared that if News Corp. increased its stake in BSkyB, it would reinforce his dominance of the British media landscape. Hunt had told lawmakers he would be impartial, but the documents showed his department giving News Corp. behind-the-scenes advice and intelligence.

Hunt's political aide Adam Smith resigned Wednesday, saying he was responsible for the perception that News Corp. had "too close a relationship" with Hunt's office. Smith said he had acted without Hunt's authorization, but it was not clear how a special adviser could have acted so independently.

Although Murdoch was cooperative with the inquiry on Wednesday, he evoked a healthy helping of the phrase "I don't remember," particularly when confronted with potentially embarrassing anecdotes about his alleged remarks.

At one point, Jay quizzed Murdoch about a gleeful comment in which Murdoch took credit for smearing his left-wing opponents.

"If I said that, I'm afraid it was the influence of alcohol," Murdoch replied.

Throughout the hearing, Murdoch attacked the idea that he traded on his political influence, calling it a "complete myth. One I want to put to bed once and for all."

So determined was he that Murdoch appeared to claim he was totally blind to business considerations when deciding which politicians to back.

"You're completely oblivious to the commercial benefits to your company of a particular party winning an election. Is that really the position?" asked a skeptical-sounding Jay.

"Yes," Murdoch said. "Absolutely."

His testimony resumes on Thursday.

More information: Inquiry website:
<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk>

Murdoch's witness statement: <http://bit.ly/IDp5rc>

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