

'News of the World' censured

THE Press Council has severely censured the *News of the World* for harassing a transexual and publishing a 'distasteful' story about her, grossly intruding into her privacy.

The council upheld a complaint by Miss Alexandra MacRae that a past incident was needlessly raked up by the paper which harassed her and intruded into her privacy without any overriding justification of public interest.

Miss MacRae told the council she shrank from complaining until medical tests showed she suffered from a physical condition — a congenital chromosomal disorder — and not some psychological illness. Because her privacy had already been intruded upon, there was no point in seeking to preserve it.

The *News of the World* reported that 18 months after Mr A. W. S. Rae left Stornoway. Miss A. W. S. MacRae started work with Inverness District Council as a legal assistant. An unnamed councillor was quoted as being convinced they were the same person. The newspaper recalled Mr Rae was at Stornoway for five years, was married, and played rugby. In 1975 staff at a local hotel claimed he had dined there dressed as a woman but he denied this.

The *News of the World* said Miss MacRae had answered the door of her Inverness council flat and said she lived alone. Asked whether she was Mr Rae, she said this was a fascinating suggestion and closed the door. The report included a head-and-shoulders picture of Mr Rae and a full-length photograph of a woman captioned as Alexandra MacRae outside her flat.

The then editor, Mr Ken Donlan, was told of the complaint, and Mr Henry Douglas, legal manager, told Miss MacRae it was a pity she had not felt able to make the position clear to the *News of the World* reporter. The newspaper had published in good faith an accurate statement of an apparent mystery surrounding a public servant. It was not pejorative but factual and even sympathetic.

Mr Douglas told the Press Council the *News of the World* considered it was a borderline case whether Miss MacRae's public position justified investigation of her private life. They decided it did, especially in view of rumours in the district.

The Press Council's adjudication was: the *News of the World* behaved unethically by needlessly and unfairly raking up a past incident in a way which was undoubtedly likely to cause pain and affront to the complainant and her family. As an example of the distasteful way in which the story was treated it was wholly unnecessary and unjustifiable for the newspaper to refer to and identify Miss MacRae's former wife in the way it did.

Its persistence in repeatedly attempting to interview Miss MacRae by effectively laying siege to her over two days when she had made clear she wanted to have nothing to do with its reporter was serious harassment. So was the attempt to photograph her.

There was a gross intrusion into her privacy which was unjustified by any public interest, despite the defence put forward by the newspaper. The complaint is upheld.