

Madam Speaker and the Sultan of Spin

A flower of British civility is about to abandon us. On July 12 Madam Speaker, Mrs Betty Boothroyd MP, erstwhile Tiller girl, told the Commons of her intention to resign. Hansard records that she added:

“I believe there is clear advantage in a new Speaker being elected during the course of a Parliament. In particular, it ensures that all Members are familiar with the qualities of potential successors. My decision will give my successor a run-in before the general election. My statement today also gives notice to my constituents in West Bromwich, West that, at the same time as relinquishing the office of Speaker, it is my intention to retire as their Member of Parliament. [Hon. Members: ‘Oh.’] Be happy for me.”

Those poignant final words strike an uneasy chord. We remember what made Madam Speaker *unhappy* in her final years. It was the tendency of Mr Blair to downgrade Parliament. Under him, Government announcements are first made anywhere but in the Commons. Ms Boothroyd's protests about that are said to have angered the Prime Minister. Did she freely go or was she pushed?

Three days later the true Blairite agenda was uncovered by the BBC 2 TV programme *News from Number Ten*. Here one saw handsome, youthful, charming, capable Tony Blair being continuously processed for presentation to the media (and through them to the public) by his equally handsome, youthful, charming and capable press secretary Alastair Campbell, who modestly described himself as His Master's Voice and was elsewhere in the programme called the Sultan Of Spin. The Commons itself, though past its best, still would not stand for such slick processing. Does that explain the phenomenon of Mr Campbell, and the sad disgruntlement of Ms Boothroyd?

News from Number Ten said that the lunchtime news bulletins all reflect what Mr Campbell has said to the Lobby that morning in his dungeon beneath Number 10. Someone remarked that Herr Geobbels, the news manipulator of Nazi Germany, would have rejoiced at achieving so much. One struggles to remember the essential democratic principle that every citizen must have equal access to all statements made on behalf of Government.

In *News from Number Ten* Mr Campbell explained that a new special unit in the Cabinet Office, the Media Monitoring Unit, scrutinises output on behalf of Mr Blair. It is assisted by the equally novel Strategic Communications Unit, which responds to that output in suitable terms. It was later announced that the Prime Minister has stood down the eager Mr Campbell from this duty of daily briefings, so that he can concentrate on policy matters. No doubt a deputy has taken over, and the position remains substantially the same: disgraceful.

Why do I say the Campbell role is disgraceful? Because it was until recently a principle of public life that the news media received little special consideration from Government. Sir Trevor Lloyd-Hughes (press secretary to Harold Wilson 1964-1969) said in the *Telegraph* (July 19) that he just gave the plain facts and avoided party-political varnishing like the plague.

Campbell, paid by the taxpayer, openly encroached on the party political sphere. In *News from Number Ten* he said (and later repeated) that Mr Blair would never allow the Labour Party to play the race card over immigration and asylum seekers. As a supposedly impartial

civil servant he should have nothing whatever to do with what the Labour Party might or might not do.

In *News from Number Ten* Mr Campbell complained, as is indeed the case, that today a news story is often not presented to the public directly but dressed up in the slants and glosses of privily-briefed reporters, being now a form of comment. Yet he is a prime cause of this abuse. The skeleton of that old editor of the *Manchester Guardian* C. P. Scott, who told his reporters that while comment is free facts are sacred, must be revolving once again in some sooty Mancunian cemetery. Or perhaps I should have said “spinning”.

In the programme a journalist indeed said that Campbell’s job is spinning. On the other hand “ours”, he said “is decoding”. To which Mr Blair replied: “it is important to get on top of the news”. Any democrat would find it intolerable that the news should be officially stage-managed in this way. Democracy requires a level playing field. Constant behind the scenes briefing from on high is a grave threat to it.

For the last word I hand over to the new mayor of London, Mr Ken Livingstone. Parliament, he says, has been reduced to a holding pen for eager young hopeful ministers in waiting. Yet Parliament is supposed to be the place where elected representatives of the people hold their rulers to account. If it is not that, what is it?

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2000.039 150 NLJ 1149 (28 July).