

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.  
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

## Politics and the media : the stormy year before the calm?

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

PUBLISHER

© Palgrave Macmillan

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Wring, Dominic. 2019. "Politics and the Media : The Stormy Year Before the Calm?". figshare.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/3193>.

This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.



For the full text of this licence, please go to:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

## **Politics and the Media: the Stormy Year before the Calm?**

*Dominic Wring*

During 2006, sections of the media continued to enjoy their role as a source of opposition to a now somewhat diminished government. Whereas the two main parliamentary opposition parties seemed preoccupied with re-establishing themselves under new leaders, journalists of various persuasions were involved in a series of critical investigations into ministerial affairs, both of a political and personal nature. The compromising stories that emerged hardly enhanced the already much derided reputation of Tony Blair and showed how media reporting reflected and influenced events. His tense relationship with Gordon Brown was widely reflected in news coverage, as were David Cameron's attempts to rebrand the Conservative Party. Aside from the Liberal Democrats' difficulties, a variety of minor party figures won legal cases against the media, notably the UK's best-selling *News of the World* title, which endured an especially expensive year. These incidents highlighted the degree to which it is often those politicians belonging to smaller, less well known parties who are willing to fight journalists in court to defend their reputations. More mainstream figures appear less willing or able to take the risk, despite their protestations about the treatment they receive from the media.

### **Labour**

#### **A year to forget**

The government has faced an avalanche of criticism, much of it from journalists, since its re-election in May 2005. During 2006 several Cabinet members were subjected to attacks on their competence, including the minister responsible for

media, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell. *The Sunday Times* led an investigation into a 'gift' to Jowell's husband David Mills, estimated by *La Repubblica* newspaper (although this figure varied in other reports) to be £350,000, from the then Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. The story over this particular relationship had featured in satirical magazine *Private Eye* some years ago but it was only now, after considerable national press speculation, that the couple separated and Mills was indicted by Rome's legal authorities. Jowell's Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS), Huw Irranca-Davies, attacked journalists for their 'cynical spin' on the marriage breakdown as a career-saving move while others detected the influence of Alastair Campbell in helping the minister survive.

The Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, found herself at the centre of a controversy over government monitoring of sex offenders teaching in schools. *The Sun* pointed out lax procedures surrounding the operation of the so-called List 99 of banned individuals when men convicted of sexual offences were offered work in schools. Kelly survived a torrent of media criticism, only to be moved in a subsequent reshuffle. Similarly, several journalists had been critical of Patricia Hewitt's performance as Health Secretary and, when she was prevented from finishing her speech to the Royal College of Nursing by hecklers, it was portrayed as a symbol of the wider malaise within the NHS.

Perhaps most embarrassing was the *Daily Mirror's* revelation of John Prescott's affair with his Diary Secretary, Tracey Temple. *The Sunday Times* followed up with claims by a former party press officer that Prescott had tried to grope her. Temple then hired the services of PR consultant Max Clifford and sold her story to the *Mail on Sunday* for a reported £250,000. The subsequent publicity laid Prescott open to the charge that he, like Blair, was a 'lame duck' leader. The *Mail*

later published photographs of the Deputy Prime Minister playing croquet on the lawn of his official Dorneywood residence, implying he was indulging himself at public expense. The paper and its fellow Associated Press title, the *Evening Standard*, also investigated Prescott's involvement with a wealthy US financier hoping to purchase the Millennium Dome to turn it into a casino. If this was not enough, the Deputy Prime Minister was also singled out for special criticism by his former Cabinet colleague, David Blunkett, in memoirs that were abridged for the *Mail*, *Guardian*, radio and television.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore several candidates declared themselves candidates for Prescott's role as Deputy Leader of the party, in anticipation of his retirement.

In the main, Cabinet ministers who faced a torrid press did proceed with care in response to media criticism. Home Secretary Charles Clarke and his replacement, John Reid, took a different approach in the belief that what they were doing would best to protect the public. Although their more draconian policies garnered sympathy from the right-wing press, they alienated liberal commentators such as the *Independent's* Simon Carr and Henry Porter of the *Observer*. Clarke dismissed these critics as 'pernicious' for their opposition to ID cards and other security measures, although his own credibility was questioned when it was revealed the Home Office did not know the whereabouts of a thousand foreign ex-prisoners, many of whom were supposed to have been deported on release. The media rounded on him and he was sacked in the reshuffle following Labour's poor performance in the May local elections.

On succeeding Clarke, John Reid maintained a similarly high profile, notably when he and Transport Minister Douglas Alexander appeared in a televised address to warn air travellers of a potential terrorist attack during the summer. Reid was so confrontational in various exchanges with journalists that even his brooding

predecessor suggested he was overly ‘media-led’ in his approach. Prison reformer Juliet Lyon went further by denouncing the new Home Secretary for surrendering policy to the *Sun*, following his announcement of further ‘crackdowns’ on assorted offenders. Even one Chief Constable, Terry Grange, suggested ministers were overly sensitive to the views of the *News of the World*. As Alastair Campbell’s former deputy Lance Price put it: ‘the influence of the Murdoch press on immigration and asylum policy would make a fascinating PhD thesis’.<sup>2</sup>

If Charles Clarke’s sacking was predictable, less so was the removal of Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary. Straw had apparently alienated the Bush administration by suggesting any plan to attack Iran would be ‘inconceivable’. The American neo-conservative, Irwin Stelzer, in *The Spectator* and more traditional right-wing columnist William Rees-Mogg of *The Times* agreed that the White House had orchestrated the Foreign Secretary’s departure. Straw’s successor, Margaret Beckett, was an experienced domestic minister but Israel’s invasion of Lebanon left her little time to settle into her new post and this crisis, together with Iraq, precipitated considerable media criticism. Beckett had particularly fraught encounters with Radio 4 *Today* presenters James Naughtie and John Humphrys. Far from fading from view, Straw became Leader of the House of Commons and expressed the contentious view that the veil worn by some of his Muslim constituents was ‘a visible statement of separation and of difference’. His comments in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* initiated an intense debate and the lurid *Express* headline ‘Veil should be banned say 98 per cent’.

### **Trouble at the top: the leadership**

Tony Blair’s announcement in October 2004 of his intention to retire after what he hoped would be a third victory in 2005 may have had some electoral benefit,

but in the longer-term left him open to endless media speculation as to when he would depart and who would take his place. Chancellor Gordon Brown's prominent intervention to shore up Labour's 2005 campaign ensured he remained the obvious successor. Inevitably, press coverage turned to the Blair-Brown relationship and every utterance by them or their associates was forensically analysed. As *The Times* columnist Peter Riddell's book *The Unfulfilled Prime Minister* suggested, Blair was a politician in a hurry to make an impact during his final years in office.<sup>3</sup> Yet it soon became clear how much his fate depended on the (in)actions of his party colleagues, the White House, the Conservatives, and the media.

The representation of Blair as George Bush's 'poodle' was reinforced by opinion ranging from the highly conservative *Mail* to the liberal *Independent*. This image was compounded when the President's 'Yo Blair' greeting of the Prime Minister in what they had assumed was a private conversation during a G8 meeting in July was broadcast along with their subsequent dialogue. Journalists interpreted Bush as having dismissed Blair's offer to visit the Middle East as a broker for peace in favour of sending Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The Prime Minister's authority was further challenged in a *Mail* interview with Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, in which he questioned government commitment to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. This was followed in December by the publication of photographs showing poor accommodation provided for troops in the UK and their families, a matter then taken by Major-General Richard Shirreff, commander of the British force in Iraq.

Closer to home, Blair had to rely on Conservative support to ensure the passage of a schools reform bill designed to weaken the role of local authorities. Endorsed by the *Sun*, the plans were denounced by ex-leader Neil Kinnock and

former Education Secretary Estelle Morris in an energetic campaign by party pressure grouping Compass, criticising Blair for trying to ‘appease Murdoch and the *Mail*’ . A greater threat to his remaining Prime Minister came with the loans for peerages’ scandal, a story initially driven by web blogger Guido Fawkes. Electoral Commission returns indicated Labour’s 2005 campaign had come to rely on money borrowed from wealthy supporters, some of whom were subsequently nominated for peerages. Party Treasurer Jack Dromey’s surprise statement that he had no knowledge of the estimated £13.9m involved raised further questions about the legality of these transactions. Various newspapers, among them the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Telegraph*, implicated Downing Street aides, as well as Blair’s long-time fund-raiser, Lord Levy. His subsequent arrest featured prominently on *BBC News 24*. The admission by Nick Bowes, Labour’s former head of corporate fundraising, that Blair ‘was up to his neck’ in the loans affair was publicised by the Conservative web blogger, Iain Dale. Labour enjoyed some relief when the media spotlight turned on the Conservatives’ own long list of donors and the funding the Liberal Democrats had received from fraudster Michael Brown. But the focus soon returned to Labour: more people were questioned about Labour’s loans, including former head teacher Des Smith, who had solicited financial backers for specialist schools. He bitterly resented his treatment by the police and denounced the Prime Minister in a *Mail on Sunday* interview, suggesting he should be interrogated. Blair duly became the first occupant of 10 Downing Street to be interviewed by detectives, although this occurred on what several journalists, using Jo Moore’s notorious 9/11 phrase, called ‘a good day to bury bad news’, with the publication of Lord Stevens’ report into the death of Princess Diana and Lord Goldsmith’s extraordinary decision to curtail a Serious Fraud Office investigation into British arms deals with Saudi Arabia.

The 2006 local elections demonstrated the Blair-led Labour Party's vulnerability to defeat by the rejuvenated Conservatives and MP Lynne Jones, speaking on the BBC *Politics Show*, led calls for her leader to resign. The Prime Minister responded by launching a public dialogue entitled 'Let's Talk', which critics likened to the earlier 'Big Conversation', and dismissed it as offering the illusion of consultation.<sup>4</sup> Blair was arguably most vulnerable when, on returning from summer holiday, he gave an interview to *The Times* in which he refused to indicate a date for his departure. Within days there was intensive press speculation over the existence of a private letter drafted by formerly loyalist MPs Siôn Simon and Chris Bryant, urging their leader to retire. Publication of their names led signatories junior Defence Minister Tom Watson and seven PPSs to resign. Watson denied a recent visit to the constituency home of Gordon Brown was related to his support for the letter, but this did little to stem speculation that allies of the Chancellor had, in the reported words of one Cabinet member, been attempting to mount a 'coup'. The statement by the Environment Secretary, David Miliband, on Radio 4's *Today* that Blair would resign within a year was reinforced by the *Sun*'s categorical, 'Blair will go on 31 May 2007'. The claim was overshadowed by the *Mirror*'s ridicule of a schedule devised by his aides for Blair's departure that included appearances on *Blue Peter* (he later did), *Songs of Praise* and Chris Evans' Radio 2 programme before concluding the public should be left 'wanting more' of their leader.<sup>5</sup>

The tension between Blair and Brown provided a story at least as old as the government, but the sense that the in-fighting between their supporters was reaching its dramatic climax encouraged further speculation, following criticism of the Chancellor's tax credit system by Stephen Byers and Alan Milburn. The latter, the *Sunday Mirror* suggested, was the Prime Minister's choice to succeed him. Brown's

tax policy was also attacked by a former Downing Street economics adviser, Derek Scott, in the *Times* and ex-minister Gisela Stuart in a *Telegraph* piece that was sympathetically reported by the *Sun*. Byers returned to the fray during the summer, with a provocative *Sunday Telegraph* article denouncing inheritance tax as a blight on the aspirational middle class.

More extraordinary were the personalised criticisms by the former Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, who attacked Brown for ‘grinning’ while leaving Downing Street in a photograph widely published at the height of the alleged ‘coup’ . Clarke intensified his attack by telling the *Telegraph* the Chancellor was a control freak with ‘psychological issues’. Journalists duly leapt on the comment ‘that’s a lie’ allegedly made by Cherie Blair in earshot of a reporter, when Brown talked about his affection for her husband during his Labour Conference speech. Similarly, a dubious BBC *Newsnight* focus group exercise, suggesting voters favoured John Reid as leader, received greater attention than it deserved and certainly more than backbench left-wing MP John McDonnell, the only declared leadership candidate .

Blair and Brown tensions were also evident when the former refused to answer press questions during their joint appearance to launch the party’s local election campaign. The Chancellor’s spin-doctors’ briefings were subsequently revealed on ITV News by political editor Tom Bradby. Brown remained above the fray, at least in public, and concentrated on promoting what correspondents began to term ‘Project Gordon’. This involved him discussing non-economic matters such as British identity, his musical tastes and family life. An appearance on Sky saw an emotional man talking about the death of his infant daughter Jennifer. Intriguingly, although the *Mail* responded critically to Brown over his Budget, the staunchly Conservative title also labelled him a ‘man of the future’ and its editor, Paul Dacre, told the *Leeds Student*

(which he once edited) that Brown was a ‘remarkable politician’. *The Times* and *Sun* were more ambiguous, signalling they were waiting for proprietor Rupert Murdoch to endorse Brown or David Cameron.

### **Brand Cameron: the Conservatives**

David Cameron’s energetic publicity strategy was aimed at a variety of audiences his party had neglected in recent years. Here Cameron applied his own experience as former head of corporate communications for Carlton media and, for £276,000 a year, recruited consultant Steve Hilton to oversee the Conservatives’ rebranding. Other recruits were Ali Gunn as public relations adviser, George Eustice as press officer, the agency Karmarama, and Chris Roycroft-Davis, an influential *Sun* executive, as speechwriter. Few policy proposals emerged, but plenty of photo-opportunities were set up to promote Cameron as a politician of vision. His first year as leader contrasted with those of his immediate predecessors and, like Margaret Thatcher three decades before, he seized the opportunity to remake the party in his own image. Cameron’s media conscious approach was reminiscent of William Hague’s attempts to relaunch the party prior to 1999 but, by contrast, was accompanied by considerably better ratings against a now diminished Blair premiership. The Conservative message has been relayed in a series of carefully orchestrated public relations initiatives that, contrary to past leaders’ experiences, have sought to set rather than merely respond to the media or government agenda while simultaneously promoting the relatively new, youthful Cameron to the public at large.

Cameron’s interest in environmentalism was promoted in April through a trip to Svalbard in Norway, where he was photographed driving a dog sleigh in an attempt to draw attention to the melting polar ice cap. Critics questioned the value of the initiative, but it secured considerable coverage, much of which was free of the ridicule

attached to Hague's early appearances as leader. As Nicholas Boles of the think tank Policy Exchange put it, 'The picture is all that counts. It's complete gold dust. The idea that he'd have been better off spending the day trooping around a shopping centre is nonsense'.<sup>6</sup> The photo-opportunity anticipated an agenda promoted by the Stern report later in the year confirming the precarious state of the environment and the need to remedy the situation. The leader further boasted his green concerns by biking to work, although his sincerity was queried by *Today* presenter John Humphrys, who challenged Cameron over his reliance on an accompanying car to ferry his baggage.

Cameron's re-branding strategy featured a new party logo in the form of a tree, progressive sounding newspaper adverts, a so-called 'A-list' of prospective candidates, and the document *Built to Last*, overwhelmingly endorsed in a membership ballot. It led Blair to respond with a charge routinely levelled against himself: 'The Tories have got themselves a slick PR strategy. But give them a real-life policy decision and they flunk it. They think "strategy" is all. It isn't...'.<sup>7</sup> Cameron's approach also involved disassociating himself from his predecessors' most contentious policies. Thus he repudiated the party's stance over apartheid South Africa and was photographed alongside Nelson Mandela. He also made a break with traditional Conservative law and order rhetoric by speaking about the importance of tackling the causes of youth crime in a speech that was derided by media critics as urging people to 'hug a hoodie'.

Consciously following on from Blair's lead, Cameron made appearances on less formal political programmes including *GMTV*, chose pop music as a guest on Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, gave an interview to the men's magazine, *GQ*, and appeared with mothers from the *mumsnet* web forum. During the build-up to the

World Cup, the Conservative leader was a guest of *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade at David Beckham's celebrity charity dinner. More daringly he appeared on *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross*, hosted by an irreverent Labour-supporter. Cameron avoided a potentially embarrassing question about his youthful devotion to Margaret Thatcher, outraging the *Daily Mail* but allowing him to emphasise he represented a new generation. The launch of the *webcameron* site also enabled the leader to communicate directly with voters with his first appearance featuring him talking in his kitchen while washing dishes.<sup>8</sup>

Where party criticism of Cameron was muted, it was more forceful in the press given dissidents on the right have, unlike their equivalents on the Labour left, ready access to many column inches. The *Mail's* Melanie Philips and *Telegraph* commentator Simon Heffer have respectively denounced 'Blue Labour' and the 'overpaid teenagers' advising the 'stupid, shallow' 'PR spiv' leader. And, although the *Express* did endorse the Conservatives in the local elections, it urged readers to 'hold your nose' when voting. Cameron can, however, rely on sympathetic coverage from those like *Mail* and *Spectator* columnist Peter Osborne, a scourge of the Blair government. Furthermore, Will Lewis becoming *Daily Telegraph* editor may help renew the party's once close relationship with the paper, despite the likely protestations from contributors like Heffer. Cameron has already been cultivating the Barclay brothers, owners of the *Telegraph*, although the revelation that frontbencher Greg Clark has lauded *Guardian* commentator Polly Toynbee's writings on relative poverty may not help this particular cause. Nor will this endear the party to former ally Rupert Murdoch, whose admission that he has not been impressed by Cameron has been reflected in *Sun* stories about 'Dave the Dope', 'Cam a Cropper' and 'green

with a little g'. The paper has not, however, ruled out supporting the Conservatives in the future.

### **After Kennedy: the Liberal Democrats.**

The Liberal Democrats' unusually high media profile at the beginning of 2006 was partly a consequence of the destabilising impact of David Cameron's victory. Charles Kennedy's ability to continue as leader subsequently dominated the media agenda. The willingness of his parliamentary colleagues to use journalists to raise doubts about Kennedy weakened his position, especially when Lembit Opik was the only frontbencher willing to defend him. When the Liberal Democrat MEP, Chris Davies, said his leader was a 'dead man walking', it marked the beginning of the end. Other prominent Liberal Democrats offered sympathy but expressed concern about Kennedy continuing after his candid admission of alcoholism.<sup>9</sup> There was speculation whether, what had been a secret between senior party figures, had come in to the public domain via former Liberal Democrat press officer turned ITV political correspondent Daisy McAndrew, although her editor later denied this was the case.

Kennedy resigned, having contemplated seeking a mandate to continue from the party membership. However, he would have been aware this risked alienating his colleagues, given that BBC2 *Newsnight* claimed only 13 of his 63 MPs wanted him to stay. The episode once again demonstrated how, even the most internally democratic of the major parties, could be influenced by an elite axis of journalists with determined political contacts. There was more drama during the nomination stage of the leadership race. Remarkably, an initial challenger for the post, shadow home affairs spokesperson Mark Oaten, made his former leader's problems appear comparatively mundane, after he withdrew from the contest through lack of parliamentary support. However, his higher profile led the *News of the World* to run a

lurid front-page story detailing the MP's relationship with male prostitutes. In a *Sunday Times* account, for which he was allegedly paid £20,000, Oaten was frank about what he called his 'midlife crisis'. Meanwhile, his wife, Belinda, who stood by him, contributed a *Mail* article on her experiences, following revelations in the paper about Conservative MP Gregory Barker ending his marriage for a male lover.<sup>10</sup> Oaten eventually announced that he would be standing down at the next general election.

Sexuality dominated the coverage of another potential Liberal Democrat leader: Simon Hughes denied he was gay in an *Independent* interview but retracted when the *News of the World* reported his use of male chatlines. The paper made homophobic jokes about 'LimpDems' but other journalists questioned Hughes' credibility, given he entered Parliament after a notoriously fractious 1982 by-election in which the orientation of his gay Labour opponent, Peter Tatchell, had been highlighted by the popular press and in a Liberal leaflet. However, it was a magnanimous Tatchell who calmed the debate, declaring he supported his former rival's candidature because of his promotion of homosexual equality. A beneficiary of Hughes' discomfort was the low profile Chris Huhne, the only other candidate to stand against the frontrunner and Liberal Democrat Deputy Leader, Sir Menzies Campbell. A former journalist, Huhne secured the *Independent on Sunday's* endorsement and shared the platform in a special leadership hustings edition of BBC1 *Question Time*, but the resulting debate was uneventful and strengthened the position of the dull but safe Campbell, who had already gained most MPs' support. He duly won the membership ballot, having secured favourable coverage from the key opinion forming *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers.

Campbell subsequently struggled for media attention against the renewed Conservatives and the constant stream of speculation over the Blair succession. A *Telegraph* poll in June suggested he had made little impact and even the revelations over funding that plagued the major parties, provided little opportunity, when it was revealed the Liberal Democrats' wealthiest election donor, Michael Brown, who had given £2.4m, had pleaded guilty to fraud charges during the summer. There was some media attention to the party's decision to propose raising environmental rather than income taxes, but this was overshadowed by the revival of Charles Kennedy's political career, with a Channel 4 documentary on the decline of democratic participation and *News of the World* speculation that he was contemplating an attempt to regain the leadership. The ephemeral nature of media attention to the Liberal Democrats was further highlighted by the coverage of frontbench MP Lembit Opik's relationship breakdown and his new partner, one of the sisters in a Romanian pop duo, the Cheeky Girls. Aside from the gossip, journalists claimed Opik had acted inappropriately by asking the relevant minister about the migration status of his consort.

### The media and the courts

Legal proceedings ensured several politicians attracted media coverage during the year, the most senior being London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who, in October, won an appeal against being suspended from office following an altercation with *Evening Standard* reporter Oliver Finegold. Aside from Livingstone, it was mainly minor party leaders who found themselves embroiled in cases that involved them challenging journalists. Thus the November trial of the British National Party chairman, Nick Griffin, following earlier revelations made in a BBC undercover

investigation into his conduct ended in his acquittal amid more publicity than he would otherwise have attracted. At the other end of the political spectrum, there was also a victory for Tommy Sheridan, the former Scottish Socialist leader, who had left the party when several of his fellow MSPs had supported allegations in the *News of the World* detailing his extra-marital affairs and visits to private clubs to pursue them. Following his triumph and the awarding of £200,000 damages, Sheridan denounced Britain's best-selling newspaper and News International as 'pedlars of falsehood', claiming they were part of a conspiracy to destroy him. The *News of the World* faced further embarrassment in November when one of its most experienced journalists, Clive Goodman, admitted in court to having hacked into the private telephone messages of, among others, aides to Prince William and Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat leadership contender.

Respect MP George Galloway, arguably the highest profile minor party leader, also scored a notable victory against the *News of the World* in April, when he won the right to publicise the photograph of its elusive reporter, Mazher Mahmood, whom he had denounced as an 'agent provocateur'. Mahmood was better known as the 'fake sheikh' who tricked various celebrities into revealing compromising details about themselves. Consequently, when he approached the Respect leader in the guise of a potential donor to the party, Galloway dismissed him for making anti-Semitic comments in an attempt to compromise the MP. More importantly for Galloway, his success in a libel case against the *Daily Telegraph* over allegations that he had profited from his charitable work in the Middle East was upheld by the Court of Appeal. He was not, however, in court to celebrate because of his participation in Channel 4's celebrity version of *Big Brother*.

Galloway's stint on *Big Brother* generated much media attention, but did little for his reputation. Channel 4's recruitment of a serving MP was denounced in news bulletins during January by the then government Chief Whip, Hilary Armstrong, who claimed he had abandoned his constituents. Galloway had thought the programme would enable him to promote his anti-war views, but he seemed unaware of its highly-editorialised format, which focused more on domestic rather than formal politics. Galloway did, however, become embroiled in a series of unseemly rows with housemates.

### Media manoeuvring

Channel 4 provided ITV with a rare boost during a bad year, when it agreed a deal that ensured the latter continued to produce its news programming. One ITV executive talked of the troubled channel needing a 'Clause IV moment', and the shock announcement that the BBC Chairman, Michael Grade, would be returning to the network as its chief executive may provide it. In contrast, the purchase by Sky of 17.9 per cent of ITV for £940m to become the largest shareholder, was attacked as a retrograde step that could weaken the beleaguered broadcaster. The intervention prevented others from acquiring the shares and led Sir Richard Branson, the leading backer of rival bidder NTL, to mount a passionate, overtly political attack: 'The government are scared stiff of Murdoch. Perhaps his empire should be looked at. If you add ITV to his papers and Sky, you may as well as let Murdoch decide who becomes PM'. Branson was perhaps mindful of former Downing Street spin doctor Lance Price's earlier observation that: 'Rupert Murdoch doesn't leave a paper trail that could ever prove his influence over policy, but the trail of politicians beating their way to him and his papers tells a different story... like the 24<sup>th</sup> member of Cabinet... his presence is always felt'.<sup>11</sup>

Sky's chief executive, James Murdoch (son of Rupert), made clear who he felt threatened media pluralism by attacking the 'broadcasting establishment' as 'authoritarian' and 'elitist' and saying that Lord Reith, the BBC's first Director General, had had 'a pretty firm view of the need to keep the lower classes in their place'. He spoke in the hope of changing policy, not least because, as Freedman suggests, governance of this arena is heavily influenced by a determined elite of relatively few actors.<sup>12</sup> A recent focus of this network has been Ofcom, which, under the new management of former Downing Street aide Ed Richards, has been given greater regulatory powers over broadcasters. The Corporation was faced with further changes courtesy of the government's March White Paper, *A Public Service for All*,<sup>13</sup> which proposed replacing the Board of Governors with a new oversight Trust. In the long term this was arguably one of the most important developments during the year, both in terms of accountability structures and media-politician relations. The renewal of the BBC Charter was followed by Director General Mark Thompson's bid to increase the licence fee above the rate of inflation in order to fund various initiatives including the proposed relocation of major facilities from London to Manchester. Although seen as sympathetic to the BBC, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell nevertheless criticised the considerable sums paid to leading presenters such as Jonathan Ross when his and other celebrities' salary details were leaked to the *Daily Mirror* and *Sun*. As the year ended, it was reported that the Chancellor would, at best, offer a below-inflation increase in the licence fee.

## **Conclusion**

2006 witnessed the resolution of much of the doubt as to who would guide each of the three main parties into the next general election. While Menzies Campbell became Liberal Democrat leader, David Cameron carefully consolidated his position, and

Gordon Brown ended the year looking virtually unstoppable in his as yet undeclared bid to succeed Tony Blair as Prime Minister. The attendant discussions within each of the parties over their respective futures created quite distinctive, introspective debates between supposed colleagues rather than with their electoral opponents. This situation arguably gave journalists more influence to shape agendas, particularly where they related to intra- rather than inter-party disputes. Consequently, the various media-driven crises that confronted a succession of Cabinet ministers were often represented through the prism of how they related to the unresolved leadership question. But dissenters such as John Pilger castigated fellow journalists for becoming side-tracked from what he argued were the real, more substantive issues:

the insidious censorship of ‘current affairs’, a loose masonry uniting politicians and famous journalists who define ‘politics’ as the machinations of Westminster, thereby fixing the limits of ‘political debate’. No more striking example currently presents itself than the relentless media scrapping of the political twins, Blair and Gordon Brown, and their tedious acolytes, drowning out the cries of the people of Iraq, Gaza and Lebanon.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, Pilger’s essential point, that the mediation of contemporary politics was overwhelmingly dominated by evaluation of personality rather than policy, was shared by non-leftists such as the former Conservative minister George Walden when he lamented: ‘who would have predicted that an Etonian of three years’ parliamentary standing (whose experience of life had been predominantly as a PR executive for a TV company notorious for its low standards) would be elected leader of the Conservative party?’<sup>15</sup> However, Cameron, unlike his predecessors, was not so easily ridiculed nor ignored by journalists during the year. Rather it was the

Liberal Democrats whose own largely self-inflicted leadership crisis at the beginning of 2006 generated much unwelcome publicity. Menzies Campbell has struggled to gain the kind of media attention the party enjoyed in the two previous Parliaments, when the Conservatives were distracted by their own problems. Ironically, the rise of David Cameron also boosts the Liberal Democrats' hopes of participating in a coalition government should the next election result in a hung parliament. That possibility will inevitably foster journalistic interest in the leaders and will exercise the party spin-doctors. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether and when the major opinion-forming media, the popular newspapers, will embrace any of the alternatives with much enthusiasm or sincerity. On the very last day of the year, Gordon Brown's acolytes let it be known that he 'is serious about doing something fundamental to change the culture of spin'.<sup>16</sup> That does not mean, however, that a Brown premiership would presage the end of this contentious practice. That will need to be watched as much as the new system of governance for the BBC.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Blunkett, *The Blunkett Tapes: My Life in the Bear Pit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Guardian*, 1 July 2006. It should also be noted that, following the murders of five prostitutes in Ipswich, a former special advisor at the Home Office complained that ministers had failed to protect the women by decriminalising prostitution because they feared a 'hostile media response' (*Observer*, 17 December 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Riddell, *The Unfulfilled Prime Minister: Tony Blair's Quest for a Legacy* (London: Methuen, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> *Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

<sup>5</sup> 2006 coincided with the 30th anniversary of another Labour Prime Minister's demise and was marked by two drama documentaries, BBC1's *The Plot Against Harold Wilson* and BBC4's *The Lavender List*, as well as ITV's more conventional offering *Wilson*. The BBC also aired a wholly fictional series, *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*, featuring a shop manager, with limited previous political experience, replacing Blair as Prime Minister some time in the near future. Blair himself appeared as a character played by Michael Sheen in *The Queen*, a successful film dealing with the aftermath of the death of Princess Diana in 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *Guardian*, 22 April 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *Guardian*, 27 June 2006.

<sup>8</sup> The site received an unexpected publicity boost when Labour MP Siôn Simon posted a spoof mocking Cameron's performance on the popular YouTube on-line video forum.

<sup>9</sup> Greg Hurst, *Charles Kennedy: A Tragic Flaw* (London: Politics, 2006).

---

<sup>10</sup> The Barker story came and went, as did *News of the World* allegations about Boris Johnson's extra-marital affair with a journalist. Perhaps a reflection of the changing Conservative Party, neither story resulted in triggering a swift deselection and/or resignation.

<sup>11</sup> *Guardian*, 1 July 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Des Freedman (forthcoming) 'Dynamics of power in contemporary media policy-making', *Media Culture and Society*.

<sup>13</sup> Cm. 6763, March 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *Guardian*, 15 September 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *Guardian*, 22 September 2006.

<sup>16</sup> *Sunday Telegraph*, 31 December 2006.