

How Woodrow and Margaret helped their chum Rupert

MEDIA ♦ IAN HARGREAVES

I had thought to entertain *New Statesman* readers this week with press coverage of the global financial crisis, but my attention was distracted by a man with a plump cigar and chins so numerous that, whenever I talked to him, I worried lest the Havana be inserted into an unsuitable orifice.

I refer to Woodrow (Lord) Wyatt, who died last year and who has bequeathed to his heirs the profits of his journals, currently serialised in the *Sunday Times*. Verushka, Wyatt's fourth wife, Petronella, his scribbling daughter, and (who knows?) perhaps even his son Pericles Wyatt, who is said to keep a bar in California, must be delighted.

Wyatt was one of those people of undisciplined talent who make themselves indispensable accessories of the governing class. If Derek Draper wanted a model, he need look no further than a man who combined a lascivious sexual appetite and a taste for the more appreciable vintages of Krug champagne with a crude style of newspaper writing and a political ambition only in practice achievable through the agency of others.

In certain respects, he was ahead of his time, a moderniser. A writer for *Tribune* who sang the Red Flag in India, he quickly evolved into a Gaitskellite, a proponent of a strategic alliance with the Liberals and, eventually, one of Margaret Thatcher's most ardent admirers and confidants. He used his columns, first in the *Daily Mirror*, then in the *News of the World* and the *Times*, to vilify his patrons' enemies and to flatter those upon whose patronage he depended. It did not matter to Wyatt that most of his columns were of no interest to readers – they were not aimed at the passing trade.

The latest diary extracts chronicle the lives of the governing class of the 1980s, mostly at dinner or the races. Because Wyatt knew well a handful of very important people and because he sat with his cigar at a thousand tedious dinners, he learnt a good deal, not least about Rupert Murdoch.

Murdoch paid Wyatt as a columnist, but used him as a lobbyist – get your mind round that one, Sir Patrick Neill. So when, in 1987, Murdoch wanted to take over the loss-making *Today*, Wyatt telephoned the prime minister to deliver the good news that “another pro-Margaret newspaper” was in prospect, so long as the Monopolies and Mergers Commission were not so foolish as to slow Rupert down.

Thatcher helpfully rejoined: “Yes, I remember the *Times* didn't get referred to the Monopolies Commission when he bought them both, the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*, because they were making a loss.”

Wyatt concludes his journal entry for Sunday, 14 June 1987: “I reminded Rupert during the evening how at his request and my instigation she had stopped the *Times* acquisition being referred to the Monopolies Commission, though the *Sunday Times* was not really losing money and the pair together were not.”

A fortnight later, Wyatt telephones David (Lord) Young.

As secretary of state for trade and industry, he had to decide whether or not the *Today* takeover should go to the Monopolies Commission. Before Wyatt speaks, Young, apparently aware of his mission (from Thatcher?), says he cannot discuss it because of his “quasi-judicial position” but closes the conversation with these words: “Give my regards to Rupert”. Wyatt notes: “From his last phrase, I deduced that all would be well.” As indeed it was.

Wyatt thus confirms from the grave what everyone connected with *Times* newspapers who is *not* paid to spread Murdoch's propaganda, has always said: that the acquisition of the titles from the Thomson group should have been referred to the Monopolies Commission. Had it been referred, it may well have been approved, since at that time Murdoch owned only the *Sun* and the *News of the World*. By non-referral, instead, Murdoch learnt how easy it was to play the British political and regulatory system – a lesson he put to good use when he later sidestepped broadcasting regulation to set up Sky Television. Lord Young's successor, Peter Mandelson, must soon decide whether Murdoch's ambitions for Manchester United are to be questioned.

Jane Reed, head of corporate affairs at News International, has said that “this is a case of Woodrow being extremely readable but wrong” and quoted figures that purport to show Times Newspapers Ltd losing money heavily in 1979 and 1980. But a company's health cannot be judged on the basis of two exceptional years, during which it grappled, first, with a lockout which prevented publica-

tion and, second, with the beginning of a recession. Wyatt was not misleading us. Nor, I think, did he invent the scene at Cliveden in June 1987 when Thatcher won another election: as Ken Livingstone appeared on television, complaining about the press's lies and smears, Murdoch, according to the Wyatt journal, delightedly cried out, “That's me.”

All this underlines a point that the Blair government has not yet grasped: governments must have robust, arm's length regulation of the media and they must make it clear that they will never override the rules. This approach is more important in the media than in any other business, not only because of the media's great importance to our political way of life, but also because it is genuinely much harder for politicians and media owners to stand at a distance from each other, when each so much desires the other's good opinion.

At present, with print, television, radio and computers converging, we have a hotchpotch of 14 regulators with overlapping powers. The government's view, according to a green paper published in July, is that there is no urgent case for action. No wonder Murdoch rubs his hands and Lord Wyatt of Weeford chortles from the other side.

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