A Boulton
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Exhibits TABB1-7

IN THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

EXHIBIT TABB4

This is the exhibit TABB4 referred to in the first witness statement of Thomas Adam Babington Bolton dated 25 April 2012.

TONY'S TEN YEARS

Memories of the Blair Administration

ADAM BOULTON

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on the airport tarmac. Bizarrely, David Hill refused to let the official plane stand as a television backdrop because of the environmental themes at the G8. So the cameras pointed in the opposite direction for Blair to describe the meeting as 'very frank. We went through all the issues.' The prime minister stipulated that 'actions rather than words' were now required from the Russian president.

Then, since this was his last foreign trip as prime minister accompanied by the press pack, he posed with the journalists for an official picture, taken by the Press Association photographer Stephan Rousseau. He had done this before only with the travelling press corps accompanying his election battle bus. This time, his BA charter plane, Blair Force One, was in the background.

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'FERAL MEDIA'

12 JUNE

I am going to say something that few people in public life will say, but most know is absolutely true: a vast aspect of our jobs today – outside of the really major decisions, as big as anything else – is coping with the media, its sheer scale, weight and constant hyperactivity.

Tony Blair, speech on Public Life, Reuters, 12 June 2007

On 12 June, with just a fortnight to go as prime minister, Tony Blair made one of the less predictable detours on his path to resignation by delivering a speech on the media. He insisted that he was neither 'whingeing' nor responding to his 'latest whacking'. Nevertheless he allowed himself a faint gloat at his tormentors: 'As I always say, it's an immense privilege to do this job and if the worst that happens is harsh media coverage, it's a small price to pay. And anyway, like it or not, I have won three elections and am still standing as I leave office.'

The speech was billed as 'A Lecture by the Prime Minister on Public Life', but since it was delivered at the Reuters News Agency's new headquarters in Canary Wharf, there was never any doubt what it was really about. Indeed, Tony Blair repeatedly yoked the two together as he argued 'at present we are all being dragged down by the way media and public life interact'.

Although the speech picked up on themes and even phrases used by Alastair Campbell in his numerous exculpatory articles and utterances, it was authentically in the voice of Blair, drafted by the prime minister himself in longhand. More temperate and less angry than Campbell, Tony Blair was also more thoughtful and ultimately conciliatory.

Displaying the disarming self-awareness that he so often deployed in his last years in office (beginning with his 'I've not got a reverse gear' party conference speech in 2003), he started with a concession: 'I first acknowledge my own complicity. We paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging and persuading the media.' Less self-consciously he then revealed that this obsession still prevailed with the observation that 'you can't let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant'.

In a classic demonstration of triangulation, Blair expressed sympathy for contemporary journalists, who shared the present 'difficulties' with those in public life. He argued that both were having to adapt to new pressures, such as a multiplicity of media outlets resulting in fragmented audiences; diverse technology, notably the internet, where broadcasters and print journalists were becoming the same; and above all 'a news cycle twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week'.

Blair's argument drew on what he had picked up during the many hours he spent dining with media proprietors, columnists and editorial boards. In a further gesture of sympathy he even parodied one of his own most famous remarks. On taking power in 1997 he had told his new parliamentary party, 'The people are the masters now. We are the servants of the people.' This was itself an echo of Labour's landslide victory in 1945 since Blair was reworking and inverting Hartley Shawcross's somewhat boastful statement to Parliament: 'We are the masters at the moment and shall be for some considerable time to come . . .' Blair's new version for the media was now: 'They are not the masters of this change but its victims.'

However, this was where common cause ended as Blair contrasted the efforts he had made to counter the media's problems, with the vicious way the media had responded. 'I introduced: first, lobby briefings on the record; then published the minutes; then gave monthly

press conferences; then Freedom of Information; then became the first prime minister to go to the Select Committee's chairman's session; and so on. None of it to any avail.' He claimed that the media had reacted with cynicism: under-reporting Parliament and concentrating not on 'honest mistakes' but on 'allegations of misconduct'. Coining a new technical term he went on to claim that '"impact" is what matters'.

His central section was argued with real emotion to the point of tautology:

> Broadsheets today face the same pressures as tabloids, broadcasters increasingly the same pressures as broadsheets. The audience needs to be arrested, held and their emotions engaged. Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked. The consequences of this are acute. First, scandal or controversy beats ordinary reporting hands down.
>
> News is rarely news unless it generates heat as much as or more than light. Second, attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgement. It is not enough for someone to make an error. It has to be venal. Conspiratorial.
>
> Watergate was a great piece of journalism but there is a PhD thesis all on its own to examine the consequences for journalism of standing one conspiracy up. What creates cynicism is not mistakes; it is allegations of misconduct.
>
> But misconduct is what has impact. Third, the fear of missing out means today's media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits. But no one dares miss out. Fourth, rather than just report news, even if sensational or controversial, the new technique is commentary on the news being as, if not more, important than the news itself.

After this, as any hack reporter could have told him, came the 'We name the guilty men' section. Here the prime minister put his credibility at risk by choosing to single out for attack Britain's weakest and lowest-circulation 'quality paper', the *Independent*. He

conceded that 'it is a well-edited lively paper and is absolutely entitled to print what it wants, how it wants, on the Middle East or anything else'. But clearly all those lengthy polemics against the Iraq War from Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn had left their scars. The prime minister seized the glib slogan of the editor, Simon Kelner, that he produced 'a viewspaper not a newspaper', as the main exhibit in his charge that the media now 'confuse news and comment'.

When the speech was announced, there had been a pretty consistent private reaction from the prime minister's friends: 'Good, it's about time he took on the *Mail*.' This was in general recognition of the fact that the powerful Associated Newspapers group had been outstandingly unforgiving in its assault on the policies and personalities of the Blair era. Alastair Campbell had repeatedly expressed his 'hate' for the *Mail* papers. But on this occasion, as early in his premiership when he attended the funerals of Associated's editor-in-chief, Sir David English, and proprietor, Vere Harmsworth, Blair ducked it. There was no mention of the *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday* or *Evening Standard* in his Reuters speech – nor of Rupert Murdoch, News International, *The Times* and the *Sun* either, which had so buoyed New Labour by endorsing the party prior to the 1997 election. Instead, Tony Blair referred only to the puny *Independent* and, in passing, to the BBC, Britain's biggest media organisation and a general-purpose punchbag.

Out of office, Blair conceded that it was a mistake to single out the *Independent*. His real target had been the *Daily Mail* but he feared what the paper would do to him and his family should he have targeted it. Blair said that he had thought long and hard about whether it had been wise to be so friendly in the early days with senior executives at Associated Newspapers, but he argued that the tone of the group had grown much worse with the rise of Paul Dacre.

The conclusions of Blair's media speech were unsurprisingly sketchy and anti-climactic, although, ever the politician, he fell back on unspecified changes in regulation as a solution. Given that the Press Complaints Commission regulating newspapers was 'traditional' and his questionable belief that Ofcom would soon be able to regulate all television content on the internet, Blair suggested: 'As the technology blurs the distinction between papers and television, it becomes increasingly irrational to have different systems of accountability based on technology that no longer can be differentiated in the old way.' (The Blairs had sought recourse through the Press Complaints Commission – particularly in the early years – but had not always been happy with the outcome.)

However, the outgoing leader modestly declined to offer a blueprint of how this might be done: 'I am not in a position to determine this one way or another.' Instead he set out a blood-chilling survey of the consequences if no action was taken:

> this relationship between public life and media is now damaged in a manner that requires repair. The damage saps the country's confidence and self-belief; it undermines its assessment of itself, its institutions; and above all, it reduces our capacity to take the right decisions, in the right spirit for our future. I've made this speech after much hesitation. I know it will be rubbished in certain quarters. But I also know this has needed to be said.

More in sorrow than in anger for sure, this was still a bitter valediction from a prime minister who had taken greater interest than any other in the media (except perhaps the stricken John Major). The speech had less impact than he might have hoped for. It was hailed by Blair's established allies within the 'commentariat', such as John Lloyd and Roy Greenslade, who had expressed similar views themselves and may even have provided the intellectual underpinning for Blair's analysis. While recognising some of his insights, though, most media commentators judged him to be too compromised a figure, too implicated, too intimately embroiled in media relations for too many years to be a valid censor.

The speech had also ducked a second vital question along with that of the *Daily Mail*: Iraq. Blair referred to the Hutton Inquiry in passing, but few journalists could agree that it had established 'the facts' which they 'refused to accept'. He did not deal with the dossiers of evidence produced on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction threat, which subsequently turned out to be wrong. And most considered

that the prime minister had overreached himself at Canary Wharf when he argued: 'I would only point out that the Hutton Inquiry (along with three other inquiries) was a six-month investigation in which I as prime minister and other senior ministers and officials faced unprecedented public questioning and scrutiny. The verdict was disparaged because it was not the one the critics wanted. But it was an example of being held to account, not avoiding it. But leave that to one side.'

As Blair recognised, his departing righteous indignation with the media was a little hard to take given the efforts which he and his underlings had expended trying to court and manipulate it during his hegemony. Attempts to win over, or neutralise, the hostility of the media had begun long before either Blair or Campbell became key figures. The change started with the election of Neil Kinnock as Labour Party leader and the appointment of Peter Mandelson as its director of communications. During this period David Hill – ultimately Campbell's successor at Number 10 – and his then employer, Roy Hattersley, the deputy leader, were also highly active in reaching out to what they generally regarded as 'the Tory press'.

Mandelson began his quest to win over, or at least neutralise, the media for New Labour as soon as he became head of the Labour Party Press Office under Neil Kinnock. Ultimately, they were rebuffed in the 1992 general election when the *Sun* treated Kinnock with exceptional harshness.

While the media had previously been viewed as suspect and kept at arm's length, Mandelson instead instigated personal contacts at the highest possible level between the Labour leadership and journalists. For example, he took Neil Kinnock to lunch with the *Sun*. Mandelson and Campbell also cultivated personal relationships with journalists on the political beat. They regularised the flow of routine information and began to use the distribution of exclusives as a means to reward or punish correspondents. They persuaded, cultivated and co-opted those they could and attempted to bully or undermine those who were judged to be hostile.

Individuals and organisations that proved susceptible to pressure would be revisited again and again. The BBC offered particularly

fertile ground. In opposition, Mandelson himself, as an old friend of the Director General, John Birt, knew which buttons to press (he was even employed as a BBC consultant prior to becoming an MP). Once Campbell took over he seemed to employ deputies to deal with the Corporation. Lance Price had worked for the BBC and could identify where to exert influence on the Corporation bureaucracy.

Only the BBC, and to a much lesser extent other regulated broadcast news outlets, could be influenced so directly. British newspapers and the journalists they employed were unruly and partisan. When a politician or party was deemed to be powerful, as New Labour was during its rise, print journalists and their proprietors could easily be curbed by threats and blandishments. Once Blair became leader, Mandelson was determined not to repeat any mistakes. This time they found they were pushing at an open door. Even the *Sun* endorsed Blair in 1996. New Labour's leaders were astonished at the ease with which they could influence the media during the 1990s, and this sowed the seeds of the contempt which Blair would subsequently feel for journalists in general. As opposition leader, Blair dined enthusiastically with proprietors and publishers such as Lord (Vere) Harmsworth, Sir David English and Rupert Murdoch – and the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and *The Times* all backed him in 1997.

It was perfectly possible not to get pressured by either arm of this pincer movement and to still maintain a professional distance, but most print journalists did not resist, either rolling over to be tickled or cowering at the power of New Labour. It was certainly not comfortable for those who were judged to be against 'the project'. Mandelson had a habit of denouncing in front of their colleagues journalists who had displeased him. The highly respected and hard-working George Jones of the *Daily Telegraph* was subjected to a particularly nasty public attack before one election news conference when he was accused of working for Conservative Central Office.

Mandelson managed to make life-long enemies in particular of some of the most influential political correspondents, who bided their time and then showed no mercy when his political career ran into trouble; some of them helped it get into difficulties in the first

place. This was Mandelson's tragedy, and played a significant part in both of his departures from cabinet office, but it also confounded the common impression that he was a profoundly untrustworthy and dishonest individual. He was not – with the one fateful, personal mistake of failing to make full disclosure of the personal loan from Geoffrey Robinson MP on his Britannia Building Society mortgage form.

Mandelson never lied or dissimulated to me, in contrast to Campbell and Blair and many of their underlings. His fault was rather that he was too brazen in supporting his cause. Unlike Campbell, he was central in developing the intellectual arguments on which New Labour was built, and had a sense of ownership of them, as is very clear in the book *The Blair Revolution* which he wrote with Roger Liddle. He could go too far in over-promoting what he so passionately believed in. His personal loyalty to Blair survived twice being sacked by him and he remained – with Campbell and Anji Hunter – one of the trio of intimates who continued to be close advisers to the prime minister long after they left his service on paper.

Alastair Campbell

> *I'm just an extension of Tony. That's what I am. And I did a job for him and I think while I was there I did a good job. But there were times I didn't do such a good job. But I said on the day I left that the good memories outweighed the bad . . . Now fuck off.*
>
> Alastair Campbell, interviewed in the *Guardian*, 8 March 2004

A handful of journalists required no pressure at all: by his own admission Alastair Campbell was 'a part-time propagandist' for Labour during his time as a journalist on the *Daily Mirror* and the now defunct *Today* newspaper.

I first noticed Campbell during the party conference season in Brighton at the Grand Hotel shortly after it had reopened following the 1984 IRA bomb attack. For a comparatively young journalist,

Campbell was remarkably self-assured. He appeared late at night playing the bagpipes in the hotel foyer. A knot of journalists gathered round including Campbell's long-time friend and client Tony Bevins and two Scottish journalists with Tory leanings, Alan Cochrane and Bruce Anderson, a veteran of the production team at LWT's *Weekend World* which also included Peter Mandelson. Predictably an altercation broke out and the pipe-playing soon stopped.

At around this time I got a measure of how Labour regarded the journalist Campbell. Kinnock was doing some end of conference interviews but got delayed. I was asked to wait in the backstage office. After a while, Campbell wandered in and began to chat with Jan Royall, Kinnock's loyal secretary, who later became Baroness Royall and a Labour whip in the Lords. After about half an hour's wait I was thrown out on the grounds that no journalists were allowed in the office. There was no suggestion that Campbell should leave as well.

Campbell was an obsessive personality who had a habit of forming addictions and dependencies on individuals. In the 1980s he was slavishly loyal to Neil Kinnock and to Robert Maxwell, proprietor of the Mirror Group, who died mysteriously in 1991 having plundered his own companies' pension funds. Campbell also confronted alcoholism with the support of Fiona Millar, his highly assertive partner.

Although he has sometimes been placed, erroneously, at the centre of the New Labour project and even been described as one of its architects, he was not an automatic choice as press secretary when Blair became party leader in 1994. Two other journalists were shortlisted for the post: Andy Grice, who ironically was the political editor of the *Independent* at the time of Blair's Reuters speech, and Philip Bassett, an industrial correspondent of the *Financial Times* and *The Times*. Bassett eventually joined the government to work as an aide in Downing Street before moving on to act as special adviser to Lord Falconer and Baroness Ashton. In 2001 he married his long-term partner, the Labour minister and peer Baroness Symons.

Campbell was an intimate of Neil and Glenys Kinnock during the 1980s and was supportive of Kinnock's reforms, but he was not

in the nucleus of what became the New Labour project. His personal politics were somewhat to the left of Blair, as was shown in some of his articles during this period. Even well into the early 1990s, Campbell was using his *Today* column to rail against the 'barmy' idea of tuition fees and to state that education funding would instead be 'best addressed by increases in general taxation'. The authors of the project were Blair, Gordon Brown, Mandelson and Philip Gould, supported by Roger Liddle and Anji Hunter. Campbell knew them well, however. By the late eighties he was a regular visitor to Blair's office, kicking around ideas for his newspaper columns.

Blair had tasked Anji Hunter, who had run his MP's office since 1986, with finding a press secretary. Grice turned the offer down for family reasons and Bassett was judged to be less of a 'people person', so Campbell got the job. Blair was obviously impressed with his new hired gun. The week of Campbell's appointment I had to interview Blair in the sepulchral rooms of the leader of the opposition. Making small talk while we waited for the cameras to roll, I mentioned Campbell's new job. Blair reacted with that mixture of naivety and detached indifference which marked him out for the very top: 'Oh, do you know Ali?' he exclaimed. 'I think he's absolutely fantastic!'

Campbell did do a fantastic job for Blair in the first six or so years that he worked for him, but from 2000 (and particularly 2001) on, he turned progressively from an asset to at best a liability and at worst a seriously destructive force.

At the beginning he was indeed a breath of fresh air. Unlike Mandelson, whose high-handed manner had alienated many, Campbell could be one of the lads when required. But he was also shrewd, gauging what each journalist was after, and which were trustworthy and which not. He knew what journalists wanted and did not hesitate to satisfy them, sometimes unscrupulously. During the 1997 party conference negative headlines were building up because of a string of mishaps. Campbell blotted them out of the *Sun* the next day by informing Britain's top-selling daily that a well-known but mentally ill actress, Nicola Pagett, had been sending him explicit love letters. The *Sun*'s front-page headline blazed: 'EXCLUSIVE: TV STAR'S TWISTED LOVE FOR BLAIR'S TOP MAN', while the opening sentence helpfully

clarified that 'the Premier's trusted Chief Press Secretary was the innocent victim of the actress's deluded passion'.

Campbell was a much better public relations man than he had ever been a journalist. Good journalism requires detachment; PR thrives on commitment and conviction. Campbell brought the total and blinkered dedication of a football fan into office with him. Perhaps because of the convergence of party political ideologies on to the centre ground, his petulant partisanship typified the way in which New Labour conducted its media operation.

In opposition and then in government, New Labour set up a media-monitoring unit which published printed bulletins several times a day containing précis and quotations from national and regional newspapers and magazines, and reports on the contents of major radio and television news bulletins. These documents were the creation of a young Australian, Andrew Sholl, who had cut his teeth with the Australian Labor Party. For politicians, they obviated the need to keep up with the media at first hand because they were so detailed. Live '2-ways' with television reporters and commentators were also closely monitored, though the finer points of equivocation were not always picked up.

When mixed in with a computer database of politicians' previous remarks, these bulletins provided the raw material for another New Labour innovation – rebuttal. No statement which might disadvantage the party, or mis-statement by the opposition which might indirectly help the cause, was allowed to stand alone. The press office would intervene, either demanding retractions or drawing attention to what it considered to be its opponents' errors.

On media management, Campbell's relationship with Blair was similar to that which Margaret Thatcher had enjoyed with her press secretary, Bernard Ingham. Both prime ministers trusted their press secretaries, not only to manage their relationships with the media – to decide who got access and who didn't – but also to read and watch the news for them. But Campbell was much more intimate with Blair than Ingham ever was with Thatcher. He behaved as an equal in Blair's company; Ingham never aspired to be more than a civil servant.

Campbell thought nothing of contradicting Blair in front of other people, albeit usually in a slightly self-mocking tone. He would decide whether the prime minister was stopping or going, talking or shutting up, and Blair would usually meekly follow his orders (to be fair, it was usually convenient for him to do so). Early in the administration, before the myths were fixed, Blair shot a party political broadcast with a crew not used to working at Westminster. One crew member's abiding memory was of 'those two people, a man and a woman, who were so rude to the prime minister'. They could be identified easily as Campbell and Hunter.

Campbell extended his control much further than Ingham. He managed to stop Blair doing doorstep interviews. With previous prime ministers, doorstep interviews were the routine way to get their on-the-hoof reactions to developments. But no matter how loudly the reporters shouted, Blair was told to walk past the cameras. Usually, press officers would be sent ahead to scout the terrain and check if any reporters lay in wait. They would ask what you wanted to talk to Blair about, but this was usually for their own information. Blair never paused to talk, although on one or two rather farcical occasions he re-emerged from his destination, having been briefed and allowed to collect his thoughts, to then give his 'spontaneous reaction' to the camera teams who had been asked to wait.

Alastair Campbell went further. He controlled what Blair knew about what the media were saying. Blair has since said that he didn't even read the daily news briefs, except on Wednesdays before PMQs. So Campbell's own words, usually deeply critical of journalists' work, were all Blair had to rely on. Anji Hunter thought even this was going too far and often tried to prevent Campbell from relaying media criticism. Towards the end, the two men were in agreement: Blair said he didn't read the papers and Campbell couldn't be bothered to either.

Campbell also set Blair to work as a journalist. In one year so many publications were given articles with his byline that he was sarcastically honoured with a 'Freelance of the Year' press award. It was an open secret that 'Tony Blair' pieces were ghosted for him by Campbell and a growing team of writers made up of Fleet Street veterans including Phil Bassett and David Bradshaw.

Years before he even became prime minister, Tony Blair had already established the most professional and extensive political press operation ever seen in Britain in peacetime. Once he was elected in 1997, the operation effectively moved from Labour Party headquarters into Downing Street. The difference was that there were now more resources available to fund it, thanks to the public purse. Blair stressed the importance he attached to his press secretary by giving him authority over civil servants.

Campbell subsequently marked out his territory by moving the press operations into Number 12 Downing Street, until then the traditional domain of the government chief whip. The large ground-floor suite of Georgian rooms was transformed into an approximation of a newsroom with a central row of facing computer desks. Campbell himself abandoned Ingham's bow-windowed office overlooking the street, for a corner office at the back of the building, commanding the garden, Horse Guards Parade and St James's Park.

For the first couple of years of Blair's Downing Street tenure, the press office and the media seemed to have an almost symbiotic relationship. The Conservatives were in disarray and – after such a massive Labour landslide – minority parties were largely irrelevant. There was little public concern for close scrutiny of the government; instead the media often merely relayed what New Labour was saying and doing. Blair has since described his first term as a wasted opportunity; it is certainly true that he took a non-confrontational approach which avoided controversy.

The prime minister's director of communications continued to fulfil the press secretary's functions by briefing meetings of lobby journalists twice daily when Parliament was sitting. He was a much more powerful source than Westminster journalists had ever had before. Ingham, for example, never attended cabinet; he waited outside to debrief a cabinet secretary before then passing on to reporters what he had learned. Ingham's successors under Major – Gus O'Donnell, Christopher Meyer and Jonathan Haslam – also stayed at arm's length, or 'out of the loop', as at least two of them complained. By contrast, Campbell sat in on cabinet as a matter of course, along with Jonathan Powell, Anji Hunter and Sally Morgan,

the prime minister's political secretary. With Blair, this group made up the core which became known as the 'sofa government', taking important and un-minuted decisions informally in Blair's den, just off the Cabinet Room.

Campbell was more than 'his master's voice', he was often 'the horse's mouth'. His closeness to Blair meant that he could articulate what the leader was thinking, sometimes before Blair had actually thought it. Even once Blair became prime minister, it was not uncommon for phrases which Campbell had first used spontaneously in discussion to crop up again as set passages in Blair's speeches or Commons contributions.

This creative process worked in a mutually reinforcing circle, provided the prime minister and his director of communications were in harmony. In briefings and articles Campbell was able to flesh out and test ideas, but once the lobby correspondents identified the unusually authoritative nature of Campbell's pronouncements, they increased the pressure on him to say something newsworthy. With his journalist's ear for quotes and headlines, Campbell could not resist temptation. Nor could the hacks. At the daily lobby briefings the pursuit of information was often abandoned for the game of trying to push him into a juicy gaffe.

Sometimes the consequences could be trivial, if embarrassing and a little unfair on Campbell. He made headlines when he used the phrase 'bog standard comprehensives' during lively exchanges over schools policy. The government was accused of disparaging the existing educational system. This was not Campbell's intent, and everyone in the briefing room knew it; he was simply deploying colourful language to dramatise the change and choice which Blair hoped to introduce into secondary schools – the tone of his voice had placed the words 'bog standard' in quotation marks but the quote was too good to miss. (Had cameras and sound recorded the briefing, the story would never have 'got legs' because the context was clear.)

Campbell was generally aware of the authority of his words and relished the power he wielded. He was widely considered to be more powerful than a cabinet minister and wasn't shy to flex his muscles. Social Security Secretary Harriet Harman was just one senior minister

who was publicly contradicted and forced by Campbell to retract a statement. Harman's joint sacking along with her feuding deputy Frank Field was preceded by Campbell making them both figures of fun; at a social gathering, Campbell had demonstrated his superiority by goading the then ambitious junior minister Charlie Falconer into praising the job Harman and Field were doing. Both social security ministers were out of the government within weeks.

Campbell was far from embarrassed in 2000 when two television programmes captured his seeming supremacy. The veteran BBC documentary reporter Michael Cockerell made a film of life in Downing Street centred on the press secretary. On it Blair was caught coming into Campbell's office and deferring to him. The impressionist Rory Bremner picked up on this aspect of the relationship on his Channel 4 television show: a series of sketches showed a thuggish Campbell brusquely dictating orders and policies to a feeble Blair. It was a venomous modern version of the Jeeves and Wooster, master and servant paradox which dates back at least to the Roman dramatist Plautus.

By the second half of the first term, relations between the media and Campbell had curdled. Contempt and hostility manifested themselves on both sides. Campbell delighted in mocking the mannerisms of individual journalists (Robert Peston, then political editor of the *Financial Times*, was a favourite target) and would on occasion hand out 'Garbage Awards' for stories which he judged to be particularly inaccurate. The problem was Campbell's slave-like devotion to his cause. He believed that the ends of a successful New Labour government justified any means of treating the press. For example, in 1998 with great fanfare Labour introduced an 'annual report' which checked what progress was being made in delivering the promises stated in the election manifesto. It listed hundreds of individual pledges and rated them as done, in progress, or yet to be acted upon. The second year a slimmed down annual report was produced without the checklist (the then leader of the opposition, William Hague, likened this new version to 'a Harry Potter'). From the third year on, the annual report was dropped altogether without apology or explanation from Number 10.

For Campbell, truth itself took a back seat to the cause – another big difference from Sir Bernard Ingham, who regarded lying as the worst possible charge that could be laid against him. On one occasion, the fact of whether a reshuffle was taking place or not depended on whether Blair was in London or Chequers. Campbell confidently told me that the prime minister was enjoying a country weekend. He wasn't. He and Campbell were closeted in Number 10 working out the reshuffle, which was announced the next morning. 'Sorry, Adam, you know why I had to tell you that,' Campbell apologised later that day. A simple refusal to answer my question would have been preferable.

Campbell's over-confidence was further boosted by the UK government-led overhaul of the NATO press operation during the Balkans conflict. The full arsenal of news war rooms, rebuttals, daily briefings and partisan press spokesmen was introduced at NATO's sleepy Brussels headquarters. In fact, a team of half a dozen officials from Number 10 was sent to Belgium, but Campbell was not slow to claim the credit personally. This operation marked the introduction of a 'coalition information service' which purported to produce dossiers of factual information relevant to the conflict and became a hallmark of Campbell's international media operations. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a new coalition information service produced files on Islamism to coincide with Blair's alliance-building trip to India and Pakistan. But the practice reached its apotheosis with the two dossiers – infamously known as the '45-minute dossier' and the 'dodgy dossier' – which inadvertently did so much damage to the British and American cause in the Iraq conflict.

By 1999, Campbell was often referred to as 'the real deputy prime minister' or 'the second most powerful man in Britain'. Blair was blasé, presumably because he had a strong aide performing what was judged to be an excellent job, and taking the media burden off his shoulders. But as Campbell became to most intents and purposes a political figure in his own right, tensions within New Labour were inevitable – especially once Fiona Millar, Campbell's partner and mother of his three children, herself became a powerful figure within Number 10 as Cherie Blair's chief aide.

Campbell's growing stature exacerbated two crises within the New Labour 'family' on either side of the 2001 general election: Peter Mandelson's second resignation on 24 January 2001 and 'Cheriegate' in late 2002.

Peter Mandelson's career as a Westminster politician appeared to have been dealt a terminal blow when he was forced to resign from the cabinet for a second time. He had first quit as trade secretary in December 1998, along with Treasury minister Geoffrey Robinson, following revelations that Robinson had privately loaned him £373,000 for a house purchase. However, within a year Blair had brought him back into the government fold as Northern Ireland secretary. Now there were murky suggestions that Mandelson had intervened to assist with UK passport applications on behalf of the billionaire Hinduja brothers. A subsequent official inquiry failed to substantiate these charges against Mandelson, but by the time the report's findings were published it was too late. With hindsight, Mandelson believes he may have been the victim of a turf war with Jack Straw at the Home Office, which was then seized on by Campbell.

After some days of lurid headlines about the Hinduja affair, Campbell decided that Mandelson had to go and he prevailed upon Derry Irvine, the Lord Chancellor and another long-time Blair counsellor, to support him. Mandelson was summoned to a meeting at Number 10. While this discussion was going on, Campbell ensured that Mandelson was finished by briefing the lobby that he was on the way out. He did not do so explicitly but anyone of any experience gathered in the Number 10 basement, which then served as a briefing room, knew exactly what Campbell meant when he said, 'Peter Mandelson is at this moment upstairs discussing his future with the prime minister.' I immediately walked across the street to the television cameras and reported that Mandelson was out. Some minutes later, he himself emerged to confirm it. Metaphorically, Campbell had kicked the chair out from under Mandelson's feet and left him dangling.

This was a decisive moment of rupture within New Labour that has only superficially healed. It brought Campbell closer to the Brownites and expedient men of business such as Jack Straw and Robin Cook,

but he was never again fully trusted by those such as Anji Hunter, Cherie Blair and Ben Wegg-Prosser who had invested emotionally in the project. Typically, Tony Blair managed to stay aloof and to retain both Campbell and Mandelson as friends and advisers.

The immediate impact of Mandelson's fall was muffled, partly because he had a very small personal following, partly because those sections of the media that had long targeted him had got their scalp. More importantly, the general election was due – though it had to be delayed by a month because of the added complication of an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Mandelson was re-elected as MP for Hartlepool with a resounding majority, but he left the House of Commons in 2004, nominated by Blair as Britain's EU commissioner for trade. In October 2008 he made a surprise return to Westminster as Brown's ennobled business secretary.

2001 general election: John Prescott's punch

John is John and I'm lucky to have him as my deputy.
Tony Blair reacts to the 'punch incident', 16 May 2001

As I was to experience at first hand, the notorious Prescott 'punch incident' displayed the strength of the New Labour media management operation and its ruthlessness, and showed how pervasive and dominant media managers had become within the party. 'Cutting out the cancer' was never even considered an option since the tumour and the organism amounted to the same thing.

The Labour Party were nervous throughout the 2001 general election campaign – even though another Blair victory looked a foregone conclusion. Ultimately, nobody was very surprised when the 1997 landslide was all but repeated in the vote on 7 June with a Labour majority of 167. The only day that a lengthy and largely comatose campaign lit up was Wednesday, 16 May, when three senior ministers were attacked by the voting public.

Jack Straw, the outgoing home secretary, was heckled and slow hand-clapped by the Police Federation during a speech to their conference in Blackpool.

On a visit to Gisela Stuart's marginal constituency in Birmingham, the prime minister was berated by Sharon Storer, a local postmistress, about the NHS in full view of the television cameras. Ms Storer's 48-year-old partner, Keith Sedgewick, was receiving treatment for Hodgkinson's lymphoma at Queen Elizabeth Hospital. One of her complaints was that he had been accommodated overnight on an improvised bed when hospitalised for a bone marrow transplant. Rejecting Blair's plea, Storer refused to go inside away from the cameras to discuss the matter privately, telling him instead: 'All you do is walk around and make yourself known but you don't do anything to help anybody.'

Both these incidents occurred mid-afternoon on the day that the Labour Party had transported the national media to Birmingham for the launch of the party manifesto. The apparatchiks in Millbank Tower had not expected to be jumpy and in full 'rebuttal mode', as they now were. And this was before the early evening when John Prescott's fists swung into action in the decaying North Wales seaside town of Rhyl – as it happened, just down the coast from Prestatyn where Prescott had been born on 31 May 1938.

Prickly, pugnacious and pompous, John Prescott had nonetheless been a loyal and useful sidekick to Tony Blair. He had stood against Blair for the leadership in 1994 and then settled for election to the post of deputy leader; Blair appointed him deputy prime minister after the victory of 1997.

Unlike Blair, Prescott had authentic working-class and trade union roots. Before Parliament and a mature degree at Ruskin College, Oxford, Prescott had been a steward on cruise ships and an activist in the National Union of Seamen, but he was also an early Labour moderniser – remarkable given the trajectory which had led him to become MP for Hull East.

Perhaps the finest moment of his career came during John Smith's leadership, when Prescott's passionate speech to the party conference was decisive in persuading the trade unions not to object to the watering down of the block vote as the Labour Party moved closer to 'OMOV' – one member one vote.

In government, Prescott insisted on a grandiose and sprawling

department, overseeing transport, local government and the environment, which quickly became regarded as dysfunctional. His main use, though, was as a fixer for Blair. He chaired cabinet committees and sometimes acted as a go-between in Blair's fraught relationship with Gordon Brown, on occasion hosting peacemaking dinners in the neutral territory of his Admiralty Arch flat.

Prescott also acted as the rallier of the party faithful. Half comic, half bullying, he was a highly effective motivational speaker. At general elections, Prescott toured the regions in his battle bus. This cheered the party workers and conveniently kept him away from the national media, who were given only the patchiest outline of his schedule. Typically, Prescott's contribution to the day of Labour's 2001 election launch was to appear by satellite link from a highly marginal target seat in Dorset. There were sound problems: first the audience couldn't hear Prescott, then Blair couldn't cut him off. 'Do you need any more?' Prescott asked. They all laughed.

But the mood when Prescott arrived in Rhyl was ugly rather than amused.

Countryside protesters were a recurrent feature of Blair's first and second terms. Their essential grievance was Labour's pledge to outlaw fox-hunting with dogs, but they bore other grudges as well. There were frequent complaints that rural life was comparatively poorer, less well serviced and not understood by the predominantly urban and suburban Labour Party. Activist farmers, including some in North Wales, were ringleaders in the 2000 fuel protests which successfully forced the government to back down on planned duty increases.

The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001 was a further potential provocation to rural communities. The first case was diagnosed in February but it was some weeks before Labour announced its plans to postpone holding the general election scheduled for May. Even though there were movement restrictions and closed rights of way in much of the countryside, some senior activists still wanted to stick to their plans. Alastair Campbell, for example, repeatedly told journalists that he had recently been to the country and it was still perfectly possible to have a decent walk (on roads) after a pub lunch. Blair's instinct to delay was decisively backed by Anji Hunter, herself

from farming stock, and the soundings she took in the wider community.

Foot and mouth lasted from February to September and cost an estimated £8.5 billion and the destruction of 6 million sheep and cattle. Inevitably, there were complaints about some aspects of the official response to the outbreak, but Blair refused to set up a public inquiry. (Before the news conference for the manifesto launch, Downing Street officials asked me what question I was going to ask. In a rare fit of good humour I confessed I was considering the countryside and foot and mouth. National television correspondents usually get to ask the first few questions; this time I was called only about forty minutes into the news conference, the only time I can remember that happening to me. Circumspection rather than honesty is sometimes the best policy.)

Prescott had deliberately set himself up as a hate figure for countryside campaigners. For him, hunt supporters fitted into a glib class stereotype – hunters equal toffs – so he mocked them at any opportunity. At the party conference in Brighton in 2000, the deputy prime minister had publicly referred to the 'contorted faces' of the Countryside Alliance protesters outside the hall.

Videotapes of the incident in Rhyl show several hundred demonstrators under police supervision in front of the hall where the deputy prime minister was to deliver his rallying speech. Prescott clambered out of his battle bus, made eye contact with the protesters and gestured at them by raising his arms from his side and leaning back as if to say 'bring it on'. They jeered back. To the bafflement of his escorts, Prescott then decided to walk to the hall door on a path through the middle of the crowd, rather than by the pre-planned route which would have taken him around the edges of the protest.

Fatefully, this brought him within arm's reach of some of the demonstrators. One of these, Craig Evans, a farm labourer from nearby Llandyrnog, was there to protest against what he called an 'erosion of rural life'. 'We in the countryside feel excluded and alienated from the process of democracy and politics,' he explained later.

Evans threw an egg at John Prescott as he passed and scored a

bullseye. Prescott instantaneously lashed back with a rather nifty left jab and, as they say, 'a struggle ensued' between the two men. In a subsequent newspaper interview, Evans claimed that he saw a 'mad glint' in the deputy prime minister's eye: 'He was boiling with rage . . . He didn't hit me in self-defence, or because he was scared. He hit me because he was angry. It was pure anger. I saw it coming and rode the punch – but it connected and it hurt.' Evans had a bloody nose and a bruised face, but it was he who was detained by the police after the incident. Both combatants were eventually interviewed by the North Wales constabulary but the Crown Prosecution Service did not bring charges against them.

Evans said he regretted throwing the egg; Prescott never apologised. He called the whole incident 'frightening and regrettable', but reference to it became part of his patter to sympathetic audiences: 'I wish I had ducked a bit quicker at Rhyl. Mind you, I think the other guy thinks that as well.' Five years later, slow-motion footage of the punch was even included in the video montage celebrating Prescott's career which followed what was to be his last speech as deputy prime minister to the Labour conference. Prescott's memoirs, published in spring 2008, were titled *Prezza: Pulling No Punches*.

Until the fight took place, Prescott's visit was just another item on Sky News' crowded election diary. However, along with other news organisations, we had sent a camera and reporter team to Rhyl, firstly because this was a relatively rare chance to see the DPM in action and secondly, in Sky News' case, because Shirley Lewis, our excellent north west bureau chief at the time, had found out that a sizeable protest was planned.

We had no live broadcast facilities on site because coverage of the event was 'a watching brief'. Then Shirley telephoned me directly because I was the political editor to ask what we should do as she had just witnessed Prescott punch someone. We went over what had happened in detail and Shirley gave me an account, which subsequently proved to be entirely accurate. She also told me that we would soon have pictures of the incident: still photographs first, followed by moving pictures from several camera angles (she was party to local

negotiations which meant that some news organisations agreed to share their individual material that evening).

I had no hesitation believing Shirley – she was at least as experienced a reporter as I was and we had worked together a number of times. I went on air from our Westminster studio and reported that Prescott had punched a protester in Rhyl and expressed the view that this was a serious matter and potentially a resignation issue for him.

When I came out of the studio, a Labour press officer was already waiting on the phone. He told me that party officials travelling with Prescott confirmed the incident had not happened; that Labour was demanding an immediate retraction and an apology and that I had just ruined my career. I replied that I would wait to see the pictures and continued to report live on what was by now becoming a major story.

Labour's tactics may have had some success elsewhere – wire services were reporting only that Prescott had been involved in an incident outside an election rally. So it was a relief, but not a surprise to me, when the photographs and then the television pictures clearly showed Prescott's fist connecting with another man's face. (Even then, the BBC's main evening news did not lead with the story.) I continued to broadcast and the Labour Party continued to phone. Most interestingly, Lord Falconer – a junior minister but operating as counsel to the campaign – rang to warn me that I was making a grave personal mistake and was laying myself open to legal action by Prescott and the Labour Party.

I was unconvinced by any of this pressure; rightly as it turned out. One of the regular highlights of subsequent *An Evening with Alastair Campbell* stage shows was the former spin doctor telling how he got a phone call earlier that evening from 'JP' asking. 'Ali, I've just punched a bloke, what shall I do?' Campbell's diaries give a slightly muted version of this but the facts stand. At the very time that Labour was officially denying the story and issuing naked threats, Campbell and co. knew exactly what had happened and were consulting their lawyers, Falconer and (according to Campbell) Lord Chancellor Derry Irvine. I do not like to think what the consequences might have been for Craig Evans had no cameras been present.

Labour's response to the incident was to assess public opinion: if the party and Prescott could get away with it, then they would. (In another context, the former prime minister, John Major, once told me that this is the attitude which must be taken by all serious politicians in pursuit of votes.) Blair didn't want a bigger crisis in the middle of his election campaign and he certainly didn't want to lose the shield which Prescott had become for him. At the morning press conference Blair joked and wriggled: 'John is John,' he declared. Nick Robinson of the BBC told the prime minister that he sounded like a mum making excuses for her yobbish son on the steps of a magistrates' court. Immediately after the press conference I was berated for my coverage of the story by both Campbell and David Hill, the man who was to succeed him at number 10. Campbell warned me I was in danger of being 'sanctimonious'.

My job at Sky News was to give a live commentary of political events as they were happening. I had felt able to comment on the Prescott punch because it was a matter of personal conduct rather than party politics, on which I was professionally bound to stay impartial. Personally, I was disgusted by Prescott's behaviour. I hate violence and don't think that politicians should assault members of their electorate and I believed the deputy prime minister had belied his own government's moralising on yob culture and anti-social behaviour. I considered that his own behaviour should, and could in other circumstances, have cost Prescott his job. Some close to Blair thought the same.

However, as I freely and repeatedly acknowledged at the time and have reported since, that was not the verdict of public opinion. Perhaps because Prescott was a well-loved 'character', perhaps because he had at least injected some life into a dull election campaign, opinion polls backed him. Blair claimed subsequently that in his constituency shortly afterwards several people he canvassed expressed regret that he'd never do something like that himself.

It was for Labour to judge whether Prescott made a worthwhile contribution in his remaining six years as deputy prime minister. His record as an administrator was not strong. In 1997 he set his only target on transport: 'I will have failed . . . if in five years time there

are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car.' In fact, by 2007 car journeys had increased by more than 10 per cent. Prescott wanted to match devolution for Scotland and Wales with regional devolution in England, but the plan for elected regional assemblies was abandoned after 78 per cent voted against the idea in the first referendum held in the Northeast. Improvements in Britain's rail services were not a feature of Prescott's tenure.

Then there were the scandals. The transport secretary using a car for a journey of a couple of hundred yards at the 1999 Labour conference. He blamed security and his wife Pauline's desire to protect her hairdo. The 'V signs' he variously flicked in the Commons chamber and on the doorstep of Number 10. He became even more of a target of ridicule in his final years because of a number of newspaper exposés. The *Daily Mirror* revealed that the deputy prime minister had had an affair with his diary secretary, Tracey Temple. There were stories too about the hospitality Prescott had received from an American billionaire interested in turning the Millennium Dome into a supercasino. Prescott had enjoyed a stay at Philip Anschutz's ranch and had been presented with a cowboy suit. Perhaps most damaging of all were the photographs published in the *Mail on Sunday* of him playing croquet with his staff on a Thursday afternoon at Dorneywood, his official country residence. Croquet, with its associations of privileged gentility, did not fit with either the public's view of him or Prescott's own self-image.

Prescott had little alternative but to go with Blair. He acknowledged this in his speech to the 2006 Labour conference in which he admitted to delegates: 'I know that in the last year I let myself down. I let you down. I just want to say sorry.' But he continued in office, albeit shorn of departmental responsibilities, until June 2007. In one of his most effective appointments, David Cameron had asked William Hague to shadow Prescott in the Commons chamber, pitting Parliament's most able debater against Prescott who often had difficulty getting his words out correctly. This trait was in evidence in his final appearance at the dispatch box on 20 June, when he mangled Hague's compliment that he was 'a cross between Ernie

Bevan and Demosthenes' into a reference to 'Dame Osthenes'. Hague picked this up, predicting that the dame would be 'very flattered that the deputy prime minister has singled her out for praise today'. But the Conservatives mainly satisfied themselves at this farewell performance with gentle teasing about the £2.5-million cost of Prescott's non-department. He retorted with boasts about the regeneration of Britain's cities over the ten years and digs at the Tories over the poll tax and Michael Heseltine visiting Liverpool 'with a bus load of bankers'.

For me, as a working journalist, the consequences of the Prescott punch were twofold: bad mouthing and a boycott by the deputy prime minister. Prescott has claimed publicly – though usually in interviews for non-national media outlets and audiences – that what happened in Rhyl was 'set up by Sky'. This is untrue and libellous. No evidence has ever been produced by Prescott; we have simply decided that the best course is to ignore his blustering.

Prescott avoided speaking to me on principle whenever he could since that day and became less available to Sky News, although we continued to treat him like any other politician. Not having access to the deputy prime minister was less trouble to me as a television political editor than might have been thought. In fact, Prescott spoke to me on three occasions after May 2001. Once, during the firefighters strike I went to conduct a news interview since there was no other Sky News reporter available. Prescott disappeared into another room as soon as he had completed the interviews with our rival news channels. I heard a lot of shouting through the door and then, after perhaps half an hour's delay, we conducted our business. He spoke to me twice more on the phone, to deny things which I wasn't saying after Labour officials reported back an inaccurate and inflammatory version of a report, or, in one case, a question which I had asked at an off-the-record lobby briefing.

I regretted none of the commentary I had given on the deputy prime minister. My words never departed from the impartial and balanced stance which we must observe under British law. I had, however, previously got on well with both Prescott and his wife and missed his numerous amusing contributions to our programmes:

Prescott swearing loudly and repeatedly during a taped interview because he was being put off by 'that fucking taff speaking fucking taff' – Labour spokesman Denzil Davies giving an interview in Welsh nearby. Prescott leaning forward into the camera and saying 'sorry viewers' when I told him it was impossible to start a live interview again. Prescott telling me on air 'the prime minister is in Number 10 drawing up his list', when Alastair Campbell had just lied to me that he was at Chequers and that no reshuffle was imminent. As he and Blair stepped down from government, we asked Prescott to give us his reaction to the new prime minister: he declined colourfully, expressing his hatred for me.

If a further lesson was needed, the Prescott incident was it. New Labour and its media handlers acted out of expediency, not out of their obligation to tell the truth. Bullying was, I suppose, one of their habitual tactics – although it was largely ineffective, but it made a lot of enemies, including senior correspondents from the institutions whose proprietors Blair was courting. Most news organisations resisted pressure. But one, the BBC, seemed almost deliberately to make itself susceptible to it. Campbell appointed two ex-BBC men in a row as his deputy – among their talents, perhaps most prized was that they knew which BBC managers and producers to court or threaten. Regrettable though it may have been, neither the BBC nor the Labour Party emerged with much credit when an official Corporation edict banned reference to Mandelson's sexuality, even after Matthew Parris had mentioned it during a BBC *Newsnight* discussion of Ron Davies' 'moment of madness' on Clapham Common.

Withholding access to interviews is a more effective sanction but fortunately it is also transparent. A boycott soon becomes obvious. On one early occasion in December 1998, Alastair Campbell excluded Sky News from interviews with Peter Mandelson when he left the cabinet for the first time. This was because I had reported on air that I had been told to 'fuck off' when I asked whether the prime minister would do an interview on camera to repeat the expression of full confidence in Mandelson that Campbell had just informed us of in his briefing. It was quite usual for journalists to take up

individual enquiries with officials as soon as a briefing proper had ended. This was what I had done. Campbell believed that we were having a private chat and that I was wrong to report it. I felt that our conversation could hardly have been off the record since there were still about half a dozen colleagues with in easy earshot and Campbell had made no secret of what he was saying. I had to explain to my boss, Nick Pollard, why we did not have any Mandelson footage. Kindly and honourably supporting a rival under pressure, the BBC let us have access to their interview. Only after a lengthy phone conversation later that evening did Campbell re-instate my access. Both of us knew and liked Peter Mandelson, and we were well acquainted with each other if not quite friends. It had been a fraught day on the brink of Christmas.

Post 2001: Nemesis

Is it becoming worse? Again, I would say, yes. In my ten years, I've noticed all these elements evolve with ever greater momentum.

Tony Blair, speech on Public Life, Reuters, 12 June 2007

As the second term began, there was a general recognition that the relationship between the media and the government was in a dire state. Campbell was already talking privately to Blair, as well as some journalists (including myself), about wanting to leave his post. Some desultory feelers had even been put out around Westminster in search of a possible replacement. But nobody really believed that Campbell would go and there was little surprise when Blair managed to prevail upon him to stay – although he was less successful with Anji Hunter, an even longer-standing member of the old firm, who quit in late 2001.

Far from stepping down, Alastair Campbell was now more powerful than ever and he and Blair introduced reforms in the way they interacted with the media. As Blair pointed out in his Reuters speech, these included two innovations which improved open government: monthly news conferences by the prime minister and twice-yearly

appearances by him in front of the Liaison Committee of senior backbench MPs who chaired the departmental select committees. However, the media greeted these initiatives with less enthusiasm than they perhaps deserved because they were part of a concerted effort to bypass political journalists and instead appeal to the public directly. Campbell himself stepped back from giving briefings, while remaining director of government strategy and communications. Instead, he appointed two civil servants as the prime minister's official spokesmen: Godric Smith, a veteran of the Number 10 Press Office; and Tom Kelly, an ex-journalist who had been chief spokesman for the Northern Ireland Office. As was to become apparent during the second internal New Labour crisis of 'Cheriegate', the crucial attraction of these new appointments for Campbell was 'deniability'. Unlike Campbell, both Kelly and Smith could credibly tell journalists that they could not answer their questions because they were out of the loop.

In case anybody missed the message that political journalists were being sidelined, Campbell symbolically moved the morning briefing, which Number 10 hosted, out of Downing Street – and indeed out of Whitehall altogether. Giving the excuse that there were no government premises large enough to host the meetings, Number 10 rented space in the Foreign Press Association off Pall Mall and invited UK-based foreign journalists to attend the briefings as well. An intention of this change was to inconvenience political correspondents who mainly operated from the press gallery in Parliament by adding at least twenty minutes travel time to and from the briefings. However, the lobby journalists refused to be discouraged.

Campbell seemed to have a fondness for the FPA, a former home of Gladstone in Nash's Carlton House Terrace. In January 2004 he chose it as the location for his own news conference following publication of the Hutton Report. Standing at the foot of the ornate staircase, he accused BBC executives, including Chairman Gavyn Davies and the director general, Greg Dyke, of lying, while claiming that he himself had always told the truth. Davies and Dyke resigned shortly afterwards.

Another attempt by Campbell to transform the briefings also

failed. He announced that in future they would often be given by ministers rather than officials. However, this strategy blew up in its very first week of implementation when David Blunkett proved understandably reluctant to answer questions outside his departmental brief and when, during a joint briefing, Chief of Defence Staff Admiral Boyce contradicted Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon on Britain's readiness for war. In a rare gesture of cross-media solidarity, television news outlets also declined to broadcast anything other than the monthly news conferences, so Campbell was unable to divide and rule.

Although his hostility towards the media and contempt for his former trade of journalism were matters of record, Campbell would always deny that he had any malicious intent towards the domestic media in making these changes. So it is significant that the Gordon Brown government immediately made reversing most of them a central feature of its 'restoration of trust' agenda following the prime ministerial handover. The chief whip moved back into Number 12 Downing Street, displacing the news war room. A career civil servant, Michael Ellam, was installed as the senior media official in Downing Street and the morning lobby briefings were moved back close to Parliament and Downing Street in an annex of the Treasury on Horse Guards Parade. Brown pledged to continue with Liaison Committee appearances, but reflecting different abilities, 'monthly' prime ministerial news conferences were initially cut back to 'regular' engagements. In this, Brown could claim to have taken a lead from Blair, who failed to hold a news conference during May and June 2007, his last two months in office. Although once he had bedded in, Brown's briefing became at least as frequent as Blair's.

The 'Cheriegate' affair of late 2002 cruelly exposed the weaknesses in Campbell's new official-led briefing system. The prime minister's wife had bought two flats in Bristol, the city where her eldest son, Euan, was going to university. There were allegations that she was helped in the transactions by Peter Foster, a well-known fraudster from Australia who had been imprisoned on two continents. Foster had become the boyfriend of Carole Caplin, Mrs Blair's personal

trainer and friend. Godric Smith, the prime minister's widely liked and trusted official spokesman, denied on the record that Foster had been involved. Emails between Foster and Cherie, subsequently obtained by the *Daily Mail*, proved that he had been. In the British media, the furore even overshadowed the European Council in Copenhagen where Tony Blair was agreeing to admit twelve, mainly, Eastern European nations into the Union. Alastair Campbell and Fiona Millar – then serving as Cherie's aide – eventually prevailed on Mrs Blair to make a tearful apology live to the television cameras in which she declared, 'I am not superwoman,' and talked about the pressures of her first child leaving home.

Few blamed Smith. He had simply relayed what he had been told by Campbell, while Campbell claimed he had been misled by Mrs Blair. But this crisis further damaged relationships within Downing Street. Fiona Millar and Alastair Campbell had both warned against Cherie's relationship with Carole, largely because they feared Caplin might someday publish her account of it. As the crisis unfolded, they didn't bother to hide their opinion from journalists. Fiona's fiercely held views on education had also divided her from her employer. As a couple, Millar and Campbell were outspokenly opposed to any sort of selection in education. Friends were dropped if they chose to educate their children privately. The couple even disagreed with the Blairs use of the London Oratory for their children. The tangential association of this crisis with Euan's higher education raised these hackles all over again. Fiona Millar left her job soon afterwards and increased her pressure on Campbell to resign as well. She continued in her roles as governor of a number of state schools and as a campaigner on education. In January 2006 she organised a rally at Westminster against Blair's city academy proposals, which was attended by both Campbell and former party leader Neil Kinnock.

Godric Smith accepted he was compromised, through no fault of his own. He came to the decision to step down as PMOS. After a period of drift, he was appointed director of communications at the Olympic Delivery Authority. Tom Kelly remained Blair's sole official spokesman to the end. However, Blair left him in a similar predicament to Smith when in 2007 Kelly insisted to the lobby that, 'as far as I

know', the prime minister had not been re-interviewed by the Yates inquiry into cash for peerages. It eventually transpired that the prime minister had been re-interviewed a week or so previously, but the explanation that Kelly had not been told was accepted. There was no further explanation as to why the prime minister had allowed his spokesman to continue inadvertently misleading the media and public. In November 2007, Tom Kelly took up a post outside the civil service as director of communications for the British Airports Authority. Alastair Campbell published his diaries on 9 July 2007, just days after Blair left office. During his time with Blair, Campbell openly admitted that he was writing diaries for publication. To me and others he jokingly referred to them as 'his pension fund' and on more than one occasion when asked to do something by a colleague from the prime minister down, he would reply: 'Fuck off, I'm writing my diary.' Historians, journalists and other outside commentators – including me – have always written books about British politics, while memoirs by politicians are a staple of the higher-quality publishing trade. However, the publication of diaries by an insider such as Campbell, so soon after the events described, was a flagrant breach of precedent in Britain – and it was a process in which Blair acquiesced.

Campbell's diary-writing had consequences for the Blair administration. Firstly, it emboldened others to 'kiss and tell' and in practice made it impossible for cabinet secretaries to force others to abide by embargoes. By their own admission, neither the press officer, Lance Price, nor the British ambassador to Washington, Sir Christopher Meyer, would have gone ahead with their instant memoirs had 'Alastair' not been intending to do it. Blair's chief of staff, the former diplomat Jonathan Powell, publicly deprecated 'kiss and tell' books such as Campbell's, yet he published his own account of the Northern Ireland negotiations which passed on gossip and shattered the thirty-year rule on the publication of official papers. By contrast, after his retirement from government, the senior diplomat Sir Jeremy Greenstock wrote a book about the Iraq invasion drawing on his involvement at the United Nations, Whitehall and Iraq but bowed to official pressure and stopped its publication.

There is a powerful argument that disclosure to the general public

is a good thing. However, a number of Downing Street insiders and others who had dealings with the administration told me that they were inhibited in their interactions and did not trust colleagues because they knew that their private conversations would soon be published.

The second consequence of the Campbell's diaries culture is that the Blair administration, more than any other, has been perceived in terms of its personalities rather than its politics *and* its personalities. Powell and Blair both read advance proofs of Campbell's book. Afterwards Blair commented dryly that he was surprised that 'At least it has two heroes, Ali and me.'

Finally, the publication of Campbell's diaries lays him and the Blairs open to charges of hypocrisy. Tony and Cherie Blair resorted to legal means and extreme vilification to avoid disclosures of matters which they considered private by those with whom they came into contact. For example, their first nanny faced an injunction, and all subsequent ones had to agree to privacy clauses in their contracts. Campbell himself was equally harsh with people whom he considered potential or actual 'blabbers'. He and Fiona even fell out with Mrs Blair because of what they considered to be her unwise friendship with Carole Caplin. When Campbell's diaries appeared Ms Caplin had some justification in pointing out that, as it turned out, it was he not she who had blabbed.

The year of the Iraq invasion, 2003, was the pivot for the Blair administration. Some could never forgive the decision to take military action in the absence of direct provocation. But the manner in which Downing Street made the case for war also contributed significantly to the damage done to Blair's government as it stood accused of over-enthusiastic and ultimately untrustworthy spin. These failings were in turn exacerbated by the bad blood which had already accumulated between the media and the government and within New Labour itself because of Campbell's power. When I first heard that Dr David Kelly's body had been found, I knew Campbell would have to go. His resignation on 29 August 2003, the day after Blair gave evidence to the Hutton Inquiry, was inevitable and an outcome he had himself long foretold.

For his remaining four years in power, Blair continued with the

media relations structure which Campbell had left in place: Tom Kelly now as the lone official spokesman, while a party political director of communications, David Hill, remained in the background but in charge. Hill suited the behind-the-scenes role better than the man who designed it ever had. After a typically wild and long-haired sixties studenthood, Hill was taken on as an assistant to the Birmingham MP Roy Hattersley. His parents were worthies in the local constituency Labour Party. The long-suffering Hill stayed with Roy through the turbulent seventies and eighties. And so without moving he became the chief aide to the deputy Labour leader.

Kinnock and Hattersley worked closely together, perhaps because Hattersley was never a credible rival to the leader, and Hill continued to play a steadying role behind the scenes. In opposition, he worked as a press spokesman for the Labour Party under John Smith and Tony Blair. This continued into government. It was Hill who, in November 1997, took the decision to go public with the correspondence relating to Bernie Ecclestone's controversial million-pound donation to the party. This precipitated the biggest test so far for Blair's young government, but Hill was resolutely straightforward. When he phoned to alert me of the key unscheduled briefing, I lazily suggested that it would probably be boring and I might not go. I am very grateful that he immediately told me it wouldn't be and urged me to be there. Hill worked on the 2001 election campaign but he also spent some years working in the private sector for one of the Tory Lord (Tim) Bell's PR companies.

Unlike Campbell, David Hill had no issues either with ego or honesty. His particular skill was as a crisis manager, especially in shutting stories down. As I suggested to him over the summer of 2003 while negotiations were going on to fill Campbell's position, the Blair government undoubtedly needed him more than he needed them – even if his appointment was unlikely to be a boon for journalists. So it turned out. For Tony Blair's last four years in office, what had once been the most celebrated and 'proactive' media management operation in modern politics became one of the most defensive. Blair continued to lunch with editors and dine with proprietors but 'don't say anything off the record that you wouldn't say on the record' became the governing code. David Hill's partner, Hilary Coffman, another long-term party servant, dealt almost exclusively with gossip eruptions relating to the private lives of the Blair family, while the dour civil servant Tom Kelly briefed cautiously, costively and with deniability.

Meanwhile, having driven hostility in relations between the government and the media to a new low level before resigning, Campbell continued afterwards to be a private adviser to Blair. He helped to broker the *rapprochement* with Brown which led to them fighting the 2005 election as a co-presidency, even sharing ice-cream cones together. Campbell carried on enjoying a friendship with Blair beyond his retirement as prime minister, but many of those who stayed loyal to Blair were shocked and alienated by the speed with which Campbell cashed in through the publication of his diaries within a couple of weeks of Blair stepping down.

For most of the ten years, Tony Blair affected to rise above day-to-day conflict with the media. Even when the row over Andrew Gilligan's *Today* broadcast on Iraq was at its hottest, important decisions were delegated to Campbell. It was he, not Blair, who decided 'to go to war with the BBC', to try 'to fuck Gilligan', and who made intemperate appearances before a Commons Select Committee and on *Channel 4 News*. For all Campbell's feints towards leaving, it was Tony Blair who in the end took the decision that it was time to dispense with his services as director of communications. For these reasons, the Reuters speech and its attack on the 'feral media' came as a surprise – not least because the prime minister at last exhibited a thin skin which he had kept well covered during his years in power.

There may indeed have been things which needed to be said in the Reuters speech; Tony Blair certainly seems to have found it cathartic. But his argument was half-baked in that it addressed only one side of the problem. The Blair administration had not just been at fault for courting the media; over the decade it had also taught many journalists tricks when it came to misrepresenting, dissembling, stonewalling, cultivating and bullying.