

Taming the feral beasts of the media requires greater transparency from government, but can Downing Street ever be honest?

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It is a fact that all modern governments operate within the unflinching gaze of the media, and that politicians often have more adversarial than friendly relationships with journalists. [Charlie Beckett](#) writes that while the media should strive to be more accountable to the public, the rise of more open systems of information like the internet puts a much greater onus on government to be more honest and transparent with the public.

The message from Number 10: Can Downing Street ever be honest?

Sometimes it's good to look back a little, to see forward. So it was clever to bring together three former Number 10 communications chiefs with the BBC's political editor Nick Robinson to discuss how best for Downing Street to deal with the media. An excellent [Institute For Government seminar](#) heard from three familiar and thoughtful guardians of Governmental narrative-making: Tom Kelly, Howell James and Jonathan Powell.

It is clear there is still a problem between the heart of government and the political journalists. There also remains a huge deficit of trust and understanding between the people and the political classes. What can we learn from the past for the present and future?

In the first instance there is a very specific contemporary problem with the current government. David Cameron's media operation is being re-shaped right now with [new staff](#) and rejigged procedures. Both Benedict Brogan of the Telegraph and Nick Robinson were agreed that the current Number 10 briefing system is unsatisfactory – I think the word 'mess' was used. The civil servants doing the briefing don't appear to have the confidence of the political team in Downing Street. They are 'not in the room' for the political conversations and so only know half the story.

This was the kind of practical, technical issue that all the speakers felt mattered. Could it be resolved by more radical reform such as televising the lobby, in the same way that White House briefings are all on camera?

Howell James, who has spoken for four governments of different colours felt that televising the Lobby would turn Number 10 spokespeople into a minor celebrities and detract from the elected PM and other ministers. He thought Blair's move to monthly press conferences was correct, but that parliamentary democracy is not a presidency and it should not go further. He accepted that one argument in favour of televising the lobby is that the public would see the media's behaviour, red in tooth and claw, and so perhaps encourage the journalists to be a little more civilised.

Jonathan Powell looked after Number 10 for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He said politicians often need to find a way past or around the media on some issues where the press is blocking open debate. He accepted that it's not all the journalists' fault and that New Labour did allow spin to become the message.

But Powell accused the media of a kind of attention deficit disorder that needs the narrative to change every week. This is partly born out of competition between papers and leads to a 'shock and awe' style of coverage. This is made worse by the merger of comment and reporting, he said.

Unvarnished Sources

Powell – like the other speakers – hoped that the Internet might be a solution because it gave accountability to the media (as well as politicians) and allows the public to get their information more directly from unvarnished sources.

Looking back into history the trio of former communications chiefs all seemed to agree that the Prime Minister who got the worst press was Gordon Brown. Even those who served with him agreed that he also probably deserved it.

Howell James said his former political master John Major suffered from relentlessly critical coverage but that reflected the true state of his government as it staggered from one close vote to another. Gordon Brown, he argued, had a better hand, but dealt it badly.

Pity Is Dangerous

Tom Kelly defined Brown's disaster well. He said that all leaders expect to be under attack from the media, but 'pity is where it gets dangerous' for a politician. Brown descended from criticism, then to ridicule, and finally to pity.

As Powell made clear, the problem was Brown's, not the media. He was obsessed by the detail of coverage, often getting each edition of the London Evening Standard brought in for him to read. Mrs Thatcher, by contrast, only ever read newspapers if she had to. Tony Blair often got bad coverage but had the ability to slough it off.

So what are the lessons for this government? As Tom Kelly pointed out, now was always going to be the interesting moment from a communications point of view. This is the period after the 'honeymoon' when the reality of the cuts meets the rhetoric of deficit reduction.

No More Split And Spin?

Nick Robinson agreed with [my thesis, first expressed back in May](#), that in its first phase, this government benefited from the suspension system provided by the novel coalition arrangement. As Nick pointed out, this meant that it was now impossible to do 'split' stories.

Tom Kelly agreed that coalition gives permission for a government to have a debate about issues. But as he said, at some point they do have to come to a decision.

He said that the current regime in Number 10 is learning the hard way that allowing departments to do their own thing is fine, but everything 'comes through the front and back door of Number 10'. In the end, Downing Street has to 'grip it hard' One must always deal with today and tomorrow but also a year or six years down the track. Take the NHS. Yes, make the case for 'reform' but make sure you don't get to the point in a few years time of having to explain away 'old ladies lying in corridors on hospital trolleys,' he warned.

Taming The Feral Beasts

Of all the battle-scarred veterans on stage, Jonathan Powell was the most optimistic, despite being the author of a literally [Machiavellian analysis](#) of contemporary politics. He said he still hoped there was a chance of a new settlement between the 'feral beasts' of the media and politicians.

For example, if the politicians agreed to stop pre-releasing announcements and speeches, perhaps the journalists would agree to report them fairly?

Tom Kelly was less hopeful. The reality, he said, is that government is never fully in control. The best you can hope for is to look like you are in control. The problem comes when you sound more certain about something than you reasonably can be. Ideally, you could allow for 'reasonable doubt' but the media interpret that as 'you don't know what you are doing'. One current example is the policy towards the civil war in Libya. There's no easy solution, but can you tell the public that without looking weak and indecisive?

Total Honesty

Politics is the art of the possible. So is journalism. Both are limited by the speed of events and the inconsistency of reality. The public expects total honesty, but it also wants simple, cheap solutions. So perhaps we shouldn't raise expectations too high.

But I think we should still demand greater transparency and the right to be treated like adults. This is partly about the new technologies that allow government to put more information out there so we can judge for ourselves. But it is also about democracy. Inevitably, our three wise men saw their job as protecting and promoting their governments. However, the ultimate task of government as a whole must surely be to take the people with them. You can't inform all the people all the time, but we can certainly do a better than has been the case for the last decade.

You can listen to a [podcast of this event here](#).

[Read Benedict Brogan's blog about the event](#).