

Call off the hounds: the virulent strain of anti-politics in British journalism is becoming a serious problem

William Brett argues that Chloe Smith's Newsnight disaster is indicative of a buoyant trend of anti-politics in the British media that is becoming increasingly distasteful and misunderstands the 'necessary' hypocrisy in our democratic system.



Once it was foxhunting, now it's minister-hunting. Britain seems to have embraced a new national pastime, which is to unleash a rabid Jeremy Paxman on to a (relatively) innocent government minister and then to revel collectively in the ensuing carnage. Yesterday morning a good portion of the Westminster elite has been whooping over the carcass of Chloe Smith, junior Treasury minister, their bloodlust sated after her mauling on Newsnight this week.

I cannot be the only one to shudder. Perhaps my distaste for this sport is heightened by the youth of the latest victim (Smith turned 30 this year); or perhaps it was her look of horror and shame as Paxo exclaimed: "Is this some sort of *joke*?" Perhaps I'm just being sentimental.

I think not. British journalism is carrying an increasingly virulent strain of anti-politics, and it is becoming a serious problem. It is hard to know which came first – the public's spiralling distrust of the political class or the news media's obsession with destroying as many of its members as possible. But clearly these two phenomena are feeding off each other. [Studies show](#) that media negativity about politics and politicians has been on the rise in developed democracies for some time. This tendency helps to provoke common misconceptions about politicians, such as the [false notion](#) that MPs have become increasingly subservient to their leaders and less likely to rebel against the party line. Meanwhile overall levels of trust in politics have been [steadily declining](#), and the trend is showing no signs of abating.

Do we really need to encourage this vicious circle? Granted, no one wants to see a supine media doing the bidding of an unaccountable oligarchy, but surely it is possible to travel too far in the opposite direction. This is [not a new concern](#), and the possible prescriptions (which mainly centre on one form of media regulation or another) are well rehearsed. But the factor which would carry the most weight is if enough of the "elites" who command airtime – journalists and academics as well as politicians – make the case for a calmer, more reflective media environment. Tony Blair [had a stab at this](#) before leaving office, but the case needs more advocates.

Perhaps these potential advocates could draw on the lessons of David Runciman's *Political Hypocrisy*, in which he eloquently points out some of the tensions inherent in a functioning democracy. "Any politics," he says, "founded on the idea of equality will produce politicians who have to be of a type with the people they rule, and yet recognisably different, given the fact that they also have to rule them. All political leaders in these circumstances will need to put on the appropriate mask that allows them to sustain this tricky double act." Politicians, in other words, are required to dissemble in order to keep the system going. If Chloe Smith had walked on to the set of Newsnight and started spouting her privately held opinions on the fuel tax U-turn – and if other politicians had followed suit – then the "entire charade", in Runciman's words, of liberal democracy would quickly crumble. If we value democracy, we should come to an understanding about the sorts of hypocrisy necessary to sustain it.

And if more of us were aware of these tensions at the heart of democratic politics, perhaps we could avoid repeating the ugly spectacle which confronted us on Tuesday night.

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About the author

William Brett is a PhD candidate at UCL. His research examines the discourse of the modern British constitutional reform movement since the founding of Charter 88. William is also working as a research assistant at the Centre for Financial Analysis & Policy to examine the future of populism in Europe and North America.

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