



Mandelson Returns: Sick joke or master-stroke?

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 The [return](#) of one of New Labour's seminal architects to the heart of Gordon Brown's government reminds us that satire is now, officially, dead. But is this an act of desperation or genius?

But perhaps t  he key [appointment](#) here is not Peter Mandelson, but Forsyth. Who? Indeed. [Justin Forsyth](#) is a former head of policy at Oxfam who joined this government as an advisor at Number 10 to Prime Minister Blair. He played a key role in that administration's dramatic commitments to debt relief, increased aid spending and global initiatives on disease and poverty. He was one of the few special advisors to have no qualms about continuing under the new Prime Minister. Now he has been appointed as Downing Street press and media advisor.

I have to declare that I have known Justin for nearly 20 years. He is totally honest and very passionate about Development. This is in stark contrast to the reportedly 'brusque' tactics of the man he replaces. [Damian McBride](#) is now taking a more backseat role, which may relieve both journalists and Labour MPs who have suffered at his hands.

But unless Justin has been on a crash course recently, he doesn't know much about the media. This may be a good thing. His idea of 'spinning' in the past was always to listen and then argue his case with intelligence, loyalty and feeling. He annoyed [purists](#) at Oxfam because he was a realist and compromised to get things done. Whether all that qualifies him to be Gordon's mouthpiece is a moot point, but it is certainly winning some respect from unlikely quarters.

This is what Conservative journalist Matthew D'Ancona [writes](#):

"Forsyth, a man with a background in international development, is one of the cleverest people in Number Ten and also one of the most courteous. I travelled with him on the Brown trip to Camp David and the UN last year as he was busy with the Darfur resolution, and he was the very model of what a Downing Street official should be. It was striking, even then, that the PM trusted him go to the back of the plane to brief the hacks on the deal that was being brokered in New York and – by common consent – Forsyth lived up to that trust by his performance. He would drain much of the poison from the Government's press operation and give it gravitas and charm."

With Nick Brown expected as Chief Whip Gordon does at least have loyalists in key places. They will probably do any dirty work that is required. One has to remember that Mandelson was once seen as a Brownite, too. He now appears outside Downing Street to face the TV cameras wearing a red woolly tank-top and utters reassuring platitudes with the world-weary tones of someone who has seen it all and survived. Mandelson's civil servants always praised his ability to run a department. Some battle-hardened basic competence may be just what this government needs.

A year ago Gordon was riding high. Then his reputation came crashing down faster than London house prices. And yet amidst the financial storms his tattered sails flutter onwards. After a grim but solid conference he is now seen as through the worst of the political weather.

As his poll ratings nudge upwards there is a sense of rising panic amongst Conservative ranks. Six months ago Tories told me that they hoped Brown would survive. His presence in Number 10 was their biggest vote-winner. Now they are not so sure.

The act of bringing Mandelson back into the fold is not an obvious stroke of political genius. It will remind voters of why they don't like New Labour. Conservatives and Old Labourites will shriek with [derision](#). But it is the act of a political fighter who realises that he needs short-term tactical muscle and nous. Mandelson has a lot of both.

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