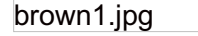


Et tu Nick? Do journalists create coups?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/07/29/et-tu-nick-do-journalists-create-coups/

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 Gordon Brown has now finally been abandoned by his last commentariat supporter, [Jackie Ashley](#). She has done it with admirable candour:

"Only one thing is clear. It's over for Gordon. His family aside, I may be the last person in the country to admire and like him. However much mockery it calls down – deep breath – this is a decent, uncorrupt, highly intelligent and serious man with good values, inspired by public service. I'd hoped he also had enough of an instinct for leadership to make him a successful prime minister. I was wrong."

The Queen of New Labour [Polly Toynbee](#) had already sold all her shares in the man she had previously hailed and went on [Newsnight](#) again to plunge the knife in deeper. And yet until yesterday barely a single Labour politician of any note had actually gone on the record to criticise their leader. So was the [talk of a coup](#) all got up by the political hacks?

The Westminster lobby stands [accused](#) of a kind of political attention deficit syndrome. When they get bored they sniff blood and then do not rest until they have slaughtered the wounded Wildebeest.

The correspondents stand in front on Number 10 and refer to 'sources', they claim 'it's believed', they talk of 'men in grey suits' and 'splits within cabinet'. All of it off the record.

I spoke to the BBC's political editor [Nick Robinson](#) about this. Nick is a real politico who was once a student activist, and so he's steeped in the insider trading culture of British party politics. His evident enthusiasm about every move in the political chess game and his attention to each nuance makes him a very modern lobby hack. But he's worried about what he calls a '[yawning gap](#)'.



Nick tells me that he worries that his viewers are confused. How does he convince the public that he is telling the truth when he can't quote any politicians directly?

Nick has adopted all sorts of tricks to get around this. In one report he actually filmed himself ringing politicians 'off the record' to show the viewer that he hadn't made it all up. He has an excellent [blog](#) where he gives more context and shows the audience the inside workings.

There are no rules for this, of course. The doyenne of political reporters, [Elinor Goodman](#) always insisted on finding two sources for any story. I once had the audacity as her producer to ask how many sources she had for a particularly stunning government-wrecking exclusive. "Oh, only one" she replied in that way that made it clear that I was being very presumptuous to even inquire, "but it's someone I trust so we shall go with it".



And this is the point. Trust is earned. Political journalism is a series of trades. Information is offered on condition. Politicians will speak if they can be protected. The alternative is silence. This is what we enjoyed in the halcyon days before the 1960s. The result was that the public were always the last to know about anything. In a 24/7 media world the public wants to know what is happening, even if it's off the record. If the information turns out to be true then that journalist or media organisation will be taken on trust.

Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that media prophecies are self-fulfilling. There is no doubt that a

'group-think' mentality exaggerates trends. How else could Gordon Brown have gone from being a world-leader with real gravitas, a 'moral compass' and huge intelligence to being a dead loss all in 12 months?

As Ashley admitted, she had gone over-board on Brown in the first place, along with most of her colleagues. Now they may well be swinging too far the other way.

New media bloggers and websites have made this process more accountable. They critique the mainstream journalists and keep an eye on the politician's manouvering. But they, too, are subject to the same (im)moral economy that exchanges stories for discretion. The [Pol Blogs](#) may be less careerist (because generally they don't make money!) but they are more subject to personal prejudice and rely just as much on tip-offs and selective briefings.



So in the end it is up to politicians to come clean and speak more openly. One of the reasons that Brown is in such trouble is that he is leading one of the most opaque administrations since Atlee. His cabinet are too excluded or frightened to speak out. And whenever the Great Leader takes to the airwaves he simply repeats the mantra about "Britain being well-placed to ride out the storm" thanks to his economic leadership. The public feel they are being ignored, at best, and lied to, at worst.

The real information gap is not between the political journalists and the public but between this Government and the Real World.

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