

Rupert, Kelvin and David Davis: The Sun bottles it?

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Why did Rupert Murdoch [appear](#) to change his mind over backing former [Sun editor Kelvin MacKenzie](#) in his attempt to take on [David Davis](#) in the “42 Day” [bye-election](#)? [Here](#)’s an article I wrote for [The Guardian](#) which seeks an answer to this puzzle which may (or may not) represent the changing politics of human rights in the UK.:

It was going to be a classic Sun stunt. Every so often someone from the paper will dress up as a chicken or a soldier to make some photogenic point at a political event. Sometimes it is the more underdressed Page 3 girls who get recruited to some ideological crusade. Usually it is to “Back Our Boys” or to “Say Balls To Brussels”. But this time it was going to be “Stop Davis”.

But it now seems that [Kelvin MacKenzie](#) will be keeping his clothes on and won’t even be making the journey up to Hull for the David Davis inspired byelection.

Last week the former Sun editor and columnist seemed to be the only person apart from David Davis who wants to fight the bizarre contest in Haltemprice and Howden.

Not only that but the Sun itself was reporting [last week](#) that MacKenzie “was approached by the paper’s proprietor Rupert Murdoch and current editor Rebekah Wade who suggested he step up to the challenge if Labour did not field a candidate”. Murdoch’s backing is something that more regular politicians such as Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have found invaluable.

But since then Kelvin MacKenzie has gone on to insult Hull (“it’s an absolute shocker”) and the Sun doesn’t seem entirely behind his campaign. What does this odd episode say about what’s going on in Rupert’s mind?

Is this U-turn just because it’s all becoming a little farcical? An artificial political stunt by a renegade politician enlivened by a guest-appearance from a knockabout tabloid veteran?

It’s a tricky one for Rupert. He seems to be edging towards support for David Cameron so perhaps he would be happy to embarrass Davis. But if the Sun and MacKenzie had given this contest any credibility or publicity it will not have pleased Cameron and his team. They want this awkward episode to pass off with the minimum of media attention. Murdoch won’t want to sour relations with what currently looks like the next government.

Rupert Murdoch may be a free marketeer but he is no libertarian. He must approve of the Sun’s support for the 42-day detention powers. But it may be that he doesn’t not want to back a losing cause.

Davis will romp home in Hull. The 42-day legislation may well end up mired in a dispute between the Commons and Lords. There does seem to be a rising chorus of support from grassroots Conservatives for Davis and his stand in favour of liberty. (That stand may not extend to human rights bills and so on, but put that aside for a moment). So MacKenzie was not likely to repeat the success of another journalist, [Martin Bell](#), in his byelection triumph in Tatton.

It may be that Murdoch’s political antennae have detected a change in the atmosphere. I do not doubt that News International will continue to campaign for authoritarian anti-terror legislation. The Sun will probably remain sympathetic to ID cards and CCTV as well. But it is possible that Murdoch does not want to be seen to be campaigning against “liberty”.

I think MacKenzie is someone – like [Richard Littlejohn](#) – who genuinely represents a big section of popular opinion. Guardian readers might find their views unpalatable but the Sun has been brilliant at articulating and promoting that ideology. It’s a section of the population that puts the right to life of those who are victims of terrorism above the

liberties of the rest of us.

This time, though, I think that MacKenzie may have misread the public's mood and his proprietor's political tactics. I am sure a majority of voters are supportive of tough laws on terror. I doubt that Murdoch lies awake at night worrying about civil liberties. But I have a hunch that he may be regretting any encouragement he gave to MacKenzie to stand.

For the full article with Guardian reader comments go

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