
From The Times

May 16, 2009

Only the chancers are shielded by secrecy

Public scrutiny is part of the deal for MPs. It illuminates the best, exposes the worst and is the only way out of this mess

Ken Macdonald

Chandeliers, moats and tennis courts. Whoever imagined that it would come to this? Parliament is at serious risk of inflicting damage upon itself that could take a generation or more to repair.

For the House of Commons Commission, chaired by the Speaker, Michael Martin, to have responded to the very first headlines last week by reaching at once for the police only signalled a vertiginous gulf between Parliament and country. The idea that the problem we faced was the theft of a disk, and not the degrading information it contained, could hardly have been held by a democratic body that respected its own electorate.

The public knew better. They understood that a scandal exposed by free speech on the front page of a newspaper could not be undone by attacking the human right that brought it out into the daylight. No serious observer could have expected a different reaction. It is painfully obvious that instead of seeing open comment as the crime here, the public would always find the parliamentary roll-call of embarrassment and shame as the best possible reason to protect free expression at all costs. They were not impressed by the sight of the Speaker lashing out at a gleeful messenger.

It is equally unsurprising that many people have reacted to particular horror stories by calling for police investigations into the claims made by some MPs. But the Damian Green case was just the most recent example to remind us that police and Parliament rarely mix fruitfully. And as Robert Wardle, the former Director of the Serious Fraud Office, observed in The Times yesterday, proving positive dishonesty in such circumstances is mind-numbingly difficult.

Of course it is always possible that a sufficiently egregious case might arise to make court action unavoidable. But a series of failed criminal prosecutions would hardly take us to a better place than we reluctantly inhabit today. The sense of cynicism would surely grow.

The challenge instead is to create something useful out of the debris. We might start by building on the strong public instinct for scrutiny. The fact is that daylight improves standards in public life. It encourages probity and it exposes wrongdoing. It plays to our best strengths and it raises up those men and women in the parliamentary majority who have no interest in playing the system, and who sit in Westminster for all the right reasons. There are many hundreds of them, not terribly well paid, but committed and hard-working. These are the people who are best supported by transparency: it is the chancers who are shielded by secrecy.

And this is the real benefit we may find from these ghastly few days. Britain has been addicted to secrets for too long. Suffocating and exhausting, secrecy seems to be carried deep within our governing DNA.

As citizens, we have submitted to surveillance and intrusion on a scale unimaginable in other countries, but it's always us that the cameras are pointing towards. We are told that our phone calls must be logged and our internet use checked. We must expect to be watched and assessed - and all for our own good.

Meanwhile in Whitehall and in Westminster things can be rather different. There, the scrutiny that makes better work of humble citizens is miraculously a distraction from good government. It apparently makes people afraid to speak their minds fearlessly, or to give frank advice. It interferes with the privileges of Parliament and it even undermines our democracy. Of course in public life not everything can be revealed, but in our public institutions discretion constantly becomes the better part of valour.

All this now falls to be challenged. The Freedom of Information Act, regarded with such suspicion in Whitehall, has become an essential tool in securing democratic accountability. If the journalist Heather Brooke had not had this legislation at her disposal in her epic battle to access MPs' claims, the double counting and the moat clearing would be continuing even now. So we need a broad acknowledgement across public life that submission to scrutiny is part of the contract. This may be the first step towards rebuilding trust.

It is a cathartic experience to embark upon openness for the first time. It is also very painful. The danger that good people will be tarnished with an unfair brush is constant and, if things get out of control, there lurk very real dangers of disillusion and alienation. A public mood that becomes merely menacing is toxic ground for democratic politics. Newspapers have a significant responsibility here - though in full cry they probably won't heed it.

Nevertheless the honest majority of men and women in our governing institutions should keep their nerve. Although it took long days for MPs and their leaders to comprehend the enormity of what was happening, there is now a response and individuals are being held to account by their parties. At this stage, this may be much of what the public are asking for. For the future, transparency will be the key to dismantling abuse.

In trying to keep their expenses in the dark, parliamentarians fell dangerously out of kilter with an electorate who now feel thoroughly vindicated by the horrors visited upon them. And although there may be some rough justice going on, MPs should reflect that there could never have been the slightest merit in a system so easily and so fatally threatened by curious eyes.

The public's right to know are words that should be engraved on the heart of every legislator. Life would have been so much easier for them if they had all understood this in their past life. It would have been a great deal easier for the rest of us if their Speaker had understood it as well.

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