

## Tall tales and home truths

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The furious public argument swirling around British political and media institutions for the past year has often seemed a bizarre illustration of what a famous historian once called “The Peculiarities of the English”.

The core of the argument, Britain’s role in the Iraq war of 2003, is clear. But surrounding it is a kaleidoscope of figures – spies, scientists, and journalists; BBC executives, editors, and broadcasters; senior civil servants, politicians, and judges – who appear to be living out the metaphor of Matthew Arnold’s great poem *Dover Beach* [1]: “Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight / Where ignorant armies clash by night”.

At times it has felt as if Britain’s public life is having a nervous breakdown – and that its angry but also perplexed citizens are reduced, “as on a darkling plain”, to being spectators rather than participants in their own drama.

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- [Anthony Barnett](#) on [Lord Hutton \[1\]](#) and the [psychology of power \[1\]](#);
- [Douglas Murray \[1\]](#) on the wrong inquiry

The confusion extends even to how we describe what has been happening. Is it about Tony Blair, the prime minister who ordered Britain to war? David Kelly, the weapons scientist whose

suicide provoked a public inquiry? Lord Hutton, the senior judge whose inquiry report cleared Blair and senior officials of blame? The BBC, whose journalism and management were sharply criticised in the report, leading to the resignations of its leading figures [2]? Or is it about the deformity of Britain's public life itself, and the way those involved in it tell stories to and about each other?

## Keeping in line

The most recent chapter in the argument has focused on the report of the Hutton inquiry [3] into the circumstances surrounding the death of David Kelly. Yet so much has already been said and written about Hutton that, less than two weeks after the report's publication on 28 January, it is becoming hard to remember the flavour of the politics and media debate even immediately before it.

One reason for this instant amnesia is that the prevailing media narrative – not just a combination of the different editorial lines of different broadcasters and newspapers, but the set of parameters and assumptions within which these individual stories are being crafted – has changed so quickly since Lord Hutton delivered his verdict.

Before the report arrived, this framing narrative presented a genuine threat to Tony Blair, a prime minister who has gained a reputation for flexible resilience in the face of impending political doom. As such, it dramatised politics, gave a focus to daily journalism, and created a cliffhanger around which all the observers of the performance could organise their opinions.

In the event, the report's unexpected conclusions (government in clean hands shocker!) were met by a sudden, dramatic change of media script. The report was excoriated as a "whitewash", an unpardonable exoneration [4] of Blair.

The very rapidity of this shift illustrates the depth of suspicion and resentment that government under New Labour has managed to attract. True, those who are still disenchanted about the way in which Blair led Britain to war in Iraq, the report was *never* going to satisfy. The only way it could have come close was if it had been so damning of the government about its treatment of David Kelly that it ended up as a lightning-rod for the wider, rumbling anger about Iraq which still persists.

But the media's precipitous plunge towards a new story also exposed a pervasive attitude within Britain's media, which extends far into other institutional sectors as well: an absolute distrust of what government says or does, whatever the circumstances.

Just as important, this editorial swerve shows the extent to which a media driven by the most intense competition can nonetheless collectively change direction, virtually overnight, without any kind of overt agreement or coordination.

Surprisingly enough, with a few honourable exceptions, this is the dimension of the whole saga that the media itself has done least to illuminate. Even those newspapers which have decided to back the government, including those motivated simply by anti-BBC sentiment, are unable to find a way of addressing how the parameters of 'media space' set the terms in which political exchange is conducted and political decisions evaluated.

This, in a vitally important way, is where New Labour's association with 'spin' really began. The doctrine of strategic communication elaborated by Alastair Campbell [5], Tony Blair's chief media adviser during his rise to power and beyond, did not develop in a vacuum. It arose from confronting a media narrative that had helped associate the Labour party with failure and

incompetence for a generation, and make Europhobia and the desire for low taxes defining political sentiments.

The New Labour [6] government, which came to power in 1997 after eighteen years of Conservative rule, needed the ability to set the news agenda – by integrating policy with communication, and employing short-term tactics as brutal and directive as any of those employed by tabloid newspapers in search of a story. If not, it would have found it difficult to make any policy decisions at all.

New Labour's media practices, under Campbell's direction, may have had corrosive effects; but they have been used to rewrite the political script in the United Kingdom – making the quality of public services and the language of social fairness part of the centre-ground on which all parties must prove their credibility. Whether British people or other observers agree with this shift, the fact that it could only have been achieved by mastering the media game is worth noting. Your view about Hutton will be partly influenced by your view about which came first: political spin or media cynicism.

The lesson of the New Labour experience with the media is clear: making democratic choice a reality depends on engaging with contemporary media power on its own terms. The real competition is not just to win numerical majorities, but to structure the broad social narrative in terms that give strategic advantage to a project's values and interests.

Despite the government's brinkmanship and apparent arrogance during much of the Iraq episode, its policy was conducted with that knowledge always in the background. At the point where the Blair government loses the ability to structure its own narrative, where events and the media's interpretation of them are able to dominate the debate and force ministers to respond, it will effectively have lost its grip on power.

### **The paralysis of pugilism**

Now, most journalists and editors see themselves as individual protagonists in the struggle to speak truth to the powerful and hold them to account. This role is so important to democratic politics and free societies that it can actually blind these actors to the cumulative effects of their competition to uncover the truth, or for their share of responsibility here. But these effects, in a world increasingly reliant on the instantaneous provision and interpretation of information, are profoundly reshaping the behaviour of institutions and the nature of power itself.

Just before the Hutton report's publication, James Blitz [7], the *Financial Times*'s political editor, wrote a reflective column in *FT Magazine*. On returning to Britain after five years' reporting in Italy, Blitz was, he says, most struck by the extent to which Britain's media and political classes were "at war" with each other. The BBC's reporting of Iraq had come under sustained attack-through-complaint from 10 Downing Street well before Andrew Gilligan made his fateful broadcasts. But the BBC's institutional response followed the same adversarial pattern, sucking it into a cycle of conflict which massively raised the stakes and focused heat, but not light, on the details of the Gilligan report.

Institutions – companies, opera houses, universities, NGOs – that might once have appeared virtually impervious to media attention now quake in the face of the exposure it brings. The BBC [8] has just discovered what it really feels like. In many respects, this general trend is a sign of progress, in that it makes old forms of patronage, unaccountable power, and deference increasingly untenable.

But the growing intensity of this competition to uncover and define *the* story, and the pugilistic public culture that it reinforces, threaten to paralyse the possibilities of government itself, by creating conditions in which decision-making in the public interest, on issues which by definition are complex and uncertain, becomes impossible.

David Marquand [8], in his **openDemocracy.net** article “Tony Blair and Iraq: a public tragedy”, is right to put the worst aspects of sensation-seeking journalism alongside the cynical use of political spin – they are indeed part of the same culture. But his elegiac evocation of an “old constitution” does little to help the British “public realm” address the nature of its collective problem and move forward.

The environment in which government, politics and all public institutions operate is being remade by globalisation [8] – not just its commercial forces but also by the myriad impacts of its new technologies and means of communication. These changes are creating a context where it is difficult for any organisation to avoid exposure to a new and immense set of pressures – to seal itself off from scrutiny, challenge or investigation. In such an environment, how can any institution be confident that it is handling information and knowledge scrupulously, let alone in the public interest?

### **A new social contract?**

The way to answer this question is to look at *governance* – the systems of rules, relationships and norms through which organisational power and authority is structured and checked.

It is significant that the convulsive disputes of the last year have revolved around decision-making processes: whether the BBC employed a good enough editorial chain and investigated a complaint properly; whether political and intelligence analysis were inappropriately fused in the drafting of the dossier; whether or not David Kelly breached civil service code in talking without authorisation to the BBC radio reporter Andrew Gilligan.

In this light, the “ignorant armies” which “clash by night” can, rather, be seen as a competition for credibility between different institutional sources of interpretation. All of them, Rashomon-like [9], employ different methods to generate their own version of the truth: the intelligence services [10]; the centre of government; the BBC; the lords who oversee inquiries; the parliamentary select committees; the newspapers, raucous and sober alike.

The widespread refusal to accept any “official” conclusions shows how far Britain has come from accepting uncritically the word of key institutions simply because of the received authority they carry. The question is, in our turn against the official in whatever form, where can society find the confidence collectively to unearth a shared, recognisable truth?

Here, the Hutton inquiry offers a remarkable example. It was transparent. The inquiry process gave the public unmediated and unvarnished access to huge quantities of information about how decisions were arrived at and how government actually works [10].

It is striking, however, that this openness has made the findings *more* contentious, not less. In one sense, we are free to draw our own conclusions; in another, in this age of information overload, we become even more dependent on intermediaries to filter and interpret on our behalf – how else would we cope with the deluge [11]? In the latter sense, Hutton has exposed both the need for mediating processes and how little we are prepared to trust any of the institutions which might provide such a role.

In virtually every area of government decision-making – from interest rates to climate change, population trends to warfare – there is vastly more information available than there was a generation ago. Yet rarely does this increase in volume make it easier to reach clear decisions, or to persuade the public that they are the right ones.

If people want government to improve their lives, they have to allow it to act in the face of uncertainty. This does not mean they should award it unchallenged authority; but it does imply that the challenge facing government – learning to get better at taking clear, good decisions – is one that other institutions that seek to embody or represent a public interest equally share.

If British society is going to learn any lessons from this epic period of clashing stories, this should surely be one major focus for public debate. To begin with, a new contract between government and media is needed: one that embodies an understanding that institutional power should always be tested and challenged, but that all institutions will make mistakes and fail some of the time.

Such a contract would bring a marked increase in the transparency of public decision-making and the accessibility of official information. But this would be accompanied by a shift in the implicit emphasis of media enquiry, away from the relentless pursuit of exposure and the assumption of guilt – by what [John Lloyd](#) [11] calls “laser-guided journalism” – and towards news values which privilege the depth of public understanding alongside the shock of sensation.

The BBC has helped to bring a catastrophe on itself by denying failure and interpreting its independence as a licence for aggression. Tony Blair’s government has won an adversarial contest but suffered further losses in its struggle for public confidence. Both are central components of a public culture where to admit failure, even when it is followed by convincing efforts to learn lessons, is savaged as weakness by those in search of a good headline.

This must change. Only when it does can people in British public life start to tell each other tales that begin to communicate the shared truth of our condition.

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[3] <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/> target=\_blank

[4] <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/01/29/hutton.press/> target=\_blank

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[6] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Labour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Labour) target=\_blank

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[9] <http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/cjs/films/reviews/rashomon.html> target=\_blank

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