

## The Truth About Westminster

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*The life of Members of Parliament is liable to place them in the path of great sexual temptation.*  
Lord Healey (1917- )

*'There is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous.'* Napoleon 1 (1769-1821)

Some say that what politicians do in private is entirely their own affair, and media 'muck-raking' should cease. It is certainly a fact that prolific media reporting of sexual antics or other matters can quickly destroy a career. The allegations do not need to be true, but simply widely aired.

From 1992 until 1995 fifteen members of the Conservative government resigned, including six Parliamentary Private Secretaries, either shortly after or shortly before certain stories appeared in the press. There have been further resignations since.

Private indiscretions of public figures do matter. Sex scandal in particular may not relate directly to what an MP or Peer does in Parliament, but they do undermine respect for those in public life. Personal problems are nothing new however, and are not so fatal to political careers in the longer term. 154

There is one particular individual whose sexual antics became the laughing stock of the nation, and who is widely blamed for bringing Westminster into disrepute. David Mellor was seen as a rising star in the Conservative Party, having been MP in Putney since 1979, junior Minister for Energy, then in the Home Office, Foreign Office and Department of Health, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and finally the Cabinet Member responsible for National Heritage. Indeed he was a continuous member of the government for more than ten years.

But David Mellor lived dangerously, taking huge risks in his private life and with the reputation of his entire government. The first tabloid 'scandal' in July 1992 was over a passionate affair with a little-known actress called Antonia de Sancha. However, the biggest and most damaging headlines were not about betraying his wife, but about lurid, detailed accounts of his sexual antics.

At first he was stoutly protected by indignant comments from Downing Street about the intrusive press. He earned some sympathy when it was discovered that his phone calls to Antonia had been bugged, within the law, by her landlord who had wired an extension to the phone which trailed outside into the garden so that a journalist could listen in. This intrusion into privacy was justified as in the 'public interest' after David Mellor was heard saying that he was so 'seriously knackered' by his sexual antics that it was affecting his concentration as a Minister.

His enemies said that he had shown grave errors of judgement and that he could no longer be entrusted with high office. Others felt that his main crime was bringing his political profession into disfavour. The biggest worry was what other media time-bombs might still lie hidden in the rest of his private life. However, to the consternation of his critics, the Prime Minister John Major stood firm in support of David Mellor and he continued as a Cabinet Minister for some weeks. 1  
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The timing of the revelations was critically important. Before the stories broke, David Mellor had been about to introduce new government measures to restrain press invasions of privacy. Not long before he had warned the press that they were 'drinking in the Last-Chance Saloon'. The press therefore were delighted to destroy both the reputation of the person driving the measures forward, and the measures themselves, arguing that if they had become law, exposure of his sordid past would have been near impossible. He might have survived had it not been for the public mockery - he had already been nicknamed the 'Minister of Fun' because he was overseeing the leisure industry, but now such a nickname had an embarrassing double meaning.

It is hard to overstate the damage that was caused, compounded by the misguided loyalty of John Major, who appeared to be saying that David Mellor's sexual adventures were irrelevant and unimportant to the government. John Major once again lost touch with the public mood. Here Major was, a family man, leading a party 'of the family who seemed to endorse adultery as a normal and perfectly acceptable role model for leaders of the nation. In contrast, public reaction was one of disgust and contempt.

A considerable number of other press stories were to follow about other alleged private indiscretions by those in government. It is probably true that just as many similar stories could have been told about Labour politicians, but the media hardly took the slightest interest. Those headlines would wait until the day the opposition MPs gained power, especially in the newly 'respectable', pro-family, cosy world of Tony Blair and New Labour.

Lord Healey has strong opinions about sexual activity at Westminster. He says that the life of MPs is liable to place them in the path of great sexual temptation: 156 'Being a Member of Parliament is very disruptive of family life. My children and my wife suffered because I was never home. I hardly saw the children. If you represent a constituency a long way from London then you have the question [of where you live].' He had no choice but to base the family in London because of his high profile role within the Labour Party. 'In my case I just went up [to my constituency] for long week-ends. But a lot of my friends lived in their constituencies but spent the whole week in London. And then the temptation is drink and women. Relationships form ... I don't think there's anything new there.'

Perhaps too there is something intoxicating about power itself, or a reaction against having to live so constantly in the public eye that leads some MPs to take such huge sexual gambles. There has never been a generation that has experienced such media pressures. Since the 1960s, television has made familiar faces of many politicians, but human frailties and vulnerability remain.

Having a huge profile can trigger a reaction in the human psyche. It is a pressure to know that several million people know what you look like. As a well-known personality walks down the street it is easy for the person to feel self-conscious and there is a sense in which privacy disappears. Something like a private meal in a restaurant can become a public spectacle. 157

The desire to be normal, to be anonymous, to be like an ordinary human being, can become overwhelming. The clothes that you wear, the food and magazines you buy, the wine you like, the friends you keep, may all become gossip column fodder. Your children are followed and photographed, and your spouse's appearance is scrutinised and criticised.

A point can come when the human brain flips into a state of denial, winding back the clock to the carefree days of obscurity. However, such a mental state is highly dangerous because in such an unreal world great risks can easily be taken on a whim or an impulse.

This desire to escape may be what lay behind the 'bizarre' actions of the Four Weddings and a Funeral actor Hugh Grant, who stopped his car in the middle of Los Angeles to pick up a prostitute, and later have sex in his car, parked on a public street. Why should a man who had everything risk it all for so little? Why did he refuse to pay a little more to go to a hotel room? Hugh Grant himself explained the mental process rather well: 'Last night I did something completely insane. 158

It has also been suggested that those men in particular with huge drive and ambition, by definition more likely to succeed in politics, may also have correspondingly larger than average sex drives. Whether the right explanation is temptations away from home, mental strain under

media pressure, large sexual drive or other factors, it is clear to me that those who are 'high profile' are in a way set up by the media and public expectations for a fall.

Another factor may be the general agreement among many in Westminster that private sexual behaviour is irrelevant in terms of suitability for public office. Teresa Gorman told me 'I don't think sexuality should be a resigning issue. Hypocrisy is worse than infidelity in public life.', She says we must be realistic and not have too high an expectation of MPs. 'We are not here because we are plaster saints; we are not here because we are intellectuals; we are not here because we are particularly moral human beings. We are here as a cross-section of humanity, the jury of the nation. No one expects a jury to have a perfect private life. Exposure in the media itself is punishment enough without loss of office. Exposure is absolutely devastating. The press are utterly ruthless and completely indifferent to the damage they do our institutions.'

'But surely the country expects certain standards of its leaders?' I asked.

'History tells us that few great leaders have led exemplarily from our politicians.' 159

However, one could argue that any behaviour likely to bring public office into disrepute is unbecoming of those in office, and that those serving the nation in Westminster have a responsibility to safeguard their corporate reputation. There are other issues than mere sexual privacy. For example, the majority of people in Britain disapprove of adultery, perhaps because it usually involves cheating and betrayal of trust. Someone in a long-term adulterous relationship may well be an expert liar and deceiver, but is that the sort of person you want to lead a nation?

Then there are issues of double standards - for example an MP campaigning vigorously against single parenting as a model for society who, it emerges, has had at least one 'lovechild'. There are also issues of legality, for example if an MP were to become involved in under-age sex; and of judgement, say if a constituent were to be seduced; or of indiscretion. As someone is in private, so they may be in public.

John Redwood surprised many people in July 1995 by suddenly resigning from the Cabinet and standing in a leadership contest against the Prime Minister John Major. He caused more headlines when he said that one of his policies if elected would be to ask people to say in advance if there were things from their private lives that could cause embarrassment later if they were appointed as Ministers.

Peter Bottomley declared that all that would be left would be self-confessed 'flashers and church mice'. 160 In other words, the only people who would survive such a process could be the arrogant, brazen and 'guilty', and the timid, diminutive and harmless.

While most people would probably agree that financial scandal involving an MP is probably far more serious than various sexual relationships, there have been some of the former too.

In conclusion then, there has been a barrage of bad publicity over sexually incontinent Conservative MPs and others have apparently lacked discretion in other private matters. Labour MPs are no bunch of innocents, but immune to media attention just so long as they have had no power. Whoever is in government, one thing is clear: we cannot afford the indulgence of another five years like the last. Behaviour must change if we are to have any prospect of restoring it

sense of dignity and respect in public life.

I want to turn now from personal morality or lack of it to one of the most corrupting practices in Parliament today: Whipping.

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