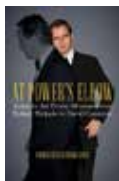


Reviews

At Power's Elbow: Aides to the Prime Minister, from Robert Walpole to David Cameron

Andrew Blick & George Jones
Biteback, £20



The familiar, sleek, unsmiling features of Andy Coulson adorn the dust-jacket of this absorbing book on a well-chosen subject. The former Tory spin-doctor is bathed in bright light. In front of him, cast in dark shadow, stands David Cameron. Coulson's plump hand hovers near the prime ministerial elbow.

In British politics it is not uncommon for aides, who ought to remain in the

background, to occupy the spotlight. Unwise appointments, which should never have been made, are especially prone to attract the cameras. Coulson is a case in point. He was the answer to an urgent problem which Cameron faced when he became Conservative leader. Napoleon said "three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets". The Tories wanted better relations with disobliging sections of the press, and Coulson was the right man for the task.

But it was imprudent to take him to Downing Street after the 2010 election, just as the rumours were starting to accumulate foreshadowing the worst press scandal in

British history. Ill-considered appointments reflect badly on those who make them. The close attachments that swiftly become established between prime ministers and unsuitable aides can have disastrous consequences. Gordon Brown's reputation is unlikely ever to recover. The two words "Damian McBride" will be repeated endlessly by future historians.

The great merit of this fine book is that it treats prime ministerial aides over three centuries, the virtuous and the villainous, with scrupulous fairness. The two authors, both of them distinguished political scientists, pass no moral judgements on the methods used by the rich variety of characters who have assisted prime ministers since the time of Robert Walpole, whose band of helpers included the Bishop of London, charged with spinning for his master in the Church of England. Walpole also anticipated Tony Blair by establishing rapid rebuttal arrangements to answer his numerous press critics.

“ The close attachments that swiftly become established between prime ministers and unsuitable aides can have disastrous consequences ”

Blick and Jones do not attempt to assess whether or not Britain has been better governed as a result of the work done by the long procession of aides. They concentrate on providing sharp profiles of the people – most of them, before the Blair era, now largely forgotten – who stood at power's elbow before the arrival of Cameron's team, whose leading members are neatly surveyed in the book's prologue.

They allow no rumours to pass unexamined. They note that Disraeli and his devoted secretary, Monty Corry, were the subject of speculation by contemporaries "interested in the idea that the two were a couple", but conclude that no



sexual relationship can be proved. For good measure they add that Gladstone was not “interested in men at all in this way”. No one has ever supposed that he was.

Certain misfortunes recur. Coulson, they point out, is “by no means the first prime ministerial aide to attract allegations of wrongdoing”. Robert Peel’s right-hand man in managing the Tory Party, Francis Bonham, was caught profiting from the award of railway contracts. Maundy Gregory, the notorious honours broker before and after the First World War, was eventually brought to justice and convicted; though he received no more than a light sentence in return for his silence (he knew too many secrets). Coulson, however, is “potentially the most controversial of all”.

In temperament and style Coulson resembled the tough, unlovely cronies who abounded during the Blair years, the golden age of the prime ministerial aide. For the first time substantial executive authority was vested in them and there were more of them than ever before as the prime ministerial staff swelled to some 200. Blick and Jones provide exactly what is needed: a detailed and dispassionate account of this extraordinary febrile, back-biting period during which Blair became the only prime minister to be interrogated by the police while in office.

A successful prime minister in today’s world, they conclude, needs to be deft in “managing the balance between outside, patronage-based appointments and career civil servants”. They argue strongly against the establishment of a Department of the Prime Minister believing that it “would threaten the flexibility that is crucial if prime ministers are to provide effective personal leadership”. The need for aides, commanding fat salaries that make MPs’ eyes water, will not diminish. ■

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian. He was political aide to Airey Neave from 1977 to March 1979.

The End of Power: Why Being in Charge isn't What it Used To Be

Moises Naim
Basic Books £18.99



Bad news for all you chaps whose daddies and mummies forked out £30,000 a year to send you to preparatory schools (like the one I used to pass in Oxford which called itself St Fred’s School for Boys. Preparatory for Girls) and then on to Eton or Charterhouse or Harrow, or whichever of the upper-class detention centres it was, to prepare you to rule our deferential little islands, as your class predecessors have done forever and ever, Amen (and Awomen too). According to Moises Naim you’ve wasted your money. The power game ain’t worth the candle.

It’s not so much that power is now more difficult to get. In fact, as the experience of Clegg, Cameron and Osborne shows, it’s easier for those expensively educated to play the great game than ever. It’s just that the prizes of power are less. The constraints on power are far greater, the checks and difficulties more frustrating and the tenure weaker than ever before. So why bother? All that struggling mass of Spads, Apparat Chicks and Chaps, interns and aspirants should either pack up and run a green allotment or go into the City and make some money instead of scrabbling round for political peanuts. Or if they want a real job they should

take an apprenticeship in plumbing and do something really useful. We run a very good one at Grimsby Institute.

Naim is basically right. But like so many bombshell books he has taken a trend building up over the years, projected it into a thesis stronger than reality will bear and ignored all the qualifications which need to be made in light of circumstances, the strength of personality of leaders and the nature of issues.

The constraints on power are certainly getting more numerous and powerful for all kinds of reasons. As Britain declines, its ability to take unilateral decisions, like invading Suez or even Anguilla, are eliminated, and we are condemned to acting as a second string with the USA. Robin to their Batman. As internationalism grows so Britain is more constrained by EU membership, NATO, the United Nations and all the other organisations which constrain us. As market forces become dominant and multinationals grow in

