

THE  TIMES

Toad can't change his spots. Nor can Ed Balls

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Last updated January 22 2011 12:01AM

Forget Tory resignations or the trials of Tony. The irresistible rise of the new Shadow Chancellor is what really matters

For David Cameron, Alan Johnson, Andy Coulson and Tony Blair, yesterday was a good day to bury bad news. Which of them should be most relieved by the existence of rival news attractions? Or — with Chilcot, phone hacking and rumours about misbehaving police officers in the news — is it Ed Miliband who should particularly bless the easing of immediate media pressure?

In the short term it doesn't matter. A good deal of this, the first-shock furore, will be scrunched into paper firelighters for the nation's woodburning stoves by next week. But after the early flare subsides, what embers will survive to fuel new difficulties for our political leaders? Ask not how a news editor should rank these items among this weekend's media priorities, but how, this autumn as the party conference season arrives, we shall be ordering their significance.

It will be the elevation of Labour's new Shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, that will seem by then to matter most.

Mr Johnson's personal story will, no doubt to his relief, be largely forgotten. Few will be able to remember the name of the police constable in the news this weekend. Most people like and respect Mr Johnson, and will feel the same as the year turns. And the rest is private, best ignored.

The trials of Mr Blair will not be entirely forgotten; but slowly, very slowly, the judgment of the era is settling foggily around the verdict that the Iraq war was a miscalculation, entered into by many of its sponsors (including Mr Blair) for honest motives but by sometimes dishonest means. The game of trying to get Mr Blair to admit this will go on, and much sadistic pleasure will it cause; but he will not admit it and will die insisting (as Anthony Eden did over Suez) that he did the right thing. Are we bothered? Yes, but less with every passing year.

Mr Coulson's story will one day disappear completely, but not yet. It has so far reverberated in two distinct arenas. First, there are the implications for Mr Coulson himself, and for his former employers, the *News of the World*, where he was Editor, and for News Corporation, which also owns this newspaper. Second, for Mr Cameron and the Conservative Party, who employed Mr Coulson in a very different job and hung on to him beyond the point when many advised them to let him go.

For Mr Coulson (whom I know slightly) and for News Corp's executives (whom I don't), I cannot suppose the story is over. Mr Coulson is a nicer and more decent man than the cynical Grub Street news fixer that people thought he was employed to be. I have no idea of the truth about his alleged complicity in phone hacking, and can say with confidence only two things: first, that if the practice really was endemic in Mr Coulson's newspaper then I have no doubt it that will have taken root among other sensationalist mass-market newspapers, too. Second, that I disapprove, without being deeply shocked or surprised by the practice. If you know my mobile phone number then you can access my voice messages using a variant of my date of birth. I've never regarded such information as secure; nobody should; I hadn't realised so many celebrities did.

But that story will rumble on. What Mr Coulson and Mr Cameron did yesterday was to seize a moment when the sun was at least weakly shining, to fix the Tory roof: to try to cut the Coulson/*News of the World* story loose from the Cameron/Tory story. It's a messy business and if Mr Coulson did know more than he says, Mr Cameron will not escape entirely unstained. But although the Prime Minister may be accused of naivety or even wilful ignorance, I doubt that any charge of foreknowledge will stick. Mr Cameron may or may not have wanted to know the whole truth, but he will have said nothing but the truth as he knew it; his sense of propriety, which is strong for a modern politician, will have steered him well clear of complicity.

More interesting to me is why the Cameron circle hugged Mr Coulson quite so tight. They do genuinely like him and rate him highly for his quieter skills — of calming rather than hyping stories; but I wonder, too, if as members of a pretty privileged caste, they felt that he had access to a world denied them, and a language they could never master? Recall that Pulp lyric: "I want to live like common people/ I want to do whatever common people do . . ."

The song continues: "But still, you'll never get it right", and I wonder whether Cameron Conservatives have attached to red-top journalism a mystique that it can hardly bear: possession of the sacred key to the popular zeitgeist. Maybe Alastair Campbell's relentless peddling of his own instrumentality fooled them into thinking they needed another Campbell, and that Mr Coulson was such a person. They don't, and he wasn't. He's a thoughtful and measured man, and, in a sometimes murky world, basically honest.

And now the Tories have lost him. It's worth pointing out that Labour and its propagandists have lost Mr Coulson too, which will have been part of Mr Cameron's thinking when accepting the resignation.

But in six months, all this will feel like the past. The story that won't is the rise of Ed

Balls.

There will be talk this weekend of Balls Mark II: a new, collegiate Balls, a humble Balls, a Balls awed by responsibility, chastened by warnings about his bullying former ways, seized with an unfamiliar modesty; a Balls reaching out to old enemies and new directions.

So it was in *The Wind in the Willows* with Mr Toad who, on regaining the manor he felt to be his right, resolved to be an Altered Toad. It didn't last. Mr Miliband would do well this evening to thumb through that familiar tale, to the passage where our amphibian hero, temporarily chastened, succeeds in clambering on to somebody else's motor car: "...and Toad, with many humble and grateful acknowledgements, stepped lightly on board and sat down with great satisfaction. 'Toad's luck again!' thought he. 'I always come out on top!'

"... Toad was almost himself again by now. He sat up, looked about him, and tried to beat down the tremors, the yearnings, the old cravings ... 'It is fate!' he said to himself. 'Why strive? Why struggle?' and he turned to the driver at his side.

" 'Please, Sir,' he said, 'I wish you would kindly let me try and drive the car for a little ... ' "

Pick up Saturday's edition of this newspaper in eight months, after the summer, in late September. If there's a story featuring Mr Blair or the Cameron-Coulson link, I shall be mildly surprised. If there's nothing about Ed Balls, I shall be astonished.

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