

“What goes around, does finally come around”

In politics, as in life, what goes around comes around. Now it is Andy Coulson's turn to be at the receiving end of dirty tricks and briefings. His accusers say he was lying through his teeth when he assured a Parliamentary Select Committee that as editor of the *News of the World* he knew absolutely nothing about the widespread telephone tapping operation carried out by the paper's jailed royal reporter, Clive Goodman, and their electronic surveillance expert Glenn Mulcaire. If the accusers can prove they are right, then it will be Coulson's turn to be a “dead man walking”.

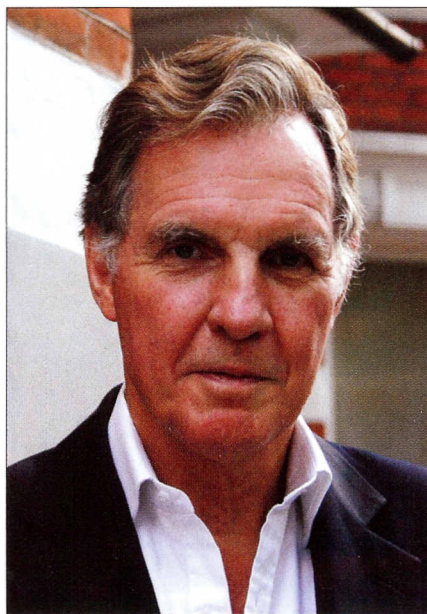
This brings me to the reason why Coulson may stay in trouble – the issue of a smoking or non-smoking gun. If such an instrument exists in the William Hague saga, there is only person who could pull the trigger; namely Chris Myers, the room-sharing aide. I think it can be safely assumed that both he and the truth are on Hague's side.

But it may be a tense wait for Andy Coulson as the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Standards and Privileges Committee embark on a prolonged series of witness hearings into this phone tapping scandal. The same will be true if Yates of the Yard goes round feeling old and new collars.

I have a couple of friends who may be put in difficult positions by these fresh inquiries. One is Stuart Kuttner, the long-serving former managing editor of the *NoW*. He was a fellow reporter who worked closely with me when we were together on the *Evening Standard* newsdesk in the 1960s. The other is Glenn Mulcaire, who served a three-month prison sentence because he was the *NoW*'s electronic surveillance consultant hacking into royal and other VIP phone calls. I regard Glenn Mulcaire as a good man who made a bad mistake. Because I knew his father, he wrote to me from jail. When he was released, I became, and still remain, his mentor and confidant.

Whenever I am mentoring ex-offenders, wild horses will not drag their confidences from me, so there are to be no scoops or leaks even on my debut as the new political columnist for *Spectator Business*. But even assuming, as I do, that Andy Coulson has spoken the truth in his denials, I still see a winter of discontent ahead of him. For this story has legs, which will keep propelling Coulson into the spotlight whatever the ultimate outcome may be. Because being in the spotlight of a political scandal is such a miserable and debilitating experience, both Hague and Coulson deserve human sympathy irrespective of the political betting about their futures.

In Coulson's case, there might be several *News of the World* operatives who could spill the beans against their former editor if his denials are untrue. So far, only one dismissed (and therefore perhaps discredited) ex-*NoW* reporter has made this direct challenge. Are there any untainted *NoW* witnesses waiting in the wings who might contradict Coulson? *The Guardian* claims there are six.



Jonathan Aitken

So, will Andy Coulson and William Hague survive the fallout from the September season of unexpected scandals? One must hope so, but it is still difficult to place bets on their chances. I know, perhaps better than most, that scandals look different to the target figure in the eye of the storm. Personal character, political enemies, smoking or non-smoking guns and, above all, the truth are the pivotal factors. But, even here, there are grey and unpredictable areas, as the Hague and Coulson stories so far have already demonstrated.

William Hague should be safe, not least because almost everyone wants him to recover. The conventional wisdom is that he has made some poor judgement calls. Yet the polls show that over 60 per cent of the public think he was right to issue his detailed statement about his wife's miscarriages. This has boosted Hague's fragile morale. It will strengthen further when he hits his stride again as foreign secretary. So, although he has been temporarily wounded, it is not a case of “never glad confident

morning again” for his career. Moreover, most of the media do not believe the allegation that he has been having gay sexual relationships. *The Sunday Times* had the room-sharing story back in May but decided not to run it on the grounds that it proved nothing. There is no Hague witch-hunt by the hacks and there are only the most half-hearted of hunts for further and better particulars of the foreign secretary's private life.

That said, there is speculation that the intensely private William Hague has been so bruised by the furore that he may be looking for an exit from public life. Not yet, in my view. It would look like running away from the reptiles when there is work to be done as a world statesman. Moreover, he has support by the lorry load from friends, colleagues and even opponents. Today, the view from No. 1 Carlton House Terrace or Chevening may seem unsettled, but by tomorrow the swirling mists of scandal should have evaporated.

Andy Coulson must be hoping that he will benefit from the same political weather forecast. But his outlook is more uncertain than Hague's for at least three reasons. First, he is under siege from a battalion of attackers, including many Labour front and back benchers, the Home Affairs Select Committee, the Standards and Privileges Committee, the *New York Times*, disgruntled former *News of the World* employees, the BBC and, leading the pack, *The Guardian*. As I well know, the paper's investigative reporting team under editor Alan Rusbridger can be pathological in their intensity when they scent blood. So this hunt will continue to run in both parliament and the media for a long time yet.

Secondly, Andy Coulson has few defenders outside the immediate Cameron entourage. As editor of the *News of the World*, he was a master of the darkest of dark tabloid arts. In that role, he created a climate of fear, not friendship. The fear has extended to Conservative MPs who believe that Coulson, even from his new office at No. 10, is still up to his old tricks of hatchet jobs and character assassinations.