

Chief Whip: People, Power and Patronage in Westminster

Whips have long been the pantomime villains of Westminster politics: a combination of arm-twister, bully and Machiavelli, the sole role of the whips is to bully poor unsuspecting MPs into carrying out evil deeds on behalf of the Government. The sort of people who tie damsels to train tracks whilst twiddling their moustache, whips stamp on any signs of independence, and demand sheep-like obedience from our MPs.

By contrast, most academic accounts of Parliament have tended to stress the more prosaic functions of the whips as party managers, organising those who want to be organised, providing a channel of communication from leaders to led and *vice versa*, and who – when push comes to shove – are not half as powerful as the mythology makes out. But these academic accounts cannot compete with the intrigue, the downright sexiness, of the myth. It is just much more exciting to believe that whips are like Andrew Dobbs' fictitious Francis Urquhart – omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent – than to face the slightly more mundane reality.

Moreover, that this caricature persists is partly the fault of the whips themselves. Whips have long practiced their own form of the Sicilian code of silence, *omerta*, which has meant that we lacked decent insider accounts of how the job functioned – and what whips actually did. The first sign that things might be changing came with the publication of Gyles Brandreth's diaries in 1999, revealingly entitled *Breaking the Code*. But for all their quality, Brandreth's were the diaries of a self-confessed bit-part player, one of the most junior of whips. Tim (now Lord) Renton, however, has now provided us with the first account of the job by a senior whip.

The first part of the book – roughly 100 pages – is an account of his time as Margaret Thatcher's Chief Whip, from his appointment in 1989 ('Cor, I said') to his resignation in November 1990 following Thatcher's departure. They were not the easiest times to be Government Chief Whip. Discontent with the Thatcher government – and the Thatcher style – was growing on the backbenches, and as the Chief Whip during Thatcher's defenestration, some on the right of the party have held Renton responsible for not giving the Prime Minister sufficient support. Parts of the book are clearly The Case for the Defence, written, as these things almost always are, with self-justification in mind. What is clear from the account is that the Prime Minister did not trust her Chief Whip, seeing him as colluding with those out to get her. In such circumstances, it is difficult to see why she made the appointment in the first place – or how Tim Renton was supposed to be much more help to her than he was.

But the book is far more revealing, and more interesting, than mere self-justification. A good whip, according to Renton, 'is not just a sergeant major. He is also a counsellor and a nanny. Giving tea to some and gin and tonic to others, the Chief Whip has an overall responsibility for the health and sanity of his flock'. Drawing selectively, and somewhat tantalisingly, from his unpublished diaries, Renton provides the behind-the-scenes story to the key legislation of the final Thatcher years, including the Hong Kong Bill (where doubts on the backbenches ran deep), the community charge (where the whips turn a possible defeat into a majority of 46), and the Social Security Bill (where the Government was defeated). Anyone who reads this account will reject simplistic accounts of the role of the whips for good.

The second part of the book, the majority of the text, examines the careers of some of Renton's predecessors as Chief Whip, including Henry Brand, Aretas Akers-Douglas, David Margesson, and Ted Heath, the last the only Chief Whip ever to make it to Downing Street. Some of these accounts are largely derivative of material available elsewhere and some of it isn't particularly revelatory. Ted Heath's ability to lose friends and alienate people is not likely to have readers' jaws dropping with surprise. But it's still useful to have the material collected together, and there are some gems. The account of David Margesson, for example, includes the observation that when on holiday, Margesson's first question to his daughter in the morning would be: 'What is the programme for today?' Not for nothing is Margesson described as the 'total whip'. Renton also reproduces Francis Pym's private four page memorandum to Heath in 1971, detailing how to get the EEC Bill through. We knew the broad thrust of the advice before – that the Government would be more likely to win if it offered its own MPs a free vote – but now we know the detail.

The final two chapters of the book are perhaps the most disappointing. The five Chief Whips after Renton, covering the period between 1990 and 2004, are covered in just 20 pages. The Lords, where Renton has been since 1997, gets just 12. And irritating errors begin to creep in. John Major, not Margaret Thatcher, signed the Maastricht Treaty. Eight Conservative Eurosceptic MPs, not seven, had the whip removed from them (a ninth also resigned the whip in sympathy). Labour rebellions over the Maastricht Treaty were in fact larger than Conservative ones, not smaller. Major suffered two defeats on the Maastricht Treaty, not one. Clare Short resigned after the war on Iraq, not before. Thirty-five Conservative MPs might have been absent from the recent vote on gay adoption, but as a former Chief Whip would know, many of those absent were not abstaining.

Perhaps more importantly, some of the judgements towards the end of the book are questionable. Renton is not a fan of the changes to the selection of the Conservative leader, that this is now no longer usually the sole prerogative of the parliamentary party. But, *pace* Renton, there's no evidence that the majority of Conservative MPs preferred Ken Clarke to Iain Duncan Smith in 2001. In July 2001, in the last ballot of Conservative MPs, Kenneth Clarke certainly topped the poll, with 59 votes, compared to Duncan Smith's 54 and Michael Portillo's 53. But if the decision had been left solely to Conservative MPs, with no subsequent ballot of the grassroots membership, then Portillo would have been eliminated from the contest and there would then have been a final run off between Clarke and IDS. In those circumstances, who knows where Michael Portillo's backers would have gone? It is far from certain that many of them they would have gone to Clarke, and it is therefore perfectly plausible that Duncan Smith would have won any ballot confined solely to the party's MPs.

It is also a little surprising to see accepted as verbatim the account offered by the ex-Labour MP Paul Marsden of the very public spat between him and Labour's Chief Whip Hilary Armstrong in 2001. Armstrong is criticised for some of the things she said, but since she denies saying them, she would presumably agree with the criticisms. It's especially surprising since Renton recounts his own, equally public, spat with the Conservative rebel Nick Winterton, in which – in Renton's own words – 'Winterton was written up as the champion of individual democratic rights and the true representative of the people... fighting against the party bureaucrat, myself'. In both cases those with inside knowledge took a very different view of proceedings.

It is also difficult to argue, as Renton appears to do, that since 1990 discipline has broken down to such an extent that it has now become impossible to maintain unity on the backbenches. Despite the various European rebellions which so troubled the Conservatives in the 1990s and the recent problems faced by Labour over Iraq and student finance, the most rebellious period in post-war British politics still remains that of the 1970s, especially the late-1970s – the average backbench rebellion in the 1974-79 Parliament was *four times* the size of today's. And despite the recent increase in the rebelliousness of Labour MPs, cohesion remains dominant on the backbenches. Most votes see absolute cohesion; even when there are rebellions, most of them are small and easily ignored; and even the most rebellious Labour MPs vote with the party most of the time. Cohesion remains the norm, dissent very much the exception.

But these are mostly minor niggles. Where Renton is absolutely right is in noting the changes in the political climate, the different expectations and resources. The rise of the career politician, often blamed for the creation of subservience, has in fact had the opposite effect. Today's politicians are more demanding; they are more likely to want to influence policy, less willing simply to support policy thought up elsewhere. The various Nolan reforms have removed many of the tools of patronage from the whips, and the rise of 24-hour media, and a more aggressive and less deferential media at that, has given any disgruntled MP outlets for his or her disquiet that would have horrified Aretas Akers-Douglas.

As a result, the style of whipping has had to change. Renton describes an encounter between a young Jack Straw and the then Labour Chief Whip, Michael Cocks. As Renton indicates, the story is probably apocryphal, but it is still indicative of a style of whipping that simply would not work today. Straw was said to be thinking of rebelling, and so Cocks explained the party's position to him. Straw replied that he didn't find it a particularly convincing argument. 'At this point, Michael Cocks seized Jack by the genitals, held on to them tight while Jack turned white in the face and finally released him with the comment, 'Are you convinced now?' They don't make them like that anymore.

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