

London letter

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Breach! Breach! The good ship News International is taking on water, holed below the waterline by a barrage of phone-hacking allegations, Andy Coulson's disappearance from Downing St., the sacking of former Head of News at the *News of the World* Ian Edmondson and the sacrifice of some lesser mortals who were trapped in the engine room while management disowned knowledge of what drove the boat so curiously well against the tide of falling newspaper circulation figures, right up the dark river and into the gloaming. It probably won't stop the ConDem Coalition boys giving Rupert 'Moloch' Murdoch his way on the BSkyB question, after Cameron dined privately with BSkyB non-Executive Chairman James Murdoch [fibs] at Christmas and Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt gave free tutoring to the old dog's lawyers on how to get past whatever tests the Competition Commission may set. Still, sometimes it's enough in life to imagine Rupert getting annoyed that he hasn't got everything he wanted, if but for a Fleet Street minute.

Time tells, as Nikolai the Horsefly Clegg's increasingly sadsack face illustrates. With Vince Cable neutered thanks to a [News International?] leak from within the *Telegraph* about the 'honeytrap' / fake constituency meeting recording which revealed his antipathy towards Murdoch, the Clegg is isolated and increasingly unpopular, which is how the Tories like him. Mr OnCamera need only now worry about Lib Dem interference with his agenda from Simon Hughes, yet less than before, now that the latter has accepted the poison chalice of a government role as official advocate for educational access i.e. tuition fees apologist. One thinks of *Macbeth*, one sees a comedy. Meanwhile, the protests continue in London, most recently against the scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, which gave young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds money with which to attend

and stay in secondary-level education and training.

Over in Labour HQ, Ed Balls has replaced Alan Duncan as Shadow Chancellor and been welcomed by such prominent Lefties as Polly Toynbee much as the wounded survivors of a plane crash in the Pacific Ocean would welcome a speargun. Well, he is certainly quite able at the Despatch Box and looks like he is licking his chops even when he isn't. Perhaps George Osborne should have saved the cost of his Christmas ski-trip to Klosters and bought some chainmail.

While Balls strives to make a Roman holiday of the Smirking Chancellor, Shadow Culture Minister Ivan Lewis is making nil hay with the recent announcement by Bush House that it is going to cut 433 jobs and close five foreign language services etc. across the BBC World Service. Besides how the diminishment of this last great Reithian shibboleth will affect the ever-increasing number of listeners worldwide, such as the estimated 30% of the populations in Kenya, Nigeria or Tanzania who do so, the implications are significant to the future outlook of England signalling, alongside OnCamera's rather cool tones on the Special Relationship with America and William Hague's earlier decision to force funding of GCHQ upon the BBC, a strategic retreat from non-profit led involvement with the broader world which leaves Britain plc. looking smaller and more introverted.

In terms then of the global stage, Cameron shows himself to be a 'One Nation' Tory with a diminutive 'n', though his plans for the NHS be more radical than Thatcher dared essay in her 1990 introduction of competition into the system. These GMC-condemned reforms may be seen as the second-most extreme ideological policy decision that the Coalition has taken thus far, after the early, deep cuts. If the mandatory internal market that John Birt introduced to the BBC served only to

increase the cost of programming production, prove [arguably] deleterious to the quality of corporation output and put license-payers' money in the hands of private media companies, one fails to see how making the NHS compete perforce with multinational health companies could do anything other than lead to underselling by the private competitors until they have seen off NHS 'service suppliers' altogether, leaving a corporatized health services marketplace where the patient soon has only such rights to care as they can afford or successfully lobby GPs for. Health Minister Andrew Lawsley, who received a £21,000 donation to his private office before the Election from the wife of the chairman of private healthcare firm Care UK, may of course know something we don't. With the government also pushing on with their efforts to affect the outcome of future elections by reducing the representation of certain Scottish constituencies and so gerrymander what has been a Scottish Labour Bloc since time immemorial, one thing that Mr. OnCamera cannot be accused of is a slow start to the year.

