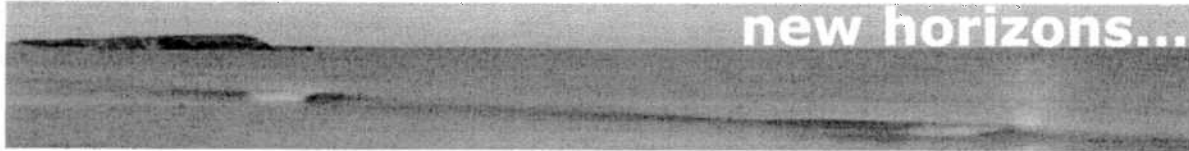


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The Sunday Times

July 23, 2006

MPs can cash in on memoirs but mandarins can't

ISABEL OAKESHOTT, DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR

POLITICIANS are to grant themselves free rein to cash in with their memoirs, while banning diplomats and other civil servants from doing the same.

MPs on a cross-party Westminster committee will publish a report this week stating there is a "good case" for operating two different sets of rules.

It will state that it would be "unworkable" to force a politician to wait for a fixed cooling-off period after leaving office, thus clearing the way for Tony Blair and other ministers to sell their memoirs.

Margaret Thatcher received the highest advance of any living British politician — reported to be £3.5m, a figure which Blair may match. By contrast, David Blunkett, who was twice forced to resign from the cabinet, says he has received £95,000 to £100,000 for his journals, which are about to be serialised.

The public administration select committee will recommend that diplomats, other senior civil servants and special advisers should sign over to government the copyright on anything they publish, thus stripping them of any financial incentive.

One member of the committee said: "Civil servants who write memoirs are breaching confidences. They do not have reputations to defend. Politicians do and therefore there should be different rules."

The committee's investigation, launched last year, was triggered by the publication of memoirs by Sir Christopher Meyer, the former British ambassador to Washington.

In his book, DC Confidential, he ridiculed serving ministers, saying that capable ministers such as Gordon Brown and John Reid "stood out like Masai warriors in a crowd of pygmies".

During the committee's hearings Dr Tony Wright, its Labour chairman, said good government was being undermined with the glut of "instant memoirs" in Whitehall and Westminster.

It will endorse Cabinet Office proposals to give permanent secretaries the discretion to force new recruits to senior posts to sign lifelong confidentiality agreements. Those who decline to assign copyright to the government of all "future works based on official information and experience" will not get the job.

Special advisers are expected to be subject to the same rules as mandarins, because they are unelected. The rules are not retrospective, so Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's former director of communications who kept diaries of his time at No 10, will not be affected.

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The committee argues that mandarins have a "duty of confidentiality" to ministers. They will be expected to seek "approval in principle" from their permanent secretary before entering into contracts with publishers.

Jack Straw, the leader of the Commons who claimed that political memoirs served a "very important purpose", argued strongly in favour of special treatment for politicians. He admits that he is planning to write a book.

However, there will be an indefinite ban on the publication of material that could compromise national security or diplomatic relations.

Lawyers have questioned whether the measures will be workable. Nicholas Lakeland, the partner specialising in employment at Silverman Sherliker, a law firm, said:

"It can be very difficult to enforce confidentiality agreements. It is fair enough to copyright anything staff write in the course of their employment, but if they go home in the evening to write a novel, it would be very tricky to enforce that."

The government can seek injunctions and can pursue the publisher or author for damages. While Straw was foreign secretary he blocked a book by Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain's former envoy to Iraq.

Additional reporting: Holly Watt



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