

T086

News officially stage-managed

Having been a senior Whitehall official in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies (now retired) I was appalled at the picture of government yesterday on the BBC 2 programme *News from Number Ten* (15 July 2000).

One saw the handsome, charming and capable Tony Blair being continuously processed for presentation to the media (and through them to the public) by the equally handsome, charming and capable Alastair Campbell. That these goings on conducted on an almost daily basis, seemed to subject both men to great strain.

Far more important is the fact that this dangerous nonsense fails to be condemned as wholly undemocratic. In my day the principle was that newspapers, radio etc. received little special consideration. Without official interference, they reported what was placed in the public domain by ministers' statements in Parliament or other official announcements made on the record.

The essential democratic principle is that every citizen should have equal access to all statements made on behalf of government. In the programme Mr Campbell complained that nowadays a news story is often not presented direct, but apparently dressed up in the comments of some privately briefed reporter. He seems to me to have been a prime cause of this abuse.

Any democrat would find it intolerable that the news should be officially stage-managed in this way. Democracy requires a level playing field. Behind-the-scenes briefing is a grave threat to democratic health.¹

¹ *The Times*, 17 July 2000 (lead letter).