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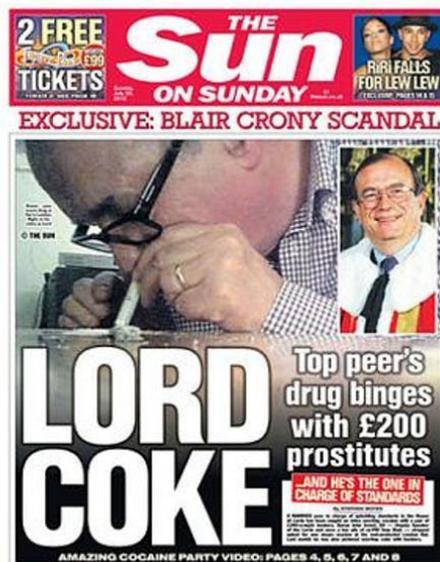


Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Very British scandal continues rich tradition of tabloid titillation – and never mind the ethics

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Gotcha: The Sun carries on the tradition of great British scandals. The Sun

In a scoop worthy of its deceased predecessor, the News of the World, the Sun on Sunday ran a five-page exclusive at the weekend alleging that Lord Sewel, deputy speaker of the House of Lords, had been “caught on video snorting cocaine with a pair of £200-a-night hookers”.

Monday’s Sun kept up the momentum with a front-page picture of Sewel smoking a cigarette clad in the “hooker’s bra and jacket” while on Tuesday we were treated to “Lord Sewer” naked from the waist up accused of bragging of “sex with a BBC host”. And that was his career over with.

In the probability of police charges being brought, Sewel resigned from the Lords apologising for the “pain and embarrassment” he had caused. One day he was the deputy speaker of the House of Lords and (oh, the irony) chairman of the Lords committee for privileges and conduct which investigates

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

breaches of conduct by peers the next he was the disgraced “sneer of the realm” allegedly prone to bad-mouthing political colleagues whilst indulging in adulterous, illicit, drug-fuelled sex sessions. This was public humiliation of a terrible sort and whatever your view of Sewel, we can only imagine his family’s shame and embarrassment.

Yellow press

There is something terribly old-fashioned about a political sex scandal and this one is currently delighting the majority of the national press – broadsheet and tabloid alike – not just The Sun. Indeed, you could say that it is part of a rich cultural tradition and full of the very details that have been a feature of the popular press since the 1850s.



This one had it all: sex, spies and suicide. PA / PA Archive/PA Images

That was the decade when, according to Kevin Williams, a new journalism began to emerge which challenged the serious reporting and commentary of The Times. This “new journalism” aimed to entertain its readership – often with reports of crime, sexual deviancy and the peculiarities of human existence. The Sunday papers, as is the case today, carried the most salacious stories. As Williams records, the first edition of the News of the World in 1843 carried an “extraordinary story of drugging and violation”.

As the century progressed, overtly political content began to decrease in the popular titles whilst criticism of their content grew. But the proprietors and editors of the time knew that scandal and entertainment attracted readers. Perhaps it will surprise nobody that the first publisher of the News of

the World, John Browne Bell, was unequivocal about what would sell his newspaper: **crime, sensation and of course, vice.**

The peccadilloes of the ruling classes have long been of fascination and as shadow secretary for media culture and sport, **Chris Bryant**, has written, sex scandals of all sorts – including adultery, homosexuality (when illegal) and murder – have gone hand-in-hand with political power for centuries. What would the modern world have made of Lloyd George? The prime minister for most of World War I known for his multitude of lovers and illegitimate children.

Yet it is in the past half century or so – as society and the press have become gradually less deferential toward those in power – that we have seen the private lives of our politicians held up for public judgement. It's just over 50 years since the **Profumo scandal**, the daddy of them all. This one had everything – sex, spying and suicide all going on in the intense atmosphere of the Cold War.

But it's entirely possible to go through the decades and choose your personal favourite. There's **Lord Boothby** and **Ronnie Kray**, the Liberal leader **Jeremy Thorpe** who was tried and acquitted of hiring a hit man to kill and silence his lover **Norman Scott**.

Then there is **Jeffrey Archer**, stepping down as deputy chairman of the Conservative Party as a result of reports in a Sunday newspaper alleging he tried to pay a prostitute to go abroad to avoid a scandal, an episode which ended in a jail term, and another best seller, for the disgraced peer.

Riding the tumbril

There can be no denying the public appetite for political sex scandals – but why is this the case? Perhaps, as **Myisha Cherry** suggests, it's because we take “vicarious pleasure in the rule-breaking of another”. The actions of Sewel are reprehensible but also titillating – he is breaking rules in the most flagrant fashion and behaving in a way many of would certainly not dare to.

Then there is the pleasure of seeing someone privileged and monied get caught in such an obvious way. The exposure of Sewel's hypocrisy is especially delicious because he was hoist by his own petard, damned by his own foolishness and hubris. Such behaviour also fits into an historical narrative which positions Lords of the realm as feckless, out of touch and generally dismissive of the laws which govern the rest of society. This reinforces the moral superiority of the audience, who in times of austerity see their leaders as disconnected from real life and representative of the fact that we are certainly not “all in this together”.

In this sense it matters not a jot that Sewel was a Labour-appointed peer. More generally, returning once again to the ideas of **Cherry**, perhaps political sex scandals provide a “distraction from the tedium of one's own difficult everyday problems”. Simple familiar escapism, then, where unacceptable sexual behaviour is punished by public humiliation – followed, in some instances, by professional ruin.



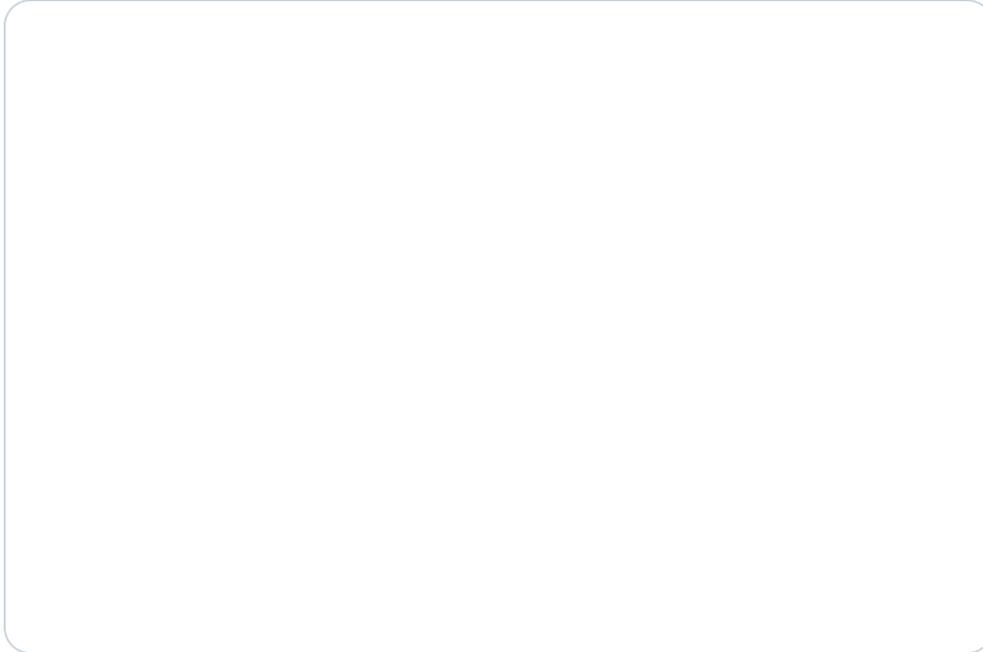
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But there is already a sense that the Sewel scandal is different to those that have preceded it. All the main newspapers have followed The Sun's lead and piled in on the beleaguered peer. So much so that Roy Greenslade writes of the "cruel" treatment that Sewel has received pointing to the fact that he could find no paper, columnist or commentator, willing to do anything other than condemn him.

Elsewhere in the Guardian, the leader piece speaks of events affecting the future existence of the House of Lords itself. Meanwhile, the "soaraway" Sun basks in the glory of another successful sting – and few give any thought to notions of "honeytraps", entrapment or hidden cameras because, after all, this is journalism in the public interest – and the public are interested. That's right, isn't it?

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