

# Battles fought without regard to truth

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MICHAEL PINTO-DUSCHINSKY

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SIR Alistair Graham is right to be angry that the Government intends to leave the committee on standards in public life without naming his successor.

It is a clear sign that the Government wants to threaten this troublesome but essential watchdog and, if it has its way, to abolish it altogether.

It is assumed that Tony Blair is having his revenge on Sir Alistair for being such a persistent critic but the unpopularity of Britain's premier anti -corruption body is a sign of a broader malaise in Whitehall.

There are signs that Sir Gus O'Donnell, Secretary of the Cabinet and the top " Sir Humphrey", has been meeting a top adviser to the public administration select committee to recommend a neat scheme to axe Sir Alistair's committee.

This is to be achieved under the guise of merging it with other "ethics watchdogs".

Tomorrow morning, the committee on standards will meet to devise a defence plan.

At the same time, Sir Hayden Phillips, the former head civil servant at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, will be issuing his long-delayed report on party funding. Unlike Sir Alistair - the brusque Northern outsider - Sir Hayden is the classic embodiment of the smooth Whitehall operator.

So his report will be an elegant fudge. It will also be based on a number of quite basic factual errors.

These arise because Sir Hayden has relied on information from the Electoral Commission.

This too is an institution whose leadership and style follows the model of the 19th century English gentlemen's club.

The Commission was condemned by Sir Alistair as lacking in competence, leadership and courage.

The don't-rock-the-boat model of behaviour is effective, it seems, for survival in the Whitehall jungle. The Electoral Commission has gone along with postal voting on demand and for life which allows electoral fraud to flourish. It has then disguised this fraud by failing to collect information about cases and by another "Sir Humphrey" device.

It has redefined electoral fraud as consisting solely of offences under one law, the Representation of the People Act, and excluding electoral frauds prosecuted under the laws for, well, fraud, from the reckoning.

For such a cooperative attitude towards its sponsoring department, it no doubt hopes to be rewarded.

As a mere academic outsider, I have been alarmed to find that battles within Whitehall are fought so ruthlessly and without regard to frankness and truth.

That is why someone like Sir Alistair, who refuses to play the game by the rules but insists instead on good government, is so valuable and why his committee must not be destroyed.