

A report by Julia Hobsbawm and John Lloyd

# The Power to create that of the newspapers from Commentariat

## Edited Highlights

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# The Power of the Commentariat

*How much do commentators  
influence politics and public  
opinion?*

A report by Julia Hobsbawm and John Lloyd

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Julia Hobsbawm and John Lloyd  
London April 2008.

# The Power of the Commentariat

British commentators usually disclaim much influence. As Jackie Ashley of *The Guardian* put it in mid-April, 2008: “we columnists are just fleas on the body politic”. Few of those to whom we spoke would allow their or their fellows’ writing more than a modest importance – and even that was said to be elusive as to evidence, with “anecdotal” being the most common response to a question on how they knew they had any effect.

But it is balanced by another, opposing belief – that is, that journalists in general and commentators in particular follow the injunction apocryphally attributed to the 17th century Quaker George Fox: “speak truth to power”. Many of those to whom we spoke strongly believed that was their mission in life – yet some of these who did also said that they believed that their work had no intrinsic importance.

This dichotomy runs through not just the minds of journalists : it is inherent in the nature of the commentators’ trade. It is true that it is, like most journalism, transient: and it is true that it must catch the wandering attention, a task more difficult now because of a vast array of media and other competitors for time and interest. But it is also the case that British newspaper commentary is among the liveliest, most combative and sharpest in the world; that it is now seen by editors and owners of newspapers as more important than reporting, at least as measured in the amount of money paid to commentators as against that paid to reporters and the privileging of commentators on the skylines of newspapers. Further, and most importantly in this context, most of those within political life see political columns as of fundamental importance to the conduct of their public lives.

British columnists are, in the main, independent, or certainly regard themselves as such. In many, perhaps most, cultures of journalism in the world the commentator speaks for – and is more or less explicitly paid to speak for – the state, or a corporation, or a party, or a powerful individual. In Britain, both the virtual and literal coin of the commentators’ trade is at

least apparent independence. To be seen to speak for an entity more powerful than the commentator is to court ridicule from colleagues and a fall in worth in the eyes of the readers. It may well be – it usually is – that the commentator’s views accord at least roughly with those of his newspaper’s editor and editorial position. Howell James, the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, at the Cabinet Office, said that newspapers had become “more of a seamless whole these days – there aren’t many differing voices within them.”

**“There is a gorgeousness about a columnist who represents a political dogma; it’s almost a form of integrity.”**

– Peter Osborne

Polly Toynbee of *The Guardian* dissents from the view that commentators are independent. Though she agrees with Howell James that, as she says: “Commentators reflect in the main the positions that most of their papers take,” she nevertheless adds that, therefore, “most commentators are on the right because that’s the way the British press is. Columnists like (Richard) Littlejohn, (Trevor) Kavanagh and (Melanie) Phillips are influential because they go with the grain of their owners, and their owners – especially Rupert Murdoch - are powerful”. But most – certainly the three Toynbee mentions – would argue that their views are their own, even if a newspaper, or a proprietor, hired them to give them. The columnist Mary Riddell, who writes for the *Daily Telegraph*, said that she wished never to be so close to anyone to whom she spoke that she felt constrained to “write anything that you don’t wholly believe”. And this independence of thought gives commentators a good deal of power. Politicians are often accused of being ‘on message’ as a sign of obeisance before the party whips. No commentator worth their salt wishes to have such a charge laid at their door: their personal opinions, or what are taken to be their personal opinions, are their currency.

# Humble journalist: commentator self-image

No commentator to whom we spoke said s/he was powerful. It doesn't figure on the permissible responses of British commentators. The columnist who said this most strongly was Peter Osborne of the Daily Mail (whose weekly column is sub-titled "On politics and power"):

**"I don't agree with the premise that the commentariat is powerful. I broadly think it is hard to see examples of it having any effect at all. I only have in mind the readers. I don't have any power at all."**

When pushed, some would say their writing might have swayed opinions. Melanie Phillips of the Daily Mail said that her warnings on the threat of militant Islam – especially her book, "Londonistan" – might have convinced civil servants that it was a more serious problem than they had believed; Nick Cohen of the Observer and London's Evening Standard thought his columns on the same subject might have had the same effect. Outside of politics, commentators on business and economics make similar points, usually denying any direct, evidential influence but – as Stefan Stern, who writes a management column for the FT, states: "It contributes to debate: it can start debate off...a handful of superstar columnists could no doubt point to significant changes in policy or approach". Iain Martin of the Telegraph

**" I would like to think that my refusal to accept that cannabis was a safe, soft drug - when all around were falling for the dope propagandists - has made it easier for politicians to backtrack on the legal downgrading of marijuana" – Peter Hitchens**

Media Group said that he, and other commentators of the centre-right, probably did have some influence in the Cameron shadow cabinet because they were, as oppositions usually are, in the stage of looking for new approaches and ideas and look to find them from commentators among others; and as we will see, commentators are seen, and seen by themselves, as moving opinions in certain circumstances. Suzanne Moore of the Mail on Sunday said: "Politicians are loath to admit that they are influenced but they do badger my editor to get rid of me or shut me up, or try to take me out to lunch". Gideon Rachman, the foreign affairs columnist on the FT, says: "I don't see myself as influencing people. In fact, I don't want a chap in Whitehall or the White House changing his view because of what I write. I

want to set people thinking – that’s all”.

On the other hand... Polly Toynbee says that her writing on the Sure Start programme and other social issues probably did help – in that it supported those ministers who were for the programme to press on with it. “Ministers said it helped: I think it helped people to go on who were going that way anyway. It helped in that, unlike most commentators who come from covering politics or sometimes economics, I come from a social affairs background – reporting on policy issues, not on performance of the ministers.” Martin Wolf, of the Financial Times, is the one of our interviewees who protests no modesty, false or otherwise: he believes that the FT is uniquely influential among newspapers – not just in the UK, but in the world, an influence deriving from its elite readership, its global span and what he calls its “open-mindedness”, that is, a reputation for examining issues on their strengths and weaknesses, not conforming to a pre-determined ideological stance. “I think I did have some influence on a particular issue - that of university fees (he was for them). I was told by Andrew Adonis (the Education Minister) that he had used my arguments with Tony Blair, and they had assisted in changing policy. And I think my work on globalisation (Wolf wrote a book, *Why Globalisation Works*, and often deals with global economic issues in his column) had an effect, but mainly in supporting views which are pretty widely held among the elites”. Timothy Garton Ash, the Oxford Professor of European Studies and regular Guardian columnist, said: “I don’t think seeking to influence is the first reason one writes. The first reason is to write something true and interesting.

Second, it is to speak to your readers. And third, it is to perhaps influence government and other actors. I hate the “memo to the President” columns: readers are, in the main, not the President.”

Many commentators believed they get what power they had from the relatively powerless – that is, the readers. This is – perhaps naturally at the time of a centre-left Labour

**“Shifting the discourse is what a good column should do. But I think we are leaving something out here which is the ability to entertain. We are not writing policy documents”**

– Suzanne Moore

government – most strongly believed by commentators on the right. Melanie Phillips, the Daily Mail columnist whose blog was bought up by The Spectator and is now published exclusively online by [www.spectator.co.uk](http://www.spectator.co.uk), was among those to whom we talked who believed this most strongly. Her first declaration was that “I am not writing for people in power or for the media class – but for ordinary people... I’ve noticed that, over the years, large numbers of people will say – you must keep on; we are voiceless.” Denise

Kingsmill, the former chairman of the Competition Commission, says that financial commentators have most power when they connect with the concerns of shareholders – the business equivalent of the electorate. “Corporate leaders are not elected – but this is the constituency to which they are responsible, and feel most vulnerable”.

A variation of the theme of powerlessness is that commentators are powerful only within the political/journalists’ class – attended to only “inside the M25”. Both the former European Minister Denis MacShane MP (whose parliamentary constituency is in Scunthorpe) and the head of the Press Complaints Commission (and former UK ambassador to Washington) Sir Christopher Meyer, said that they rarely heard any mention of the issues which obsess those, whom Editorial Intelligence calls the “Commentariat,” outside London. This chimes in with another piece of commentators’ self-denigration; that they are an overwhelmingly London-based elite, often living in pleasant and expensive parts of north and west London. Stefan Stern

**“Because politicians spend time reading all this bollocks, comment is influential... ideally you don't want them reading the papers because it affects their vanity”**

– Charlie Whelan

(albeit a South Londoner) said: “I sometimes think: who am I to tell people what’s good and not good?” As Rachel Johnson of the Sunday Times put it: “In the end I’m a posh woman from Notting Hill.”

The debate on degrees of powerlessness is not confined to the commentators, of course. At one extreme, Christopher Meyer believes very strongly that politicians should not confer on their commentator-tormentors any power whatsoever – a view he holds so passionately that he devoted much of our interview to it. Meyer had spent the first half of the 1990s as press spokesman to the then Prime Minister John Major and says: “I tried constantly to convince him not to read the newspapers and get upset with the commentators it never worked.” He says: “The power of the commentators has been very much exaggerated, both by themselves and by the politicians. Politicians can react to the supposed power of the commentariat with craven obsequiousness. Both government departments and Number 10 have created very large staffs of press officers – one of the largest reasons for that is to influence the commentators. But in the end the power is slight. John Major was destroyed, not by the press, but by the European Exchange Rate Mechanism.”

On the other side, the former cabinet minister Charles Clarke says: “Of course the commentariat is powerful. Any government committed to change needs to understand that the case for change can only be sustained through strong argument. Commentators reflect the strength of that argument. When I was Secretary of State for Education, driving through the bill on university

tuition fees, a key strategic priority was to persuade a large variety of commentators of our argument. Because comment is a key conduit for arguments – not just the political theatre of the sketchwriters. They give intellectual underpinning and create intellectual fashion. Comment is the essential intersection between the political class and the public”. Timothy Garton Ash gives some examples of where he thought he had influence: the clearest, he thought, was when he wrote in a signed Spectator column, and in an anonymous Times leader in 1984, that the then junior Foreign Minister, Malcolm Rifkind, should insist on visiting the grave of the recently murdered (by the secret police) priest, Jerzy Popieluszko on a visit to Poland. Because Garton Ash wrote two pieces – one by-lined, one not – “Rifkind must have felt there was a crescendo of opinion calling for him to visit the grave! And he did, to the fury of the Communists. So I think there was a bats’ squeak of influence.” Otherwise, he said, any influence is mostly diffuse and difficult to track

In an unusual exchange in April 2006 in the Observer, the columnist and Vanity Fair London Editor Henry Porter and the then Prime Minister Tony Blair set out their opposing views of the state of civil liberties. The fact that this exchange took place, and with such prominence on the opinion pages, speaks strongly for the power of the commentariat. Porter had been writing for some time about the erosion of civil liberties. He claimed that civil liberties in the UK were being destroyed in pursuit of security, ending his philippic with: “You have offered us a trade-off between freedom and security; I fear we will lose both.” Blair replied by saying that much of what Porter wrote was “in the realm of fantasy” or simply incorrect.

In a parallel move, the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke wrote a letter responding to a column on April 15, 2006, by the Independent’s Simon Carr (which began: “If you think you live in a liberal and democratic society, then please read on,”) arguing that Carr had made a “series of incorrect, tendentious and over-simplified assertions about this government’s record on civil liberties.” He ended by saying that the “conclusion would be too much to ask of the ‘Independent’ newspaper.” The Independent’s “viewpaper” style of journalism, in which the reportage and the comment merge into each other and are both continually and highly critical of the government, irks politicians. Tony Blair singled the paper out for criticism in the speech he gave to the Reuters Institute in June 2007.

Senior politicians and other public figures emphasise the significance of the commentariat by becoming commentators themselves to create maximum impact. In the first four months of the year, leading politicians, including the Prime Minister Gordon Brown; the Leader of the Opposition David Cameron; the Foreign Secretary David Miliband; and the London Mayoral candidates Ken Livingstone, Boris Johnson; and Brian Paddick the Shadow Chancellor, all set out their political stall with by-lined comment pieces in the coveted ‘guest’ slots of the opinion pages of, amongst others, the Financial Times, the Sunday Times, the Guardian, Evening Standard and the News of the World. Business leaders join in: Justin King, chief executive of

Sainsbury's, complemented a broadcast think piece for the BBC's Newsnight on the use of plastic bags with a "Personal View" piece in the Daily Telegraph in April, defending his company's policy on plastic bags against that of the government.

Significantly, the "Thunderer" rubric – an appellation of the 19th century when it was coined to describe the influence of The Times' leaders – now serves as a signpost to guest columnists who "thunder" about this or that. Guest columnists themselves can be very powerful; indeed, the success of many comment pages is the calibre of their guest writers, and their topicality. Catherine Meyer, London bureau chief of Time magazine, mentioned Gloria Steinem and Caroline Kennedy, who both wrote guest op-ed pieces in favour of each Democratic candidate during critical stages in the primaries as being influential.

Howell James, who had senior roles as a political aide in 10 Downing Street and running public affairs for the BBC before becoming Permanent Secretary for Government Communications says: "Having worked closely with politicians for the last few years, I can see why they invest so much time to get on the right side of commentators. They want to set the context, and to demonstrate that they're on top of their job and making the right kind of waves. If you're in public life you can't afford to ignore the media."

The latter views seem to be dominant within politics itself, and among those who are close to the political scene. Matthew Taylor, the former head of the No 10 Policy Unit under Tony Blair, now chief executive of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (RSA)

**"We do take a close interest in what the commentators are saying, but not necessarily more than the news pages. If we do, it is to find out who they have been speaking to, because generally it can only be one of around thirty five people"** – anonymous Ministerial aide

said that Blair would read, and at times be swayed by, a selection of commentators who he thought had some intellectual status. Charlie Whelan, the former press advisor to Gordon Brown in the early days of the latter's time at the Treasury, said: "Comment is hugely important because politicians read all this bollocks... ideally you don't want them reading the papers because it affects their vanity... politicians care what they say because people care what the commentators say". A senior aide to a cabinet minister, who would only speak on terms of anonymity, said; "Sensible cabinet ministers see the commentators as one part of a broad and diverse media mix, not the only part. They are valuable to help ministers hear what different voices in the country are saying, but the risk is that the purely political commentators, like Peter Riddell of the Times, are writing only for the Westminster square

mile, and to have influence in comment you must get outside the sealed bubble of insiders and among the voters. To that extent the more mainstream commentators, like Richard Littlejohn in the Daily Mail, matter more because they write about issues like the Ghurkhas or police pay, which resonate with voters”.

Ian Wylie, the CEO of the autism charity, TreeHouse Trust, says: “It seems there is no doubt that by-lined commentators have authority. They are read and their comments are critically scrutinised by a large majority of the people whose collective efforts go to shape policy and practice. Specifically...I think the commentariat has had an impact on the Brown government, which through a combination of inexperience and lack of directive leadership, has given a great deal of authority to commentators by paying them more attention than is perhaps healthy.” In the business world, according to Denise Kingsmill, the effect of columns is undoubted – but mainly affects presentation rather than strategy. “It takes time for the effect to be felt – but one example is corporate social responsibility, where the press I believe played a big role in its encouragement. But it’s undefined: there are movements and attitudes which change over time, in which the media play a major part.” And Denis MacShane says: “Commentators’ independence gives them power: “To paraphrase, facts are boring, comment is fun.”

However, the political insiders insist – and the commentators do not, at least, demur – that ministers will follow unpopular courses of action, against even a united front of commentators, if they believe it right and if the Prime Minister and their senior colleagues are with them. Howell James said: “When ministers believe they have a strong case for something, even when it won’t be popular and will be difficult to get through, they usually decide to go ahead, even against the commentariat.”

**“Educated middle-class people are fantastically impressionable. I believe I could change the minds of most of them with a column, or a dinner party conversation”**

- Peter York

Editorial Intelligence case studies

# Number Crunching

In order to look at the impact of the commentariat **Editorial Intelligence's Sophie Radice** took four very different issues affecting public policy and public opinion and analysed the stance and number of comment pieces across a broad spectrum of newspapers to set them in context of political decisions which were taken at the time. The subjects chosen were the finance trio of **The Northern Rock, non-doms and capital gains tax issues** (which were also analysed separately), **Heathrow** and the plans for a third runway, **supercasinos** and finally, the treatment of the **Gurkhas**.

For the Northern Rock crisis we looked at the huge wave of commentary in the six months leading up to nationalisation and considered if the opinions of commentators had any influence on government U-turns and changes of heart. In our analysis we grouped it with tax issues of non-domiciled residents (non-doms) and capital gains because these three subjects were so often grouped together by the commentators.

For the subject of Heathrow's runway expansion we looked at the same six month period from October 2007 to March 2008 and produced a graph depicting which papers were for or against the idea of a third runway. It became clear that the number of comment pieces on a subject was not necessarily indicative of who was the most vigorous opponent of the idea

because even though the Daily Express wrote the greatest number of commentary pieces coming out against the Heathrow expansion, the Sunday Times comment pieces were the most sharply critical and negative in tone.

For the supercasinos the analysed time period was extended and changed (January 2007- to January 2008) because of Gordon Brown's decision to scrap the supercasinos which came when he took over as Prime Minister in June 2007 and the commentary had been a steady and usually disapproving trickle rather than a single mass. It was therefore more useful in this case to look at a whole year, rather than an intense six-month period. For the Gurkhas too, it was more informative to cover a ten-month period, running from June 2007, to the end of March 2008, so that we could look at how the subject had gradually gained momentum.

# Between a rock and a hard place

The Northern Rock crisis was the subject most keenly covered by commentators and leaders of the national papers in the six months from October 2007 to March 2008.

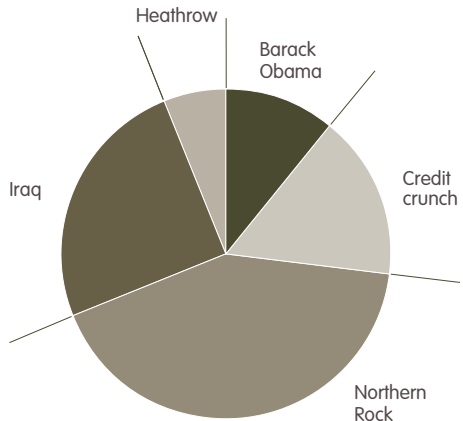
With 763 comment pieces on the stricken bank, it surpassed commentary on Iraq by 300 columns and Barack Obama by nearly 600. The collapse of the Newcastle based mortgage provider was a drawn-out British saga, with greedy bosses, shady private equity firms (JC Flowers, Cerberus and Blackstone) the home-grown hero (Richard Branson) and the oppressed down-trodden share holders and tax payers. There was such a large cast of people, institutions and decisions to point the finger at – the FSA, the Northern Rock directors, the Bank of England, the Treasury, Gordon Brown’s 1997 financial changes and of course the indecisive foot-dragging of a seemingly bewildered government, which many commentators agreed should have acted earlier.

Understandably financial commentators couldn’t really bring themselves to write about much else. It wasn’t just the financial journalists either, Richard Littlejohn in the Daily Mail on February 19 blamed the ‘spivs’ at Northern Rock for ‘knocking out monster mortgages to minimum-wage monkeys’<sup>1</sup> while Rod Liddle in The Sunday Times (November 18) wrote that Northern Rock was ‘portrayed as an act of God, like a freak flood. But, of course, it is not: it has been occasioned by the greed and

stupidity of men like Applegarth’.<sup>2</sup>

Although Northern Rock dominated the column inches it led a platoon of capital gains tax and non-doms tax change issues. Here was the new government looking so dithery that few commentators could resist throwing a punch or three. The constant analysis of this embarrassing trio of topics, often mentioned in the same breath, helped create a climate of U-turns and changes of heart from the government which in turn seemed to do little to quiet criticism from the commentariat.

**Subjects most commented on between October 2007 and March 2008**



<sup>1</sup> Richard Littlejohn, The Daily Mail, 19th February 2008. <sup>2</sup> Rod Liddle, The Sunday Times, 18th November 2007

Between a rock and a hard place:

# Capital gains tax and non-doms

Pre-budget proposals on changes to capital gains tax changes and non-doms' tax were understood by commentators to have been put forward as populist moves to show that the government was doing something about division between the super wealthy and the very poor of Britain – a subject that many columnists wrote about during 2007.

Although the non-dom tax plans were seen as directly lifted from the Conservative Party conference both tax changes were meant to hit the private equity fat cats by plugging up tax loopholes and some columnists and leaders at least appreciated the sentiment. Before the pre-budget report of October 9 The Financial Times leader ( October 2) urged Labour to do something to tackle the 'bizarre anomaly by which international billionaires can keep their money offshore, live in London and not pay a penny in tax'.<sup>3</sup> The Daily Mail, October 23, Alex Brummer defended the pre-budget report's handling of the non-doms and capital-gains tax by saying that business lobbies cannot 'have it both ways', by asking for tax simplification and less red tape on one hand and on the other asking for special exemptions for entrepreneurship. Who added that, 'the real key for enterprise is access to start up capital, not the tax bill when assets are cashed out'.<sup>4</sup>

By the time the actual budget came around on March 12 the national mood had changed. Small businesses had petitioned the government because they felt they were going to be penalised and the wealthy non-doms were supposedly

threatening to move away from London. Most commentators felt that Alistair Darling had accidentally lashed out at the wrong people and that small businesses in particular were right to be angry. Darling had already promised a revision of capital gains tax by offering relief to small businesses relief in November while February saw a get out clause for non-doms when the chancellor said that he would no longer require them to make additional disclosures about their income and gains arising abroad. Commentators such as The Evening Standard's Chris Blackhurst who had seemed keen on Darling doing something about non-doms in the Autumn felt by the following February that it could do Britain's reputation as a financial haven a great deal of harm.<sup>5</sup> The over-whelming commentariat view by March (excluding the Guardian's Nils Pratley and Polly Toynbee who were consistently unsympathetic to the view that the financial services would really be damaged by these taxes<sup>6</sup>) was that the climate had changed dramatically in the last six months and that the tax plans were thought up on the hoof.

A day after the 2008 budget in which the chancellor protected small businesses

<sup>3</sup> Leader, The Financial Times, 2nd October 2007. <sup>4</sup> Alex Brummer, The Daily Mail, 23rd October 2007. <sup>5</sup> Chris Blackhurst, The Evening Standard, 25th February 2008. <sup>6</sup> Nils Pratley, The Guardian, 13th March, Polly Toynbee, The Guardian 29th February 2008. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

and created loop-holes for non-doms, Adrian Hamilton in the Independent (March 13) summed up the national mood, now more anxious about recession than hitting the wealthy and deeply shaken by what had happened to Northern Rock. Hamilton said that when it came to taxes, politicians tend to react to last year's mood just as circumstances are changing and that now that the 'City is engulfed in the biggest financial crisis for a generation, or even the war' it may well be 'the wrong fight, at the wrong time, in the wrong place.'<sup>7</sup>

.....

## Between a rock and a hard place: Northern Rock

*After the drama of the late summer of 2007 with the Bank of England giving Northern Rock emergency funds on September 28, October saw 113 comments by the commentariat picking over what to do, who was to blame and what lessons should be learnt.*

Each week seemed to bring a new potential buyer for the bank and while some commentators felt that Richard Branson was simply courting publicity, others, such as Lucy Farndon, writing in the Daily Mail on October 13 saw him as an 'unlikely saviour'<sup>8</sup> whose intervention should be welcomed by shareholders because they would be able to enjoy the benefits if he turned the business around. In October too, Alistair Darling failed to impress commentators when he

appeared in front of the Treasury Select Committee and many writers looked back to financial systems devised by Gordon Brown and Ed Balls in 1997. In the Daily Telegraph of October 22 Liam Halligan asked for a reversal of some of this financial legislation which took responsibility for banking supervision away from Threadneedle Street and gave it to the Financial Services Authority, leaving the bank in charge of financial stability yet reliant on the FSA for information.<sup>9</sup>

November saw outrage from all quarters of the commentariat as bidders for Northern Rock urged the Bank of England to waive interest charges of £2bn on its crisis loan and many wondered how the tax payer would be expected to foot such a massive bill. Nationalisation became a very real possibility with the Daily Mail leader on November 15 asking how many more millions of taxpayers would have to stump up if the bank fell under the dead hand of the state.<sup>10</sup> By the 20th the Daily Mail had thought up the radical idea of making the financial community foot the bill for its own problems 'then the rest of us might be less resentful of those vast City bonuses'.<sup>11</sup> This was the month when commentators became really excited with many of them arguing over the benefits or evils of a nationalised bank – there were nearly 200 columns on the subject.

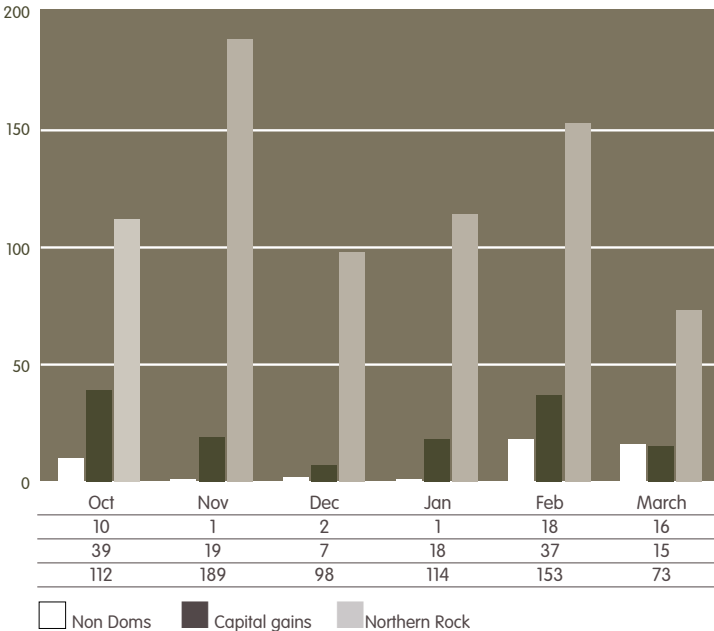
December saw Northern Rock's chief executive resign, something nearly all financial commentators throughout the British media had been asking for, and in the Guardian, both its leader and its writer Nils Pratley agreed on December 14 that nationalisation was really the only option.<sup>12</sup> The Daily Express's Andrew

<sup>7</sup> Adrian Hamilton, The Independent, 13th March 2008. <sup>8</sup> Lucy Farndon, The Daily Mail 13th October 2007. <sup>9</sup> Liam Halligan, The Daily Telegraph, 22nd October 2007. <sup>10</sup> Leader, The Daily Mail, 15th November 2007. <sup>11</sup> Leader, The Daily Mail, 20th November 2007. <sup>12</sup> Nils Pratley, The Guardian, 14th December 2007. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

Johnson writing on January 15 felt that nationalisation would be a nightmare for the Government, battering its reputation for financial management and raising the spectre of the Treasury repossessing homes from the defaulting Rock. On February 17 Alistair Darling announced that the two proposals tabled for Northern Rock, one from a group led by Virgin and the other from in-house management- wouldn't actually offer enough value to the taxpayer and that the Rock would have to be nationalised. 109 comment pieces were written about the nationalisation of Northern Rock in the last two weeks of February. Of these perhaps one of the most thought-provoking was by

Peter Osborne in the Daily Mail on February 23 who said he had learnt that Goldman Sachs advised the government that some form of public ownership for Northern Rock was the only sensible solution all the way back in September. Osborne wanted to know why the government had spent so much time and public money trying to avoid the nationalisation of Northern Rock that was possibly inevitable from the beginning. He asked for the debate to be kept alive and for real answers from the government about what happened<sup>13</sup>. On March 19 Northern Rock said that it would have to cut 2,000 jobs and reduce its residential mortgage lending by half.

**Number of comments pieces on non-doms, capital gains tax changes and Northern Rock Oct 2007- March 2008**



<sup>13</sup> Peter Osborne, The Daily Mail, 23rd February 2008. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

# Heathrow

The case for a third runway at Heathrow was discussed by 112 commentators in the six month period from October 2007 to March 2008.

This discussion included their opinions on the hands-off attitude of Ferrovial (the Spanish owner of the British Airports Authority) the case against expansionism, a more plausible site for a new airport in the East End of London, the crash landing of a passenger plane on January 17, protesters on the House of Commons' roof, the BAA's agreement with the Civil Aviation Authority about raising landing charges and the security breach just before the Queen's visit on March 13.

Those who felt that a new terminal was inevitable and necessary such as the writers of the Evening Standard leaders throughout the six months period analysed had considerable reservations. The Evening Standard invited Zac Goldsmith to write a guest column hoping that 'just this once the Government prioritises the quality of London life above the short term interests of the aviation industry'<sup>14</sup> on November 12. The Evening Standard clearly stated that it favoured another runway, but that the Government should take a much more robust approach to the aviation industry than it does at present. All writers, even those in favour of the new runway, wrote negatively about the existing experience of being a passenger at Heathrow, of the bad service, long security queues, and 'squalor' of the surroundings. Financial writers told stories of businessmen who

choose not to fly to London because they couldn't face going through the airport.

The Sun Leader of February 28 came out strongly against the runway, saying that the environmental costs would be too great<sup>15</sup>. Simon Jenkins in the Sunday Times of November 25 wrote that denying approval for a third runway would have actually boosted the economy by encouraging more people to holiday at home and helped fight global warming. He ended with the terse statement– 'all we do know is that the government's case for a third Heathrow runway is so thin as to amount to a single sentence. BA wants it.'<sup>16</sup>

On January 31 2008 Camilla Cavendish of The Times stated that she felt that the British public was being conned over the need for a new runway. Cavendish did not believe that the airport was full or that there was any important economic reason for doing it as she very much doubted that aviation has such a huge impact on the economy. Similarly she felt that arguments over the environment, capacity and usage didn't hold water.' At one stroke we are looking at a con, perhaps the greatest ever perpetrated on the British people by the DTI'. Such a distortion she felt, suggested that the DTI had ceased to function as an arm of the government and had become a mere

<sup>14</sup> Zac Goldsmith, The Evening Standard, 12th November 2007. <sup>15</sup> Leader, The Sun, 28th February 2008. <sup>16</sup> Simon Jenkins, The Sunday Times, 5th November 2007. <sup>17</sup> Camilla Cavendish, The Times, 31st January 2008. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

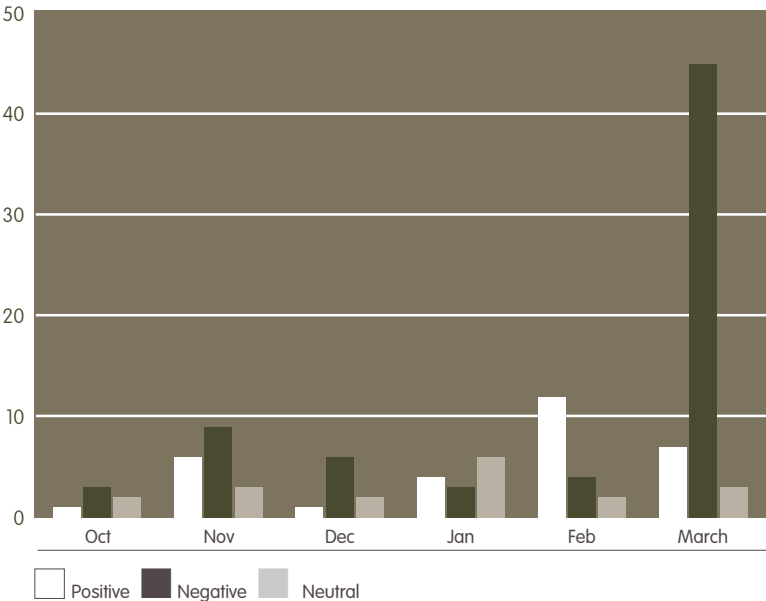
subsidiary of BAA<sup>17</sup>.

The Sunday Times leader of March 9 went even further when writing about the government document putting the case forward for a third runway which was published on the same day. The Sunday Times felt that 'data on the impact of a third runway was repeatedly altered' and suspected that it was due to collusion with BAA. The Sunday Times concluded that, 'Ministers seem so beholden to BAA and Heathrow that they have closed their minds to the alternatives, whatever the cost to the environment and the quality of life.'<sup>18</sup>

The debacle of the Heathrow's fifth terminal opening on March 27, had 22 columns written about it in the last days of March with only one – the Daily

Telegraph leader of the 28th - showing some optimism that 'teething problems would be overcome'<sup>19</sup>. The Daily Mail, Daily Express and the Financial Times leaders wanted BA's chief executive Willie Walsh to resign and were depressed about the whole future of the airport, while The Guardian saw the terminal's messy opening as a clear reason to rethink any other kind of air-port expansion. The Sunday Times, the harshest critic of plans for a new terminal throughout the six months analysed, saw Terminal 5 as symptomatic of underlying problems with the airport itself and that 'the lesson of Terminal 5 chaos is that however much you spend trying to bring Heathrow into the 21st century, its fundamental problems will remain'.<sup>20</sup>

**Number of comment pieces on Heathrow Oct 2007- March 2008**



<sup>18</sup> Leader, The Sunday Times, 9th March 2008. <sup>19</sup> Leader, The Daily Telegraph, 28th March 2008. <sup>20</sup> Leader, The Sunday Times, 30th March 2008. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

# £supercasinos

The proposal to create supercasinos was not one of those subjects that caused a flurry of commentary, but rather a steady stream of disapproval from the time the idea was introduced in late 2005 to when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister and killed off the idea in the summer of 2007.

Between January 2007 and January 2008 there were 57 columns of commentary about supercasinos, many in the early part of the year comparing Blackpool and Manchester, both towns considered suitable sites by the government for a supercasino.

Nick Cohen was in a waspish mood in *The Observer* (January 14) when he looked towards Australia as an example of how governments become as addicted to the potential tax revenues of gambling – ‘Of all the addictions gambling fuels, the one we should fear most is the dependency of governments. Once they are hooked, it takes a tremendous effort to wrench them free.’ He observed that the internet had created a culture which meant that gambling can take place at anytime and anywhere which in turn meant that the government wouldn’t have to feel that all gambling problems would be laid at the door of casinos. What he wanted was an admission from ministers ‘that gambling must be contributing to the debt which is sinking so many households.’<sup>21</sup>

On January 30 2007 the government announced plans for 17 new casinos with one super or ‘regional’ casino in Manchester. On the same day the then culture secretary Tessa Jowell answered

questions in the House of Commons. She responded to Conservative MP Julie Kirkbride’s concerns about the effects of gambling on those families who could least afford it by echoing Nick Cohen’s predictions of what the government response would be.

“On the point about deep social change, that social change is going on anyway. Every single television and mobile phone, as well as the internet, offers opportunities for gambling which were not available even five years ago. The Government are committed to public protection through legislation that protects the vulnerable, but we recognise that millions of people want to gamble as a legitimate leisure pursuit and should be allowed to do so.” (Hansard Publications January 30 2007)<sup>22</sup>

For the majority of columnists writing about the issue supercasinos became the symbol of the government’s greed and lack of morality. Martin Townsend in *The Daily Express* on February 14 wrote that he was ‘horrified’ about the plans for Manchester<sup>23</sup>, (the *Daily Express* and its columnists were the supercasino’s most vocal critics) In March in the *Daily Mail* Max Hastings, called for Tessa Jowell’s resignation because of her immorality<sup>24</sup> and in the same month (27th) Polly

<sup>21</sup> Nick Cohen, *The Observer*, 14th January 2008. <sup>22</sup> Hansard Publications, 30th January 2008. <sup>23</sup> Martin Townsend, *The Daily Express*, 14th February 2007. <sup>24</sup> Max Hastings, *The Daily Mail*, 27th March 2007. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

## The Power of the Commentariat

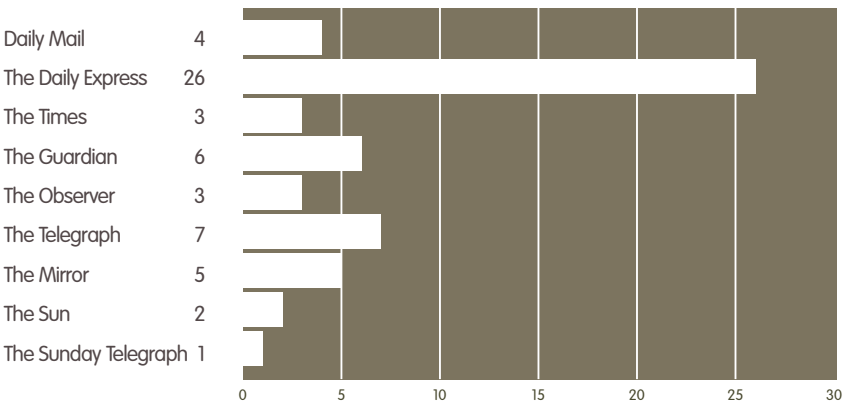
Toynbee of The Guardian worried about the effect on the families of gambling addicts.<sup>25</sup> Most seemed to feel that there would be better ways to regenerate an area than to put a great big casino on it.

These outraged voices didn't seem to be soothed by Gordon Brown's 2007 budget which imposed a penal rate of taxation on casinos and announced a tax on online gambling operations designed to discourage sites from registering in the United Kingdom. There were only a few commentators who didn't share the pack's disapproval. A notable exception was Daniel Finkelstein, comment editor of The Times, writing on March 28 in reaction to the House of Lords rejection that day of the supercasino in Manchester. Finkelstein felt that Britain had a long history of 'panics about gambling' and went back to the time of Elizabeth I when the first ever lottery provoked the 'outrage' by leaders of the respectable middle-class opinion' who

just couldn't bear to see 'rewards allocated through sheer luck to the feckless and indolent'. Finkelstein had a dig at the distaste of the left, in the form of another commentator, Polly Toynbee, who had written the day before about supercasinos and ended with a blast at City bonuses, people buying yachts and 'global-finance gambles with their aura of corrupting unreality'. For Toynbee, Finkelstein wrote, it might be difficult to stop such squalid and unmerited booty but at least there was something that could be done to stop casinos.

Finkelstein felt that this saving people from themselves attitude was both patronising and futile, and that most restriction only ends in the habit or pastime thriving underground – 'The idea that one supercasino in Manchester is going to undermine the foundations of a civilised society is ridiculous and immature. Tessa Jowell's position is brave and right. Now she needs a little luck. I

### Commentary on Supercasinos from Jan 2007-Jan 2008



<sup>25</sup> Polly Toynbee, The Guardian, 27th March 2007. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

## Number Crunching

hope she gets it.<sup>26</sup> Less than a month after he became Prime Minister Gordon Brown chose to tell parliament his 'moral compass' led him to believe that regeneration might be a better way of meeting [the] economic and social needs of deprived areas than a Las Vegas-style casino. Whitehall sources later acknowledged that the controversial plans were "dead in the water".<sup>27</sup> Well, not quite, on February 26 the government stated that they still had plans to build 16 smaller casinos. The Daily Mail leader on hearing rumours of the plans in January

had asked Mr Brown to 'think again' and to search around for that famous moral compass<sup>28</sup> while Polly Toynbee rolled up her sleeves for a new fight against the 'perverse logic of the industry's commitment to something called "socially responsible gambling". While she didn't suggest banning gambling she felt that there was an important social difference between adults doing what they pleased to thrusting it at them in everyday life. She urged parliament to vote against what would still be Britain's 'biggest ever casinos'<sup>29</sup>.

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# The Gurkhas

Much of the commentary about the plight of Gurkhas denied the right to settle in Britain because they retired before 1997 came after the Gurkhas protested at the House of Commons, with the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg becoming their very visible political champion.

Vicki Woods, however, wrote about the Gurkhas difficult situation in The Daily Telegraph of June 30. This was something which many people felt had been resolved in September 2004 when the government confirmed that it would change immigration rules to let them stay, she wrote, but there was a loop-hole which meant that only Gurkhas who had served for at least four years and who had been discharged after July 1 1997 were eligible for 'fast-track' citizenship. She highlighted the efforts of the Army Rumour Service website (ARRSE) which

was trying to actively publish other cases of Gurkhas being treated unfairly.<sup>30</sup> Carole Malone was quick off the mark too when on August 5 she wrote in the Sunday Mirror that it would be a 'supreme gesture of goodwill to allow them to spend their last years here.'<sup>31</sup>

By late summer the Daily Express had started a 'Support the Gurkas' text campaign and the paper could rightly claim in March that it had long been the most active supporter of Gurkhas' rights with constant news stories in the previous six months by Maryn Brown, dozens of

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Finkelstein, The Times, 28th March 2007. <sup>27</sup> Whitehall sources, BBC News 24, 11th July 2007. <sup>28</sup> Leader, The Daily Mail, 23rd January 2008. <sup>29</sup> Polly Toynbee, The Guardian, 26th February 2008. <sup>30</sup> Vicki Woods, The Daily Telegraph, 30th June 2007. <sup>31</sup> Carole Malone, the Sunday Mirror, 5th August 2007. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission.

letters from outraged readers and leaders on the subject on March 19, 20 and 26. The plight of the Gurkhas was used as a launch pad to discuss immigration in general by The Daily Express and The Daily Mail. The Daily Express leader of March 26 said: “Even murderers and rapists could be entitled to a British passport if their homeland was considered “too dangerous” under human rights laws for them to be deported. In Labour’s morally deprived universe, more “rights” accrue to murderers and rapists than brave, law-abiding Gurkhas such as Falklands war hero Gyanendra Rai, who has been denied NHS treatment for back injuries that nearly killed him.”<sup>32</sup>

Sarah Sands’ commentary in The Independent on Sunday was particularly

powerful, because of the extremely moving quality of her commentary. It was soon picked up by bloggers and pro-Gurkhas websites. She compared the dignity, honour and bravery of the Gurkhas to the tawdry case of Raymond Horne, an elderly paedophile who arrived in Britain having been kicked out of Australia with his British citizenship intact. She pointed out that Prince Harry was put under the care of the Gurkhas and spoke of meeting many Gurkhas when she was in Afghanistan last August. Sands described the friendships she developed: ‘As I sat quietly with my guide watching the sun set over the Himalyas, I felt the pull of historical ties and shared values. The Gurkhas are among Britain’s oldest allied and deepest friends.’<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Leader, The Daily Express, 26th March. <sup>33</sup> Sarah Sands, The Independent on Sunday, 23rd March 2008. Copyright Editorial Intelligence Ltd 2008. Do not reproduce without permission

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“Political reputations are yo-yoing and columnists are like a herd of wildebeest – it’s bedlam. **More like power of the madhouse than power of the Commentariat**” – Nick Cohen

# The Power of the Commentariat

How much power do the media commentators – the leader writers, columnists and bloggers - who Editorial Intelligence first called ‘*The Commentariat*’ (after the late Frank Johnson) - really have?

*Is their influence tangible, or is it intangible?*

Do commentators wish to directly influence policy makers or is influence a by-product of their first journalistic obligation, to the reader? And can influence be measured and judged and if so how?

The Power of the Commentariat, which is co-written by Julia Hobsbawm, CEO of Editorial Intelligence, and John Lloyd of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, and contributing editor at the Financial Times, is the first look at the subject of media ‘op-ed’ comment and its role in shaping debates, an political direction.

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