



Popping Keith Vaz's bubble

by Simon Belt

Keith Vaz MP has been known as the Teflon politician for a while, even reportedly dubbed the Vaseline kid within and around Westminster. All that ended on Sunday as the ***Sunday Mirror*** published an article alleging that the Labour MP for Leicester East since 1987, paid for sex with male prostitutes. Big deal eh?

It's the context of a war between the press in Britain and an increasingly censorious and technocratic political elite that has turned this private matter into national news. The situation for this Honourable Member is complicated further by him being the Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee since 2007. From Keith's neighbouring constituency, Conservative MP

Andrew Bridgen has wasted no time in saying that he'll be reporting Mr Vaz MP to the Commons Standards watchdog and perhaps the police.

In terms of the alleged facts of the situation, nothing particularly problematic seems to have taken place, and as far as the shenanigans of some MPs have been revealed, it's a tad mundane. No laws seem to have been broken, and sex between adult men began being decriminalised with the Sexual Offences Act 1967 and sensibly is now on a par with other sexual activity. The use of poppers in the reported liaison is also pretty mundane by some of more wild revelations of heady drug fuelled sex parties of a previous, and in some ways, more liberal eras. Should we see the popping of Vaz's Teflon coated balloon more than a personal annoyance?

Simon Danczuk, Labour MP for Rochdale said on LBC "He's clearly been struggling with his sexuality. It won't be easy in terms of his family, dealing with the fallout.", which is understanding from someone also facing some of the same limelight for the profile he's got. The more heartening aspect of Simon Danczuk's intervention though was to publicly rebuff the notion that the press, and especially the tabloid press, should not be curtailed for such investigative reporting, however prurient it is.

Perhaps a little tongue in cheek and less charitable, though equally robust was Katie Hopkins saying "We all have grubby secrets... Go you. Little bit of sympathy and support for Keith Vaz this morning. Little bit of a shocker to find out your whole private life has been made public. Rock on Keith Vaz". There are clearly some personal and party political gripes being aired through causing Keith Vaz and his family some unnecessary distress, but the solution is surely to end the futile war between politics and the press.

As politics in Britain, and elsewhere, has become less about big ideas or contested ways of organising society, and more about technocratic tinkering or society as it is, the role of the press has been seen as more problematic to the new wave of managerial politicians. Calls to curb the freedom of the press culminating recently with the Leveson inquiry and proposed regulations following it, has resulted in a press that feels itself under the cosh searching for ways of deflecting the pressure they're under by turning the spotlight on politicians. As politicians have less to say about big ideas they also feed the frenzy with a focus on expenses and personal morality, picking on their opponents for linguistic gaffs using the wrong vernacular.

In many ways, I think Keith Vaz, along with Simon Danczuk and all the others finding themselves in the spotlight for their behavioural indiscretions rather than the policies or ideas they promote, are reaping the consequences of the politics of micromanagement, and extending that to include regulating the press to being no more than the PR wing of government. Indeed, speaking to Sky News, the Teflon kid said "It is deeply disturbing that a national newspaper should have paid individuals to have acted in this way." As chairman of the influential Home Affairs Select Committee of MPs, he also lambasted the Met from 2011 onwards for 'not doing enough' to crack down on the excesses of tabloid journalism.

With a greater focus on ideas for how to organise society, there need not be such a pernicky tension between politicians and the press, and with less focus on micromanaging our behaviours, there would be less focus on the behaviours of our politicians private lives, and less impact of such stories. Downplaying the climate of restraining Press Freedom as a backdrop to this story with high-falutin claims of personal autonomy for politician individuals will forever miss the point - **Press Freedom** is primarily a logical as well as a practical freedom.