

Prime Minister

In case you not already read

Page 215

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page 2. and third leader on
centre page.

Sherman view on loyalties

By Peter Hennessy

Sir Alfred Sherman, a personal adviser to Mrs Margaret Thatcher for nearly ten years, said last night that it was better for an adviser to face political death than "to be drawn into competition in courtiership and sycophancy".

In a lecture, "Leadership and Advisership", at the London School of Economics, Sir Alfred said: "Leaders, by the nature of things, all too easily attract sycophants".

Sir Alfred, director of studies at the Centre for Policy Studies, the private free-market think tank, is on sabbatical after differences with Lord Thomas of Swynnerton, the centre's chairman.

Sir Alfred said an adviser's loyalty must include speaking his mind

Leading article, page 11

INSIDE NUMBER TEN

Inside most men and women with a strong interest in public affairs there lurks a would-be adviser to a prime minister. Consider the attractions. Without the need to suffer the indignity of the selection process to become a parliamentary candidate and the exhaustion of an election, or even the rigorous requirements of the Civil Service Selection Board and the steady plod to high Whitehall office, you can have the ear of the mighty. Hobby-horses when translated into a Prime Minister's Minute acquire the ability to run and run where, in less exalted circumstances, they could fall at the first fence, victims of scepticism and conventional wisdom. Yet the life of a prime minister's intimate can be perilous. One slip and you plunge into outer darkness. The safe route is conformity to the known preferences of the patron. That path is itself a form of death, according to Sir Alfred Sherman, a Thatcher intimate from the Centre for Policy Studies stable, in his lecture at the London School of Economics last night. He would sooner, he said, face political death than become a courtier.

Mrs Thatcher's premiership has been singular for several reasons. One unusual aspect has been the cluster of former advisers who have gone public on their craft while she is still in No 10 (indeed, Sir Alfred, who was never on the Whitehall payroll, can still be called an adviser in the informal sense of the word). The couple who have lectured on the subject in the past five days, Sir Alfred and Mr

Norman Strauss, a member of the Downing Street Policy Unit until 1982, have gone against the contemporary grain by suggesting that, far from the Prime Minister's style being too presidential and insufficiently collective, Mrs Thatcher should isolate herself still further (Mr Strauss's advice) and strengthen herself against the pressures of Whitehall and vested departmental interests (Sir Alfred).

Two more Thatcher advisers have in the recent past contributed to the debate on how the Prime Minister should run the country. The best known is Sir John Hoskyns, her former senior policy adviser, who has said repeatedly in public that without a transfusion of new men and new methods into Whitehall, even a formidable politician like Mrs Thatcher cannot devise a strategy for lasting economic recovery. While Professor John Ashworth, Vice-Chancellor of Salford University and former Chief Scientist in the Central Policy Review Staff, has told her not to despise the social sciences or think tanks and to avoid "the temptation to look to... husbands, chauffeurs, hairdressers, old school chums and especially family relatives for advice and support in fields other than the emotional/personal".

Sound men, the "good and the great" of public life, may bridle when Sir Alfred and Mr Strauss denounce the Civil Service and call for innovation, creativity, fantasy or isolation. Heterodoxy, and spiky people to promulgate it, are a necessary part of any prime ministerial team. So are

Whitehall greybeards, those whom Hugh Dalton called "congenital snaghtons" to stop the "creative" ones getting out of hand. Such a team also needs a fixer or two, someone who knows where the bodies are buried in Whitehall, someone who can decode the real meaning of bland departmental submissions that cross the prime minister's desk. In short, what is needed, is a cabinet on the French model. In her expanded Policy Unit, Mrs Thatcher has something very close to it.

The existence of her second-term Policy Unit under the leadership of Mr John Redwood, raises two questions, one internal the other external. Does it pass the Sherman test of eschewing sycophancy and of telling the "patron" only those things she has "not heard before, but which once heard impress themselves"? Does it, put another way, speak truth to power? If it is so valuable to the Prime Minister why cannot her more heavily burdened Cabinet ministers have their own cabinets? The Treasury and the Foreign Office are pivotal institutions. Defence, Health and Social Security and Environment are big businesses as well as great departments of state. They would surely be more manageable if their secretaries of state each had a team of innovators, snag hunters and fixers? Or is that asking too much of a Prime Minister who, like all her recent predecessors in No 10, too often feels cornered or outnumbered when faced with the departmental satrapies that surround her?