

Observations

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

Big beasts and large appetites

Kevin Maguire

Leaders, like armies, march on their stomachs. David Cameron likes to pop in to the members' dining room for lunch on Wednesdays after Prime Minister's Questions. Whips corral Tory trenchermen on his table to reassure Cameron that he whacked Little Ted out of the ground, particularly when the thin-skinned Premier was well beaten. By all accounts, the meals give sycophancy a bad name. Dave usually orders roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Millions of workers in public services and industry, including transport and construction, are forbidden to drink alcohol during working hours. Not prime ministers (and, in the interests of self-disclosure, political journalists). Dave, muttered my snout, also normally enjoys a glass or two of claret. George Osborne, on an occasion when he joined the backslapping throng, studiously stuck to water. It appears the PM and Chancellor play rival roles of smiley Cavalier and puritan Roundhead in semi-private as well as public.

Johann Lamont, Scottish Labour's feisty leader, had a witty dig at "big beasts, or men as I call them" in her speech to the party's Dundee conference, aimed at Male-minster Scots who think they, not her, will run the Edinburgh anti-devo fight. More pointed was an early draft, in which Lamont declared: "Big beasts, as Douglas Alexander proves, can come in very wee packages." Wee Dougie's sharp elbows are rubbing other Labour people up the wrong way. One, complaining that the Paisley MP's campaigns in 2010 for the general election and David Miliband had failed, noted that, if repeated, the shadow foreign

secretary could be visiting a foreign land when he returns to Scotland.

That bear of a man, Richard Harrington, a significant physical presence despite shedding a few stone, should beware Westminster's feministas. The six-foot-something former property developer, who represents Watford, suggested he was fit for one Olympic event: "Possibly for the ladies' shot-put," he opined, "for which I was once told I had an ideal physique." The shot-putting London 2012 gold hopeful Jessica Ennis is unlikely to be described as having the build of a Tory backbencher.



Mr Rebekah Brooks, Cameron's police horse-riding chum Charlie, is familiar with Dave's appetite. The pair were at Eton together and the PM's schoolfriends still call the people's toff "Fat Dave". Hacks who hailed Steve Hilton as his key aide overlooked Gabby Bertin, his Girl Friday. The strike-breaking Scabby Gabby's "bun patrol" to curb Cameron's snacking helps prevent that Fat Dave moniker gaining wider currency.

Chris Leslie, a shadow minister thought to have his finger on the pulse of British yooof as baby of the House when first elected an MP, aged 24, back in 1997, has acquired that outdated way of speaking that infects parliamentarians. He refers to the "interweb", rather than web or net. A colleague speculated that Leslie listens to the wireless in his motor car before arriving home to put a record on the music centre. ●
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Farewell, Messiah? Chávez in Caracas

VENEZUELA

Hugo's last stand?

Girish Gupta

Hugo Chávez rode in an open-top motorcade to the international airport in Caracas on 24 February, his vehicle plastered with an image of Christ and the procession flanked by supporters. The Venezuelan president was on his way to Havana to receive treatment for a recurrence of the cancer that left his government rudderless last year.

"I dreamt a while ago of Christ who came and said, 'Chávez, rise, it is not time to die, it's time to live,'" the socialist maverick said as he prepared to board the plane. Though his charisma and PR skills are as strong as ever, his health is not, and this year will bring his most hotly fought election yet. "I'm a human being. I'm not immortal," the 57-year-old said. "Independent of my personal destiny, this revolution already has its own momentum and will not be stopped."

With those words, Chávez, for the first time in his 13-year tenure, admitted that the "revolution", styled very much in his own image, could continue without him. Since the former paratrooper was first elected president, Venezuelans haven't so much supported political parties or an ideology as backed a personality.

Illness couldn't have come at a worse time for the populist president. An organised and united opposition has just chosen the young, charismatic Henrique Capriles Radonski as its leader to take on Chávez in

October's presidential election. The 39-year-old state governor won with 64 per cent of more than three million votes, showing a momentum that the opposition hasn't enjoyed in years.

Chávez is concerned. "We're going to pulverise you," he said, welcoming Capriles to the ring. "You're a lowlife pig." The government's machinery is also cranking up a smear campaign. On state media soon after the vote, Capriles's Jewish roots were attacked in an online essay titled "The Enemy is Zionism", and a television personality read out what he said was a police report alleging that Capriles was caught performing oral sex on another man in 2000.

Capriles is smart enough to know not to respond directly. Though Venezuela has one of the world's worst murder rates, 26 per cent inflation and regular power outages, Chávez remains popular in the barrios, and it is there that Capriles must win over voters. The new opposition leader is fighting a calculated campaign, never mentioning or attacking Chávez directly.

Instead, Capriles praises Brazil's leftist former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, credited with reviving the Brazilian economy. Those who doubt Capriles's sincerity point to his wealthy background and historically centre-right leanings.

Barrio boys

The tide in Venezuela does seem to be turning. Watched over by murals of Che Guevara, Chávez and a dozen other left-wing heroes, hundreds turned out to vote in the primaries in Caracas's 23 de Enero barrio, until now regarded as a Chávez stronghold.

"Chávez has only one idea," said a 64-year-old fruit-seller, Roberto González, as he chopped up a malanga. "We need various ideas, because that's democracy." In the nearby slum of Antimano, Yesman Utrera, a 24-year-old student who once supported Chávez, stumbled down a set of shoddy steps. "People believe that Chávez is their Christ and came to save us," Utrera said, "but it's not like that." ●