

# Playing with explosives

An interview with Paul Staines, aka the blogger Guido Fawkes

TOBY YOUNG

**M**PS TO VOTE ON DEATH PENALTY', announced the front page of the *Daily Mail* earlier this month. This was a reference to a petition on a government website calling for the restoration of capital punishment, but the true significance of the story was buried in the small print. The e-petition in question was created by Paul Staines, the man behind the Guido Fawkes blog. Until recently, Staines's influence was confined to uncovering political scandals, making him a must-read in the Westminster village but relatively unknown in the wider world. Now, it seems, he's single-handedly put capital punishment back on the political agenda.

'Harry reckons this is our Glenn Beck moment,' says Staines, referring to his second-in-command Harry Cole. Political anoraks will recall that Beck, an outspoken American talk-show host, lost his slot on Fox News after he branded President Obama a racist, prompting an advertiser boycott. But Staines doesn't seriously think his e-petition will harm his career.

'Harry spends too much time on Twitter,' he says. 'I didn't go to Westminster to make friends and I've achieved that.'

Recent enemies include the Trinity Mirror group, which he has succeeded in roping into the hacking scandal thanks to a series of embarrassing revelations about Piers Morgan, former editor of the *Daily Mirror*. 'I honestly think Trinity Mirror's share price would be higher if it wasn't for the campaign,' he says.

I've arranged to meet Staines at the French House in Soho, a regular haunt of his in the 1980s when he was a libertarian activist. (He described his politics back then as 'Thatcher on drugs'.) At one point, he was the editor of *Political Briefing*, an anti-left-wing smear sheet put together by a former MI5 officer, before morphing into the PR man for the Sunrise collective, an organiser of acid house parties. It's an odd career path for a political journalist and, in truth, that description doesn't really do him justice. He's less of a news gatherer than a news-maker, a mischievous imp who's fashioned a bully pulpit for himself that makes him considerably more influential than any lobby correspondent. 'I've been called the bastard love child of Popbitch and Kelvin MacKenzie,' he says with evident pride.

There's a streak of self-satisfaction running through him — a kind of bumptious vanity — that can rub people up the wrong way, but it's hard to fault his journalistic record. He scored his first coup in 2006 when he broke the story of John Prescott's affair with his secretary and subsequent scalps include Peter Hain and Damian McBride. Towards the end of the Brown government, when senior Tories were reluctant to go in too hard for fear of jeopardising the new hug-a-hoodie brand, Staines was an effective negative campaigner.

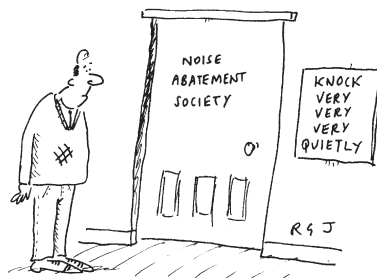
'I did feel that I was single-handedly destabilising the last government, particu-

*He describes his politics back in the 1980s as 'Thatcher on drugs'*

larly during the Tories' de-toxifying phase,' he says. 'There was a reluctance to attack.'

One of his proudest moments was discovering just how upset Gordon Brown was by his year-long campaign against the Smith Institute, a charitable think-tank set up in honour of the late John Smith. Staines uncovered evidence that both the Prime Minister and Ed Balls were using the Institute to further their political careers, something forbidden by charity law. In the end, the charity commission was forced to investigate and the Smith Institute was wound up.

'I know he got really narked off about that because there's a passage in [the pollster] Deborah Mattinson's memoirs in which he storms into the room, clutching a printout of my blog, screaming for my head,' he says. 'That gives me immense pleasure, to know that Gordon Brown was reading the blog with a picture of him at the top in a clown costume.'



So what makes Staines such an effective thorn in the side of the Establishment? (He occasionally goes for Conservative politicians as well.) There are plenty of theories about this. According to Andrew Neil, it's the 'drip, drip' factor — his habit of worrying away at the same story for months on end, continually revealing new tidbits that are often passed on by his readers. ('My favourite emails are the ones that begin, "You probably know this, but ...";' he says.) Given that some of the most frequent visitors to his site are from Britain's main newsgathering organisations, such as the BBC and Associated Newspapers, that can have a powerful effect. He currently has Chris Huhne in his sights, and it would surprise few people in the Westminster village if Huhne ends up on his trophy wall.

John Rentoul, political columnist for the *Independent*, thinks Staines owes his success, in part, to his cavalier disregard for the libel laws. 'He is less cautious about libel than others and he is not afraid to get things wrong, though not always quite so cheerful about admitting it,' he says. 'In that respect he captures some of the buccaneering spirit of the old *Private Eye*.'

Another advantage he enjoys is that he's not hamstrung by the 24-hour news cycle. As a blogger, he can post stories as soon as he gets hold of them — he doesn't even have to be in front of his computer. He was having a drink in a Westminster pub when a reader emailed him a picture of the Camerons waiting in the Ryanair departure lounge at Stansted in April and he was able to post it on his site using his mobile phone.

But perhaps his greatest asset is his journalistic instinct. The *Times* columnist and political commentator Danny Finkelstein calls him 'a rival to Kelvin MacKenzie' but is quick to point out that, like the legendary ex-*Sun* editor, Staines has a dark side. 'What comes with it is a crude populist politics that, while often right, can also be quite destructive and even occasionally unpleasant. He pretends that greater sophistication is beyond him, but that, as he is well aware, is utterly untrue.'

'I met Kelvin once,' says Staines, draining his pint in the French House. 'It was at the British Press Awards in 2009, the year the *Telegraph* cleaned up for breaking the expenses scandal. I saw him looking on at the back and introduced myself. He gestured to the stage and said, "This ain't for the likes of us, son."'

As he says this, you get the impression this is exactly where he wants to be — throwing brickbats from the back of the class, not winning any prizes, but scoring direct hits nevertheless. He describes his website as an 'online gossip column' and if that's true he's the internet's answer to Walter Winchell.

'I do revel in the power of it all and I sometimes think that's bad for my soul,' he says.