Murdoch Marries Blair: Anji Hunter and Adam Boulton discuss politics, the media and business

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Business leaders must learn how to use the media and influence politicians if they want to succeed, a Westminster power couple revealed last night (Thurs).

Anji Hunter, former gate-keeper to Tony Blair, and Adam Boulton, Political Editor of Sky News, used a lecture at Birmingham Business School to lift the lid on their relationship and offer an insightful and humorous reflection on the goings-on at the very highest echelons of power.

Describing journalism as “the first draft of history”, Boulton admitted that the relationship between New Labour and the media “got too close”.

“Saying it became a substitute for actually doing it,” he said. “Trust was eroded not just between politicians and the media but between both and the public.”

Speaking to an audience of business leaders, academics and students at the University of Birmingham, Hunter said the three pillars of modern Britain: business, politics and the media, “need each other”.

Hunter admitted she had “always steered clear of publicity” for herself, but added: “If you can control it, the media can sometimes be useful.”

During the event, Hunter revealed:

Former Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, considered blaming The Sun newspaper for the party’s defeat in the 1992 general election in his concession speech - ahead of the paper’s claim that it was The Sun “Wot won it”.

The first time former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s flew first-class and in a private jet was when he accepted Rupert Murdoch’s invitation to speak at a conference of News Corporation executives at Hayman Island, Australia in July 1995.

A personal view that the British government sometimes “sacrifices efficiency to penny pinching”.

Comparing her role in the Blair government with her experience at the oil giant, BP, Hunter said: “Of course every expense for the taxpayer should be scrutinized but I sometimes wonder if this country sacrifices efficiency to penny pinching.”

The couple showed a clip of the television interview in which Boulton lost his temper with Blair’s former spin doctor Alastair Campbell.

And Boulton revealed he once dropped his mobile phone in the bath when on a “quite innocent” call to Simon Walters, political editor of the Mail on Sunday.

“The decision to serialize my book in the same publication led to the worst rift (so far) in our marriage,” he said.

Hunter said she had always taken the view “that you need to keep a very firm hand on the press”.

“Give them something, but do a deal, make sure you get something back in return.”

Explaining why she had previously avoided any publicity for herself, she added: “I always felt that discretion was a vital part of our role as advisors and assistants to elected politicians as well as to the corporate executives trusted by shareholders to run businesses.”

Hunter continued: “If you can control it, the media can sometimes be useful.”

Explaining why she recently agreed to do an interview with the Sunday Times, Hunter said: “I am in charge of the launch of the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering, which will be a global Nobel Prize level award to an engineer, or up to three engineers, responsible for a ground-breaking innovation that has been of global benefit to humanity, worth £1m and awarded biannually...

“In business we must learn how to use the media and influence politicians or they will use us. And in politics, in the media, in business – indeed in all walks of life, relationships of trust and respect can be forged.”

For more information please contact the University of Birmingham press office on 07789 921165 or email: pressoffice@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Note to Editors:

1. The Birmingham Business School advisory board annual guest lecture entitled Murdoch Marries Blair was introduced by Lord Digby Jones at the University of Birmingham Business School at 5.30pm on Thursday 15th November.

2. Anji Hunter is a member of Birmingham Business School Advisory Board. She is a director of the Royal Academy of Engineering where she is launching the Queen Elizabeth II Prize for Engineering. Previously she was an executive for BP and AngloAmerican. Hunter worked for Tony Blair MP from 1987 until 2001. She was Director of Government Relations in 10 Downing Street 1997-2001.

3. Adam Boulton is a presenter for Sky News, where he has been political editor since the company’s foundation in 1989, having previously been part of the launch team for TVam. He was moderator of the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate in Bristol. A former chairman of the Parliamentary Lobby, he is a winner of the Royal Television Society’s judges award.

4. Anji Hunter and Adam Boulton married in 2006.

5. An edited video of the event is available on request.

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