

“It’s not the economy, stupid!”

How often I wanted to shout these words at my TV screen in the aftermath of last month’s Comprehensive Spending Review. So many illustrious figures from the commentariat kept asking the wrong questions about the government’s deficit reduction programme: will it hinder the economic recovery? Is it fair? Will it weaken sterling? Is it too big a gamble?

These are good debating issues, but they are unanswerable in the foreseeable future. As the philosopher Terence wrote in the 1st century BC: “So many men, so many opinions: his own a law to each.”

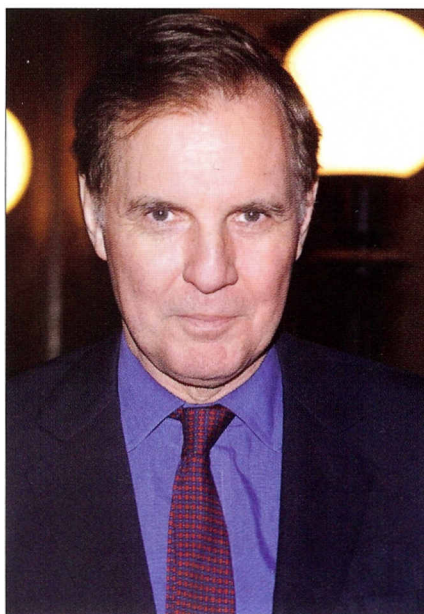
The politics as well as the sayings of ancient Rome can be a useful guide to our present situation. The Rubicon has been crossed. The die is cast. The senatorial or parliamentary opposition is in disarray with no Cicero (Alan Johnson? Miliband Minor?) in sight. The mob, or, to be more accurate, a small group of politically-motivated men from Unite whipped up by Cassius Bob Crowe, are plotting to take to the streets. But they have been outmanoeuvred by the speed and strength of what Whitehall and Westminster insiders have for weeks been calling ‘The Quad’. The name derives from ‘Quadriga’, a powerful Roman chariot drawn by four horses.

The success of the Quad – David Cameron, Nick Clegg, George Osborne and Danny Alexander – has much to tell us about the strength of the coalition. All the key drivers have enhanced their reputations in the fire of tough decisions. They have been savvy in their orchestration of the media and ruthless in their handling of ministerial colleagues. Spending ministers who thought they could circumvent the Quad by going round the back of the chief secretary and getting a better deal out of the chancellor or prime minister soon learned that their punishment was to come out worse in the spending review settlement for their departments.

The solidarity of the Quad is derived as much from personal chemistry as political necessity. Cameron and Osborne have the closest rapport of any occupants of No. 10 and No. 11 in living memory. But *The Guardian’s* attempt to class label them the “Bullington boys” looks silly now that it is clear just how strongly they have bonded with their Liberal co-drivers of the Quad chariot.

Danny Alexander is a man to watch. As a fellow alumnus of the ex-chief secretary’s club, I appreciate his qualities. I suspect he has little of the financial acumen of his talented but short-lived predecessor David Laws. But, as Morley said of Gladstone: “It is the character breathing through the sentences that counts.” There seems to be a granite streak of tenacity in Alexander which has turned him into the understudy who outshone the star. This is a chief secretary destined for high office. For he is the Treasury work horse who delivered on the tactics for Osborne’s strategy.

Let’s take the tactical details first. This is a Comprehensive Spending Review in which it is difficult to pick holes. By chance, I had some good opportunities to probe some of the allegedly weaker areas because, in the 72 hours after the statement, I found



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myself visiting a London council estate; speaking in Pentonville and Brixton prisons; and having conversations with two senior police officers.

On the Peabody estate, I kept hearing phrases like: “Well, it’s high time someone sorted out the social” or “too many people round here are pretending they’re invalids when they’re really work shy.” Pensioners in particular seem to like what they hear about the IDS plans to reform and simplify the entire welfare benefit system.

Among prison officers, the mood was resigned, with only mild grumblings. Yes, 3,000 out of 82,000 prison jobs will go over the next four years. But at least half of them will be through natural wastage, and most of the rest will be among ancillary civilian staff.

Whatever the Tory right may say about Ken Clarke’s money-saving plan to send 3,000 fewer short-sentence prisoners to jail and give them tougher community punishments instead, most prison professionals think this is sound common sense. This is

because three out of four of these short-sentence inmates reoffend within a year of their release; learn nothing during their few weeks behind bars except more criminal ways; and go back to the street completely unsupervised by the probation service. As a society, we could hardly do worse at stopping their reoffending. So roll on the rehabilitation revolution, which will cost less and achieve more.

As for the police, they know perfectly well that they can get better value for money from improved management, fewer overtime fiddles, and perhaps some more mergers of facilities or even forces. Nobody is pretending these cuts are easy. But, at a time when it is well-recognised that the deficit crisis has to be resolved, most people on the ground – like pensioners, prison officers and police – seem to be considerably more realistic than the political pundits.

This leaves the union bosses. Will they call for strikes and a winter or two of discontent? Mercifully, we are not France. While French history since 1789 shows that power erupts from the streets, here it resides in parliament.

So the only arithmetic that really matters in Britain for the next four years is the parliamentary arithmetic. Osborne may or may not have got every figure in his economic equation right. But his political outcome is a master stroke.

For the commitment of the Quad equals the commitment of the coalition. The Liberals are now tried and tested partners in government. They will do what it takes to deliver these cuts, even if there are moanings from Ming and agonisings from Ashdown. Strong coalition government is here to stay for the duration of this parliament – and perhaps well beyond it.

20th October was not just, as Osborne put it, “the day Britain pulled back from the brink”, it was also the seminal moment when the coalition consolidated and began pulling credibly ahead from a visibly inadequate Labour opposition. From now on, we can expect the charioteers of the Quad, leading an increasingly united coalition, to race towards the winning post of the next general election.