

**Address to the Franco-british Lawyers Society's Colloquium
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"Last night, I had the pleasure to attend the cocktail launch of this event. Some of you may have heard how Dr Eva Steiner from King's College mentioned how the French press has been over the years quite complacent with the politicians.

And that was the moment when I thought : "Is it really a good idea to come today ?"

Specifically as I would have to admit that in a way, Dr Steiner is right.

Anyway, I will just share with you my experience as a French journalist who has been working in the United Kingdom for the last 16 years.

And I will probably begin with a recent anecdote. Last May, just after Dominique Strauss-Kahn's arrest in New York, I was interviewed by the BBC news.

The first question the presenter asked me was, and I quote : "So, the DSK's story? It's not a big deal in France, is it? After all, French are renowned for being quite cool about the sexual lives of their politicians", end of quote.

I have to confess that I was quite speechless for a moment, which, trust me, doesn't happen very often.

Then, I had to explain that we were not, at the time, talking about a serial seducer, or an adultery. We were talking about one of the favorite to win the next French presidential election, being accused of RAPE. A serious crime in the UK and indeed in France. So, of course, it was, and it is still a big deal ! Even in France!

Over the years, in the United Kingdom, I have often encountered the same point expressed in two very different ways.

It would be either: "Oh, in France, you have a much more relaxed attitude towards the private lives of politicians and you don't have those horrible tabloids", or it would be: "In France, the press is much weaker than here, you would never dare talking about the sex life of a politician".

Let's be clear, that was before last May and the arrest of DSK.

It feels now that all the French press has been talking about over the last 5 months is actually the sex life of a politician.

Without doubt, there are in France many close connections between the political world and the press. A number of high profile journalists are married to a politician. Being Christine Ockrent and the former foreign affairs secretary, Bernard Kouchner. Or the current Foreign secretary Alain Juppe, who is married to a former journalist. And of course, the most famous of these couples is the one and only Dominique Strauss-Khan and Anne Sinclair.

But the fact is, these connections are in the open, completely known by the public who can then, maybe, judge by themselves if these relationships have any influence on the treatment of the information.

On the contrary, in the UK, not many members of the public know that one of the most prominent journalists at Sky News (Adam Boulton) is married to Anji Hunter, who was one of the closest adviser of Tony Blair.

Or that Gavyn Davies, former director general of the BBC, is the husband of Sue Nye, former private secretary of Gordon Brown, a close friend.

And the fact that there are some very tough tabloids in this country doesn't necessarily mean that they tell all the dirty secrets.

The affair between John Major and Edwina Currie was revealed in the press, but, curiously, after he had left 10, Downing Street.

And the drinking problems of Charles Kennedy were constantly denied and the press referred to it as a “health problem”, until his resignation from the leadership of the Liberal-democrats and his public admission that he had indeed a drinking problem.

In France, we do have some tabloids, but it is true that with our laws on private life, they are less intrusive compared to their British ones.

And, it is also probably true, until very recently, there was a more relaxed attitude towards the private lives of a public figure in the sense that “what happens in your bedroom is your own problem”.

But over the last couple of years, it has been fascinating to witness the quick evolution of the situation, in France and in the United Kingdom, but in exact opposite directions.

In the UK, there has been a growing use of injunctions and gagging orders to prevent the publication of some private information.

If you add to that the recent hacking scandal, you will notice the emergence of a debate about the limits of the freedom of information. Debate which didn't really exist before, or wasn't really heard.

This hacking scandal, by the way, revealed to the British public the extent of the connection, in this country too, between the media and the politics.

And you may have noticed, since July and the closure of NoW, his sister paper the Sun, has been extremely cautious, for obvious reasons, about its contents.

Actually, this morning, the builders working in my house told me that it has become quite boring, except for the page 3, of course.

In France, you can as well notice a shift, but towards more openness on the private lives of the rich and famous.

That shift goes back notably to the election of president Nicolas Sarkozy. He has been using the press to convey his marital problems with his ex-wife Cecilia and his subsequent romance with his current wife Carla Bruni.

If you add the DSK scandal, then you reach a point where there is now a real debate in the public but as well within the media about the limits of what you can say or not about the private life of someone.

Sometimes ago, in France, it didn't seem to matter for an election if a politician was a serial seducer or not. Today, and just eight months before the next presidential election, it clearly does matter.

To summarize, on a personal note, after 16 years in this country, working for French media, I am still envious of the aggressivity of some of my British colleagues. For example, when they dug out the expense of a floating duck house for the pond of a Lord, paid by the taxpayer. 1,645 pounds !

But on the other hand, I am also still amazed to see how sometimes, the same British media focus on personal matters, like last year the fact that the leader of the opposition Ed Miliband was in a relationship, had children, but wasn't married.

In France, I think we would still say : “So what ?”

Thank you and *bon appétit* !