

TABLOID WAR

A sage once remarked that to face each day with equanimity it was necessary to eat a live toad for breakfast. This surly philosophy appears to be shared by about 12 million people in these islands — the regular purchasers of our three most uninhibited tabloids.

Admittedly, their daily dose of bile is nicely balanced with pabulum, and thus, the

Fleet Street theory goes, the popular punters don't notice it. You can, in other words, fool all of the people all of the time — if you're as clever as a Fleet Street proprietor.

However, like most Fleet Street theories, this one steadfastly refuses to work. The statistics that even journalists believe, circulation figures, are resolutely and perceptibly changing the policies of the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Star*. The readers are, in the only way open to them, exerting their influence.

The *Daily Star*, from the Trafalgar House stable of Express Newspapers, is gaining readers. The *Mirror* is losing them slowly. Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*, Fleet Street's smutty pacesetter, is haemorrhaging heavily.

Over the past year the *Star* has moved from 1,033,000 daily sales to 1,116,000. The *Mirror* has slipped from 3,569,000 to 3,527,000, although its Scottish-based partner, the *Daily Record*, has increased sales slightly from 720,000 to 732,000. The *Sun* circulation has dropped from 3,837,000 to 3,627,000, giving it a marginal 100,000 advantage over the *Mirror* and endangering its boast as the country's best-selling daily.

Undoubtedly the growth of the *Star* has had an impact on its two established rivals, but it cannot account for the aggregate loss. Arithmetic alone tells us that. The politics of the papers and their readers' perceptions must provide the answer. Certainly, that is where the proprietors are looking.

The steadiness of the *Record* also provides a clue. Its readers are the Labour Party voters in Scotland, among the most loyal there are. It is also fair to say that the *Record* reflects their more atavistic political attitudes in a way in which the *Mirror* does not. The *Record* is blunter, less equivocal.

The *Star's* advance provides more evidence. It is printed and circulates largely in the North of England, again a region more loyally and less timorously Labour than the South. It has deliberately set out to satisfy that market, and appears to be doing so with reasonable, if not spectacular success.

The *Sun's* slide is clearly worrying the panjandrums of Bouverie Street. The sex and sport mixture needs an added ingredient. The *Sun* is now putting in a pinch of social conscience. Thus it produced a front page story on August 28 under the headline DOLE BOYS IN DEATH PACT which began: 'Two young pals died in a suicide pact . . . because they saw no future in jobless Britain.'

This emphasis on working class despair is not the sort of stuff which wins knighthoods from grateful Tory leaders, but it is symptomatic of the *Sun's* recognition that its brash and adoring support for undiluted



Thatcherism is costing it readers.

Even its sports pages reflect a desperate desire to ingratiate the paper with northerners. The same issue carried the 'soccer scoop of the century', a limp page of recollections by goalkeeper Harry Gregg of the Manchester United Munich air disaster of 1958.

The *Mirror* and the *Star* also led with the 'dole boys' tragedy. Predictable enough! The *Star's* partner, the *Daily Express*, chose something more to Tory tastes, the Coventry vote in favour of cuts in local services rather than increases in rates. The 'dole boys' were relegated to Page 7 in the *Express*, while the Coventry rates story earned merely a paragraph in the *Star*, five paragraphs in the *Sun* and was ignored by the *Mirror*.

The *Mirror* has also ignored its rivals' bingo games gimmick and seems bent on keeping such editorial dignity as it has. The *Mirror* is still recognisably a newspaper and has stood aloof from the bingo capers as the *Sun* and *Star* have offered escalating prizes. Its concession to readers' gaming instincts has been a shame-faced offer of cash to random car registration plate owners.

Despite the recent twist in its political attitudes, the *Sun* is definitely not 'wet', merely cautiously moist, and when the chips are down at election time one can expect it to revert to its natural character and endorse Thatcherism in all its forms. It will happily risk a jolt to its efforts to woo her victims.

The *Mirror* will cling to its position of support for the Labour establishment, doing its best to ensure that Labour politics retain the label of socialism while having nothing to do with it in practice.

The most outspoken socialist position will be adopted by the *Star*, which will represent the crudest irony, as well as the crudest expression of radical values. Lord Mathews (peerage by courtesy of Mrs Thatcher) has his political reputation tied firmly to the Prime Minister and his financial reputation equally tightly staked to the *Star's* success. He can face the prospect of the paper's political and social volte face only at the expense of a readership which recognises the realities it has so unerringly tuned. But that way lies humiliating defeat in the battle for circulation.

The *Mirror*, wedded to the opportunism of Callaghan, and new to Foot's acquiescence to the right, is bound to tread the wellworn path of Labour moderation, offering the pretence but not the substance of socialism.

If each paper were a separate company, and we had to invest hard cash in one or the other, a capitalist would give only one piece of advice.

'Put your money on the *Star*, baby!
But invest your trust in none.

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