

Michael Skapinker: Whistle while you work

By Michael Skapinker

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All whistleblowers receive some abuse but the case of Paul O'Neill, the former Treasury secretary, is unusual. While people said nasty things about him after the publication of his unflattering portrayal of the Bush White House last week, they said even nastier things about him before that.

One New York Times writer called Mr O'Neill's contribution to Ron Suskind's new book *The Price of Loyalty* a "thick stew of self-justification and insider revelation".

But few had anything good to say when he was sacked in December 2002 either. The FT observed that, as Treasury secretary, "Mr O'Neill lacked credibility and then repeatedly undermined the little he developed".

All the same, Mr O'Neill's account of life in government is illuminating. (I am relying on the extract in The Wall Street Journal. In spite of what my fellow-columnist Martin Lukes calls "this ever more globalised world", the book is not yet available on my side of the Atlantic.) Americans are surely entitled to know that, according to Mr O'Neill, the White House believes deficits do not matter. And we are all entitled to know that America's imposition of steel tariffs was even more cynical than most of us had suspected: few in the administration believed the US steel industry needed protecting anyway.

So why do the jibes at Mr O'Neill for going public strike a chord? Part of it is the feeling that if he felt this strongly, he should have resigned rather than being told to go. Part of it is the sense that he is motivated by revenge rather than a commitment to open government. And part of it is the unease we feel when someone rats on former comrades.

We have a different attitude to people who blow the whistle while they are still in their posts, rather than months later. Time magazine named three such whistleblowers as its 2002 people of the year: Coleen Rowley, the FBI staff lawyer who exposed the bureau's failure to react to warnings about the

attacks of September 11 2001; Cynthia Cooper, the WorldCom vice-president who told her audit committee that there was something seriously wrong with the company's accounts; and, most famously, Sherron Watkins, who blew the whistle on Enron.

But not everyone regards even these whistleblowers as heroes. All three told the magazine that many of their colleagues resented them. Ms Watkins said the messages of congratulations she received from the Enron rank and file had stopped. "Now no one recognises me," she said. Ms Rowley had been called a traitor by fellow officers. When the three were asked whether anyone had thanked them, they laughed.

Some whistleblowers now have more protection through laws such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in the US and the Public Interest Disclosure Act in the UK, which shield those who reveal corporate malpractice against vindictive employers. But while whistleblowers have won compensation, many continue to have their careers destroyed.

The loss of jobs is a feature of several cases highlighted by Public Concern at Work, a UK charity that supports whistleblowers. In one, a train driver told the Health & Safety Executive that he feared longer shifts would mean train drivers would go through red signals. His company attempted to silence him. He won £55,000 compensation, but only after he was forced to resign.

When a vice-president of a mining company "questioned the legality of a transaction in Australia, the chairman threw a digital diary at him and threatened to destroy his career", the charity reported. He won £800,000 compensation under the UK Act but by then had already been forced out.

Some whistleblowers are still fighting. Marta Andreasen, the European Union's former chief accountant who was appointed to reform the EU's accounting system in 2002, took her concerns to the European parliament and the media after her proposals for change were blocked. She was suspended on full pay in August 2002 for taking her complaints outside the Commission.

The most immediate problem many whistleblowers face is that those they accuse are invariably more powerful than they are and in a position to make their lives a misery. The second is that the taboos against going outside the family, of washing dirty linen in public, are strong. The words popularly used to describe those who speak out about others' malfeasance are usually derogatory: snitch, sneak, grass.

Two of Time's 2002 people of the year, Ms Rowley and Ms Cooper, even disliked being called whistleblowers. "In elementary school, kids are called tattletales. It has a negative connotation," Ms Cooper said.

Chris Heaton-Harris, a British member of the European parliament who has criticised the European Commission's handling of the Andreasen case, has said: "You have to be very brave, even slightly mad, to be a whistleblower."

So why do people do it? Some have mixed motives: they have been passed over for promotion or hope to make money selling their stories. But many more are simply upset by what they see happening at work. Some of the employees who have contacted Public Concern at Work's helpline report dreadful happenings: care home staff buying clothes for themselves with the money of a man with learning difficulties was one example.

Other whistleblowers believe in their organisations. They hope that, by voicing their complaints, they can ensure their organisations rediscover their integrity. Time magazine's three whistleblowers acted in this spirit. They made their initial complaints internally.

Ms Watkins has co-authored a book on her experiences and is now a handsomely paid speaker. Few other whistleblowers are so lucky. But those who act from honest motives have something else: the knowledge that whatever troubles their actions have brought them, they have a greater sense of peace than if they had looked away. Only Mr O'Neill knows whether he falls into that category.

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