

Editorial

Coalition Politics

Nick Clegg's YouTube hit 'I'm Sorry' is but one song in a festival of *mea culpas* from the deputy prime minister, as the sustained attempt to resuscitate his political fortunes founders against the growing economic and political crisis which now afflicts Britain. His broken promises on student fees are compounded by disappearing courses, as the market in higher education renders some of them, and their teachers, 'uneconomic'. Direct public funding for humanities courses has ceased altogether. Undergraduates commencing university courses in 2012 face an accumulated bill on completion in excess of £50,000. The common advice to such students is to borrow as much as possible, as they're unlikely to earn enough to pay it all back during the 30 years following graduation. On current reckoning, graduates would need a starting salary of about £38,000 to be on course to complete the repayments. Some chance!

But, while Mr Clegg seemingly self-flagellates, he and David Cameron have handed another Lib Dem a get-out-of-jail card by making David Laws the new Minister of State for Schools and the Cabinet Office, where he has a 'cross-department role working on the Coalition Agreement and government policy'. Among other things, the MP for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown's old turf) is charged with driving through the abolition of national pay agreements for teachers and other staff while advancing conversion of their schools to independent academies so that they no longer are part of the local authority. How is it that his rehabilitation has been so rapid?

In April 2011, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards found that, over a number of years since his election in 2001, Mr Laws had claimed substantial Parliamentary allowances to which he was not entitled (see below). Once caught, Mr Laws quickly repaid more than £56,000. No shortage of cash there. Although the sum was considerable, the calculated deceptions and errors of judgement revealed in the Commissioner's 284-page report are all the more worrying, given the Minister's new responsibilities for schools.

Apparently, Mr Laws remains popular in the City of London where, according to recent press reports, he was paid £5,000 for four hours' work, before Mr Cameron's phonecall. As Ken Coates informed us in *Spokesman 109*, Laws had been a banker, first as Vice President at J P Morgan and Company, and then Managing Director of Barclays De Zoete Wedd, before becoming Director of Policy for the Liberal Democrats between 1997 and

1999. Once elected to Parliament, in 2001, he edited *The Orange Book*, published in 2004 to reclaim Liberalism for the ‘free market’, and away from the clutches of Charles Kennedy, the Lib Dem leader who had dared to oppose the Iraq War *before* it was started.

Here is Laws’ great merit in the eyes of the Cameron/Clegg Coalition. He, like them, is a neo-liberal, ideologically opposed to public provision. That is why one of the first acts of the Coalition Government was to legislate for the widespread establishment of those publicly funded independent schools known as academies. Formerly, most of these had been part of the local authority. At a stroke, billions of pounds worth of public assets passed into the ownership of new charitable companies limited by guarantee. Some were absorbed into academy chains of several schools. There’s much money to be made in education these days, as Mr Laws and Michael Gove know very well. For they seem to share a key aspect of Orange Book Liberalism

‘which is the belief in the value of free trade, open competition, market mechanisms, consumer power, and the effectiveness of the private sector. These beliefs are combined with opposition to monopolies and instinctive suspicion of State control and interference particularly in relationship to the ownership and control of business.’

So it is that falsifying expenses to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds should not be a bar to high office, even before the electorate has had a chance to pass its own judgement on such conduct.

Tony Simpson

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*Excerpts from the Memorandum of the
Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards*

Rt Hon David Laws

- i. Mr Laws wrongly designated as his main home his Somerset property in his constituency from April 2005, since, by then, he was spending substantially more nights in his London accommodation than in his Somerset property... It follows that all his second home claims after April 2005 were made on the wrong property.
- ii. Mr Laws’ conduct in the submission of his tenancy agreements was not above reproach, because he submitted misleading agreements to the Fees Office from 2001 to 2008 with the result that the Fees Office had no opportunity to challenge or advise him about the propriety of his claims against the Green Book rules. This was in breach of the

- injunction that claims should be above reproach in successive editions of the Green Book ...
- iii. Mr Laws was in breach of the rules of the House from July 2006 to July 2009 in claiming for the costs of leasing accommodation from the person with whom he shared each of the two properties in London over that time, since that person was his partner under the terms of the prohibition on leasing such accommodation from a partner in section 3.3.3 of the 2006 Green Book: they were living together and treated each other as spouses. It follows that all Mr Laws' claims arising from his lease of that accommodation from his partner over that period were in breach of that rule.
 - iv. Mr Laws was in breach of the rules of the House in the claims he made for rent in staying in these two properties from at least 2004 (the earliest year for which figures are available) to July 2009 since the monthly rental claims were substantially more than the costs which could be justified as having been wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred while living with his landlord in these properties ... The result was that his rental claims benefited someone close to him, namely his partner who owned the properties and who lived with him in them ...
 - v. Mr Laws was in breach of the rules of the House in claiming for repairs and maintenance work undertaken on the second London home in 2007–08, since these additional expenses were not necessarily incurred by him given that his rental claims were already significantly above that which could be justified by his share of living in the property in a sound condition, with the result that his claims for building work benefited someone close to him, namely his partner who owned the property and who lived in it with him ...
 - vi. Mr Laws was in breach of the rules of the House from 2001 to March 2009 in the claims he made for his telecommunications costs which covered his main home in his constituency and his mobile phone as well as his calls from his London homes ...

I consider that Mr Laws' breaches of the rules in respect of his second home claims were serious. I have no evidence that Mr Laws made his claims with the intention of benefiting himself or his partner in conscious breach of the rules. But the sums of money involved were substantial. He made a series of breaches. Some of them continued over a number of years ...

John Lyon CB
28 April 2011

Our foremost socialist dramatist

Trevor Griffiths is a friend and comrade of the Russell Foundation of many years, going back to the 1960s and visits to London's Red Café. In 1978, he served on the jury of the Third Russell Tribunal, which examined *Berufsverbote*, or bans on employment in the public service on political grounds and related aspects of human rights in what was then West Germany. Ten years ago, in 2002, he travelled to Cordoba in Spain to participate in a dialogue on peace and human rights which brought together activists from Europe, the Middle East and more widely. The threat of coming war in Iraq hung over the assembly, which argued strongly and cogently for a 'Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, chemical and biological'.

All the time, Griffiths was writing, adding to a distinguished and substantial body of work for the theatre, film and television. In 1982, Spokesman published *Sons and Lovers*, his sparkling screenplay for the BBC's memorable adaptation of Lawrence's coalfield novel. Twenty years on, in 2002, prior to Cordoba, we commenced publishing in *The Spokesman* an occasional series of Griffiths's texts. The first was *Camel Station*, a short play with a very good joke, set in Iraq's Northern No-Fly Zone (*Spokesman 75*).

In 2005, at Ken Coates's instigation, Spokesman published Griffiths's full-length screenplay about Thomas Paine, *These Are the Times*. Kurt Vonnegut loved it so much he declared that he wished he had written it, and requested dozens of copies to send to friends in Hollywood, some of whom did indeed promise to try to get the film made. A short excerpt was published in *Spokesman 91*. Subsequently, the work was adapted for the stage, under the title *A New World*, and premiered at The Globe in London to wide acclaim in 2009. A BBC radio adaptation, with Jonathan Pryce as Paine, brought the work to new ears.

Meanwhile, Griffiths had entrusted Spokesman with publishing his collected *Theatre Plays* in two volumes, which appeared in 2007. Fifteen plays, written and performed during more than 40 years, included classics such as *The Party*, *Comedians*, and Griffiths's scintillating version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (premiered at Nottingham Playhouse in March 1997, directed by Richard Eyre, when the audience spontaneously applauded the opening set), as well as *The Gulf between Us*, which grew out of the first Gulf War in 1991, and *Thatcher's Children*, first performed at Bristol Old Vic in 1993.

Michael Billington, *The Guardian's* redoubtable and humane theatre critic, remarked that 'Trevor Griffiths is the godfather of British political

theatre’ and rightly described him as ‘our foremost socialist dramatist’. Billington went on to urge a new production of *Occupations*, Griffiths’s first full-length play for the stage about factory occupations in northern Italy in 1920, which received its first production at the Stables Theatre in Manchester in 1970. Now that would be a timely revival!

In 2008, the screenplay for *Willie and Maud* (W B Yeats and Maude Gonne) was first published in *Spokesman 98*, followed in early 2012 by *Habbacuc Dreams*. As part of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the publication of the King James Bible, the Bush Theatre in London had invited contemporary ‘responses’ to the 66 books of the Bible. In between, in 2009, we published Ann Talbot’s extended review of *A New World* at The Globe, together with songs from the play.

Now, we are pleased to fulfil a longstanding commitment made by Ken Coates to Trevor Griffiths that *The Spokesman* would publish *March Time*, his screenplay homage to the Labour Movement down the ages. Originally written in 1987, in the midst of Thatcherism, and revised in 1994, as Tony Blair stole the Labour Party, *March Time* has been revised again for publication here. As neo-liberal destruction of public provision reaches deep into education and the health service, and ‘austerity’ is seen to be not for the rich but only for the rest of us ‘plebs’, it couldn’t be more fitting.

Tony Simpson