

Lobster 59

Tittle-tattle

Tom Easton

The fall of St David

The departure of the Lib-Con government's Chief Secretary to the Treasury, David Laws, must cause a little alarm to other ministers whose expense records are held by *The Daily Telegraph*. Will their own financial affairs be revealed at critical times for the new coalition, they must be wondering. But for Laws, the co-editor of the Lib Dems' *Orange Book*, who set himself up for a political career in Lord Ashdown's old Yeovil seat after making a pile with JP Morgan and Barclays de Zoete Wedd, the press coverage was broadly sympathetic. Most of the media support the coalition, and so while accepting he had to go after the revelation of the £40,000 rent payment from the taxpayer, most still think he can make a ministerial return following the New Labour precedents of Peter Mandelson, David Blunkett, Beverley Hughes and Peter Hain.

Some journalists went further in their support for Laws. While his partner Matthew Parris was touring the studios urging Laws to stay on, *Guardian* columnist Julian Glover wrote twice in two days in support of the Yeovil MP. Before his departure Glover wrote: 'The story of David Laws has an uncomfortable echo: the downfall of BP's former chief executive John Browne.' After he went, Glover described Laws as 'this man of exceptional nobility'.

Readers who want to assess Glover's comparison with Lord Browne may care to read the judgment in that case of Mr Justice Eady, a man not known for upholding the press's right

to free expression in privacy matters.¹ Those who want to weigh the 'exceptional nobility' of the former Chief Secretary, 'Mr Integrity', according to Ashdown, might start with this – <www.yeovil-libdems.org.uk/news/press/1305.htm> – from his recent Yeovil election campaign.

Vanunu

Little reported in most of the Western press was the jailing once again of Mordechai Vanunu following a May decision by the Israeli Supreme Court. Vanunu, who served 11 of his 18-year sentence for revealing Israel nuclear secrets to *The Sunday Times* in solitary confinement, was released in 2004. But after speaking to the foreign media in 2007 he was re-arrested and, after a lengthy trial, was sentenced to community service. Vanunu refused to carry this out beyond the boundaries of Arab east Jerusalem, the only part of the country where he feels safe. His lawyer, Avigdor Feldman, said: 'All he has been accused of is talking to strangers, not revealing any new secrets. It is surely time he was allowed to lead a normal life.'

Sweet FA

A rather lower level of punishment came the same week for Lord Triesman, the former New Labour Foreign Office minister under Tony Blair. The ex-communist multimillionaire, a close friend of New Labour fundraiser Lord Levy, and the party's general secretary between 2001-3, had been appointed chairman of the Football Association in 2008. His loose language about other football associations recorded by a young woman he thought was a friend was splashed in *The Mail on Sunday* the week after the general election. His

¹ It's at <www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1732379.ece>

resignation from the FA and from heading England's 2018 World Cup bid swiftly followed. Some of his friends complained about personal intrusion. His critics will also remember that as Labour Party general secretary Triesman led the 'anti-semitism' charge against the *New Statesman* when it attempted to investigate the links between Israel supporters and New Labour.

An improper Charlie

Another Blair crony facing punishment but this time attracting minimal publicity was Lord Falconer. Once the country's senior law officer, Falconer was caught doing 40mph in a 30mph zone and landed a six-month ban in May under the totting-up procedure as he already had nine points on his licence. Tough on the causes of crime?

Once is luck. Twice is.....spooky?

Nervous frequent flyers might wish to take note of the travel planning of the family of Radek Sikorski, the former Rupert Murdoch man who is now Polish foreign minister. He was one of the few senior Polish figures not to be on the ill-fated plane to Smolensk that crashed in April, killing all aboard. Sikorski's wife, the former *Evening Standard* and *Spectator* journalist Anne Applebaum, was booked in 1988 to fly on the Pan Am 103 flight that came down over Lockerbie. 'About a week before the flight, however, I postponed my trip simply in order to stay a day longer with friends in Oxford,' she has written.

LFI = Liverpoolian Friends of Israel?

Suspicious minds might think there is rather less of a coincidence in the late sorting out of safe constituencies that

allowed Harriet Harman spouse Jack Dromey, 60, to inherit the safe Birmingham Erdington seat from 42-year-old Sion Simon, a recent New Labour minister for the creative industries. Simon, like Applebaum a former Conrad Black columnist, became known in 2006 for mimicking a David Cameron webcast.² He claimed to be leaving Parliament to seek election as mayor of Birmingham. At the same time, Simon's partner, Luciana Berger, 29, was parachuted into the safe seat of Liverpool Wavertree. Berger, whose ignorance of legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly caused a flurry of negative local publicity, is the former director of Labour Friends of Israel (LFI). In the adjoining Riverside constituency is LFI deputy chair Louise Ellman and in the equally safe Liverpool West Derby Labour selected to return to Parliament Stephen Twigg, a former chair of LFI.

Duty calls

SDP founding member Roger Liddle (*Lobsters passim*), exposed by Greg Palast in 1998 as a commercial lobbyist while being on the No 10 payroll as a defence and Europe adviser, has now become a Labour peer, joining his life-long pal Lord Mandelson. Sitting alongside them will be Jeremy Beecham, the Newcastle councillor and former chair of the Local Government Association. He's another old friend of both Mandelson and David Abrahams, the curious Labour Friends of Israel figure behind the New Labour funny money which passed through the unknowing hands of nominal donors into party coffers. Dianne Hayter was party chair when this was 'investigated'. She's now in the Lords, too.

As is former Truro Lib Dem MP Matthew Taylor. Retiring from the Commons at the general election he told the BBC on 10 April that Parliament was 'spectacularly unsuccessful. I

² <www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPNqTjGIT_w>

won't miss it at all'.

Lest we forget (1)

The revealing Channel 4 Dispatches film showing former New Labour luminaries salivating at the prospect of post-election lobby earnings failed to mention the man to whom many of them owed their political start – Neil Kinnock. Patricia Hewitt was press secretary to Lord Kinnock when he was the unermied leader of the opposition, and from there launched herself into a safe Labour seat and Blair promotion. Stephen – ‘cab for hire’ – Byers and the hapless Geoff Hoon both became MPs when Kinnock was exercising strong influence over parliamentary selections. Lady Morgan was an ambitious apparatchik at Labour Party HQ at the same time, rising to No 10 heights under Tony Blair. Kinnock’s kitchen cabinet as Labour leader comprised Hewitt, Charles Clarke (now a defeated New Labour MP), Lord Mandelson of Foy and Hartlepool, and, of course Robert Maxwell’s favourite and much-favoured journalist, Alastair Campbell. Lord Kinnock, you have earned the thanks of a grateful nation.

A new kind of left?

Two lesser names from the Kinnock era are still influential Labour lights, for what that might be worth these days, and both were made peers in Gordon Brown’s dissolution list. Sue Nye, who has served most Labour leaders since Jim Callaghan, was the woman blamed by Gordon Brown for introducing him to the ‘bigoted’ Rochdale pensioner Gillian Duffy. She has reportedly worked for free for Brown for years, money presumably not being a pressing concern for the wife of a former Goldman Sachs chief economist. Anna Healey was an early recruit to the New Labour cause, working as a junior

press officer to Mandelson in his Labour HQ days. She subsequently worked for Jack Cunningham and Mo Mowlam among others. Today she is better known as the wife of Jon Cruddas, styled by the media soon after the election as the 'left-wing' candidate for the Labour leadership. This may be his new claim to fame, but having worked as a party official to shift the party rightwards under two general secretaries and then as a No 10 adviser to Tony Blair, his past, like that of his wife, is resolutely New Labour.

A safe pair of hands?

After 13 years as a New Labour MP, many of them as a financial minister, Ruth Kelly has returned to the banking world – she spent pre-parliamentary time with the Bank of England – whence she came before 1997. She chose not to defend her narrow majority in Bolton West and is now safely ensconced as a managing director at HSBC.

Before the Bank and without any previous journalistic experience she was hired by *The Guardian* newspaper. This was around the same time that similar reporting neophytes Ed Balls and Yvette Cooper were taken on by the FT and *The Independent* respectively. After the election she told her old paper: 'We are going to have to rely on the banking industry to haul the world economy out of recession so I am very excited about joining such a respected global institution with such an important role to play in the future.'

Lest we forget (2)

The recent death of British-born David Kimche reminds us that there were days when Iran was not top of Israel and America's 'axis of evil' hit list, but rather the means of lubricating the foreign policy interests of both. Mossad

founding father Kimche was a key figure in setting up the 1985 US arms-for-Iran deal when President Ronald Reagan was needing to find a way to finance the Contra rebels in Nicaragua after the US Senate ruled such funding illegal. Israel supplied the weapons and Reagan's Central American friends got the dosh. Kimche, working with his old friend and key Reagan security adviser Michael Ledeen, was the brains behind the scheme, leaving former US marine Colonel Oliver North as the fall guy when the whole covert operation was blown wide open.

Mandy, pollarded

In the last issue of *The Jewish Chronicle* before the general election Peter Mandelson was given space by editor Stephen Pollard to write the leading comment article urging readers to vote Labour. 'Our beliefs are your beliefs,' wrote Mandelson: 'The Labour Party is driven by many of the same values that have historically united and defined the Jewish community.' The former business secretary went on to write:

'The Labour Party is, and will continue to be, a strong and loyal friend to Israel. We are very proud that Gordon Brown was the first serving Prime Minister to address the Knesset last year. Under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's leadership, Labour has worked tirelessly to ensure a just and secure settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We believe this settlement will be achieved through constructive dialogue and not through sanctions, boycotts and violence. In government, Labour will continue to lead international efforts to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and will not waiver from our commitment to promote regional stability and an enduring peace.'

One would have thought that as big an endorsement of Israel

as any JC editor might ever have wished for. But within days, Pollard – a leading Fabian Society driver of the New Labour project in the 1990s and biographer of Mandelson mate David Blunkett – had turned on his contributor in a biting *Spectator* piece:

‘The most pervasive myth in modern politics – that Mandelson is a genius of political strategy and communication – is utter nonsense. Haughty, moody, lacking in judgment, and possessed by a childlike obsession for hanging out with the “in” crowd, Lord Mandelson has built a career based on the credulousness of those who have fallen for the Mandelson Myth.’

No comrades like old comrades....

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