

Greasy Pole: Money for stale words



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Spare a thought for Michael Portillo. Hounded by an ungrateful electorate from his unassailable seat in Southgate, he was forced to spend years in the wilderness until the Tories of Kensington and Chelsea took him to their affluent bosoms. And even then it was not entirely easy for him because there were a few curmudgeons in the party muttering about being forced to accept, in contrast to Alan Clark and Nicholas Scott, so vulgar a standard bearer. Some of them were even mean enough to dwell on Portillo's Iberian origins. In the event the Portillo won them over – or perhaps they hoped to share in the glory of having an MP who was so clearly the next leader of the Conservative Party and so, in the dim and distant future, Prime Minister. At the time it seemed as if Portillo had only to wait until the Tories got the inevitable thrashing at the next general election for him to win the leadership which destiny – not to mention a bit of back-stabbing and arm-twisting – had set out for him. Except that the Tory membership was as rejecting as the Southgate voters. Back in the wilderness, Portillo was devastated.

What next, he might have asked himself. A life as a run-of-the-mill, barely noticed, constituency MP, holding mind-numbing surgeries listening to the voters' complaints about rubbish collection and nightmare neighbours, spending his evenings struggling to digest fibrous chicken and Black Forest gâteau at ward party dinners? Hardly the stuff of an exciting destiny. Happily, the BBC have come to his rescue, encouraging the prime minister who never was and never will be to develop into a kind of mini Melvin Bragg (well at least they have similar hair styles) by presenting a programme on Wagner. This generated enough publicity to indicate that there may well be more opportunities to enjoy such nice little earners. And in case anyone is still feeling anxious about how Portillo will make ends meet, there is the little matter of his fees for making speeches.

Value For Money

Paying a politician to speak, when that is what they are supposed to do anyway, may seem a little odd. For his words of wisdom Portillo could demand £8,000. Even if he stayed for a while after speaking, pressing the flesh, graciously accepting congratulations, that is still an hourly rate several times what many workers bring home in an entire month (according to the Guardian, a special needs teaching assistant gets £13,800 a year, a refuse truck driver £12,500 a year). So what about that concept, so dear to Tory hearts when Portillo was in government, of Value for Money? He has changed his mind so often, turned his back on so many cherished “principles”, that it must be difficult, for even his most ardent admirers, to give any weight to what he says, let alone pay to hear him say it. This is the man who, when he was a minister, was notorious for being among the most arid of the Tory dries, described by Thatcher as “. . . beyond any questioning a passionate supporter of everything we stood for”, who abruptly became passionate in the opposite direction when he was looking to get back into parliament. This is the man who denied any intention of standing in the leadership election in 1997 while he was busily setting up a campaign office. This is the man who tried to win the gay vote by remembering past homosexual experiences but who did not stand out against the homophobic Clause 28 when his opposition might have counted. This is the man who championed the poll tax on the grounds that it would be a massive vote winner for the Tories.

There are of course other members giving similar value for money in this cosily lucrative way. Thatcher herself, before her doctors forbade her to speak in public, could ask for as much as £60,000 to instruct an audience in how to run capitalism her way, so that the rich stay like that while the poor keep their place. She was never famous for taking a tolerant, balanced view of things so in her speeches she probably made much of her success in hobbling the unions, in tightening the poverty screw so that being on the dole became as stigmatising as having a disease, in arousing the jingoist hysteria about the Falklands which, over the bodies of the dead, did so much to help her smashing win in 1983. She may then have moved on (because she seems quite unable to resist doing so, such is her enduring bitterness) to rail against those she left behind in the Tory Party – including Portillo – who faint-heartedly betrayed the one and only faith. She would not have dwelled on the deep misery of the unemployment which her government presided over, nor on the economic switchback which they were quite unable to control, which led her to describe her Chancellor Nigel Lawson as “. . . brilliant, brilliant” shortly before it all collapsed about him and she changed her opinion to say “ Nigel and I no longer had that broad identity of views or mutual trust which a Chancellor and prime minister should”. She would not have elaborated on the social despair which erupted into soaring crime and street riots in the 1980s. Nor would she have examined in any depth the fact that her party ditched her because she was seen, however inaccurately, as personally responsible for all that suffering and so had become an electoral liability who had to be got rid of, quickly.

Sleaze

There seemed little prospect that Thatcher's successor would fare any better, which was a sure sign that he would not lack for invitations to earn a little extra by telling audiences about it. For one thing, John Major did not match up to the Iron Lady for a strident talent in blanketing over harsh reality. Faced with capitalism's typical problems, Major would whinge and wriggle and blunder. It was predictable that his premiership should end in a swamp of sleaze, aggravated by his routine paralysis when confronted with clear evidence of what his ministers and MPs were getting up to. Towards the end he was a wretched man, patently out of control, harassed by members of his own party (including Portillo) who he described as “bastards”. He then led the Tories into historic defeat, leaving them as a party whose enduring grip on power had been transformed into a period of opposition likely to run into decades. None of this affected his reputation as a speaker; to give his doctored account of his catastrophic time at the helm and his advice on how the Tories might do better in future, he can trouser the sum of £28,000.

This racket – for that is what it is – is not confined to the Tories. On the Labour benches and a long way down the tariff is Peter Mandelson, who is one of the ex-ministers to have earned the right to have the prefix “disgraced” to their name. In fact Mandelson went one better than the others because, as distinct from most of the ministers who lose their jobs after being found out in some unparliamentary manipulations, he was twice disgraced. Even without those episodes he would have been forever notorious as one of the most ruthless of spin doctors – one whose financial re-arrangements were tailored to assuage his appetite for swanning around the salons of the rich and famous. Like the others who rake in the money from their speeches, Mandelson can use his freedom from governmental responsibilities to criticise those who are still in power – as if he were ever different, more effective, less blundering than they are. Like any other soiled goods, he goes at a knock-down price – to listen to one of his speeches costs a mere £5,000.

At a price

Nobody would bother to listen to a medical analysis by a surgeon with a reputation for having his patients die on the operating table. Nobody would want to fly in an aircraft where the pilot had a nice line in chat but was unable to keep the thing in the air. Yet politicians are allowed, when they have been exposed in all their impotence and in their attempts to conceal how useless they are, to turn their hand to self-justification – at a price. If this is a kind of madness it is because that is typical of what they represent – a social system which works against the interests of the mass of its people.
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