

## ***Eyewash no. 1122*** December 24, 2004

*Private Eye* loves a joke and hates a cliché but, if it's got to choose ... well, it's the jokes business it's in, not waste disposal, especially when the joke's as sure-fire as "John Prescott" and the cliché as irreproachable as "the right to buy" ... not a house ... but a "home".

And if you're in for one cliché, why not a few? Pitch that well known figure-of-fun, Mr Prescott—with "a sensitive, not to say touchy soul" beneath a "bluff exterior"—against someone seriously wanting to make a difference—"right-to-buy campaigner Ricky Rennalls"; one "drastically reducing the discounts available to council tenants who wish to buy their homes", the other "distributing leaflets protesting".

Rennalls's leaflets call Prescott "Scrooge" and give Rennalls's mobile phone number, so "*Imagine* Mr Rennalls's surprise when his mobile rang and it was the deputy prime minister himself on the line!" saying "This is John Prescott here. I see you lot call me Scrooge."

But, Mr Prescott being a known provoker-of-wit-in-newspaper-reporters, he mustn't be allowed any wit of his own. The point has to be that (and Polly—or is it Gobshite?—says we can take Mr Rennalls's word for it) the one with the touchy soul beneath the bluff exterior rang up "trying to intimidate and bully me ... His tone was aggressive ... he probably would have punched me if we had been in the same room."

*What* a good joke. And who would want to spoil it by objecting that it's Mr Rennalls and Backbiter who lack a sense of humour or that homes are made not bought and sold, or that the "right to buy" in question is more properly called the "right to buy partly at someone else's expense"? It seems to me that Backbiter missed Mr Prescott's joke and swallowed Mr Rennalls's cliché. But then, like his editor [*Which one?* Ed.], he has a living to earn and space to fill too.

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What in the world could be funnier than the Chairman of a Municipal Council in Bahrain objecting to the realism of female mannequins used to display underwear in clothes shops? What bloke not utterly ridiculous makes any connection between the *mons veneris* beneath the knickers of a realistic mannequin and the *mons veneris* beneath the knickers of any real, or imaginary, woman in his mind's eye? What difference is there between realistic mannequins dressed in tweed suits and realistic mannequins dressed in low-cut bras and stocking tops? It's a funny old world in which blokes get turned on by realistic, full sized, three-dimensional mannequins just as if they were three inch-high, two-dimensional, glossy photographs on the pages of *FHM*. Funnier still when other blokes want them banned. Come on. This is the 21st century, even in Bahrain. Do *I* see or feel anything out of order when I'm in the underwear department of Marks and Spencer? Nor does Polly Lewis-Smith either.

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The editor [*Hislop?* Ed.] likes gags, as a way of telling the truth. And he's right to. A gag may tell more of the truth or tell it more deeply than some equivalent bit of excogitation. But, equally, a gag can be a way of evading the truth or evading having to say what you think the truth is. A gag can make a useful bolthole. Eyegags *can* be

Moronic too, especially if the subject is—for a liberal-minded readership—a touchy one, like Northern Ireland or immigration. *Private Eye*, then, is as ready as any other newspaper on the Street of Shame to tell the gags its readers want to hear. So if the IRA steals £26 million—whether to reward Loyalty with rest and recuperation on the beaches of the Costa del Sol or to buy more semtex to blow people up with—and if that annoys loyalist politicians so much that they refuse to take part in government with Sinn Fein, the safest position the paper can take up is the highest it can reach, one from which it can call out “Tweedledum and Tweedledee” in superiority to both parties. Which is what it does (“Talks called off as Adams says Potato and Paisley says Potarto”), as if there were nothing to choose between. This is what is called taking the line of least resistance or the easy way out or perhaps—even on the Street of Shame—cowardice.