

## **Claim and Shame**

**By Francis Beckett**

A play for the stage in two acts. Running time: about one hour fifteen minutes.

The action takes place in the corridors and offices of the House of Commons between summer 2004 and spring 2010.

Characters in order of appearance:

Julius Bradshaw MP: age 40-60

Mervin Montague, a political columnist: age 35-55

Meg Jones MP: age 30-40

Doug Jones, her husband, a head teacher: age 35-45

Sir Rick Lorimer, a financier: age 30-45

Lizzy, an investigative journalist: age 25-30

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## Synopsis

Meg and Doug Jones are a golden couple. She has just won a stunning by-election victory to become one of Labour's youngest MPs, and is expected to have a brilliant future. He is the government's favourite educationalist: Head Teacher of the Year, successfully bringing private sponsors into state education. But when it all starts to go sour, it does so with terrifying speed, until, mired in scandal, facing ruin and even prison, they find that their friends no longer want to know them.

**ACT 1**

JULIUS BRADSHAW AND MERVIN MONTAGUE WALK TO  
THE FRONT OF THE STAGE

JULIUS            Good evening, and welcome to the Mother of Parliaments. To your left, over the terrace, you get the finest view of the Thames to be found anywhere. I'm Julius Bradshaw MP, and it gives me particular pleasure to host the 2010 annual dinner for the members of your famous, in fact legendary professional association, the (DISCREETLY CONSULTS CARD IN HIS HAND) Retail Traders Federation. I know you will be making a huge contribution to the recovery of Great Britain PLC in the coming months, like the patriotic business people you are. I have the honour of being your parliamentary host for the evening, and of introducing your guest speaker, that prince of newspaper columnists, Mervin Montague, who will give you the taste and texture of what it is like in this place in his own inimitable fashion.

MERVIN            Thank you. My old friend Julius Bradshaw, ladies and gentleman, not just a sycophant, one of the great sycophants. He was born grovelling. (JULIUS LAUGHS, SYCOPHANTICALLY.) Here in the House of Commons, he has many imitators. You used to see them crowding round Tony Blair, tongues hanging out. Unfortunately Mr Blair believed everything they said about him. Here, but for the grace of God, goes God. Members of Parliament have a historic duty to keep us permanently amused, which is no doubt why they have livened up a boring springtime with the current parliamentary expenses scandal. More of that later.

JULIUS            Thank you for that, Mervin. I expect. And of course you've touched on the reason why I'm substituting today for my parliamentary colleague Meg Jones. Some allegations have been made against her and her husband – made by journalists, who as we all know are men and women of absolute probity, never been known to fiddle their expenses or do anything at all underhand. I can't of course, comment on the charges against her. But Meg Jones has been a good MP

and is one of the finest economists it's been my privilege to know. I remember as though it were yesterday the day she and her husband arrived in this place, six years ago in 2004. I was already a seasoned old political hack.

MERVIN GOES OUT. JULIUS GOES TO THE BACK OF THE STAGE AS MEG AND DOUG JONES COME IN.

JULIUS           Meg. Such a pleasure to see you. Especially when you did so well to get here. The PM said so himself. Tony really thought we might lose that by-election. You did brilliantly to get the vote out. The best by-election campaign for fifty years.

MEG               It's very good of you to say so. We were pleased with the result.

JULIUS           You had every right to be. It's only what one would expect from the best young economist of her generation. And so you're the famous Doug Jones.

DOUG             Famous?

JULIUS           Of course famous. The youngest head teacher in his county, transformed his school in just two years, from failing school to getting "outstanding" from Ofsted, admired wherever education is valued.

DOUG             Well – it's extremely kind of you to say so.

MEG               Do you always Google people before you meet them?

JULIUS           Always. Always, always, always. You must do it too, if you want to thrive in this place. People don't know, they think you carry that information in your head. You have to remember that most people don't have your shrewdness.

MEG               Aren't you going over the top now?

JULIUS           No. People say flattery can be too gross, but it can't. Flattery can never be too gross. No matter how outrageously you flatter them, people still think you mean it.

MEG               That's dreadfully cynical. Surely you don't really believe that?

JULIUS           Well - there are just a very few very special people – people like you, Meg, with your special intellectual sharpness – who aren't fooled by flattery.

MEG               I suppose that's true.

JULIUS            Now, we're in luck – there's someone you should meet.

HE STOPS CALLS OFF STAGE

JULIUS            Rick! Rick! Come over here.

BACK TO TALKING CONFIDENTIALLY TO MEG AND DOUG

JULIUS            This really is a stroke of luck, you'll like Rick – it's wise to like Rick.

MEG                I don't recognise him. He's not an MP is he?

JULIUS            Good Lord, no, he's...

ENTER RICK. JULIUS FINISHES IN A QUICK ASIDE TO MEG.

JULIUS            He's as rich as Croesus.

OUT LOUD

JULIUS            Meg, meet Rick Lorimer. Meg's...

RICK                I know who Meg is. Congratulations on a fine victory, Meg.

JULIUS            Now, Meg, let me tell you about Rick. Sir Rick, I should say, knighted for services to education reform. Sir Rick is a genius out of the city. Chairman and chief executive of Magnivox Finance. He can take base metal and turn it into gold. He's also a highly respected broadcaster, you'll have seen his programme...

DOUG              Of course. Getting Richer Faster. Great programme, Sir Rick. I make my GCSE students watch it every week.

RICK                Thank you.

JULIUS            And he's a great philanthropist. He's put hundreds of thousands of pounds into state schools. You'll know all about it, Doug.

DOUG              I do. This is a stroke of luck. I've been wanting to meet you, Sir Rick –

RICK                Please. Just Rick.

DOUG              Rick. I've written to your office – I don't expect you to remember, of course – but we have some innovative and exciting projects in my school....

RICK                Is that so?

DOUG              We pride ourselves on innovation. It's very exciting.

RICK            You find innovation exciting?

DOUG           Very. And ours is exciting innovation.

RICK            Sounds exciting.

JULIUS         And innovative.

DOUG           And we're seeking private sector partners...

MEG             Darling, I'm not sure if this is the right moment...

RICK            It's fine.

JULIUS         In that case, Meg, do you think perhaps you and I might diplomatically continue our tour?

MEG             Well, perhaps. Doug, don't forget to tell Sir Rick about the curricular innovations, and the enrichment programme. Give him your FSM figures, and don't forget the gifted and talented programme...

JULIUS         We'll be off. I'll show you – let's see, have you seen the whips about an office yet?

MEG             Yes.

JULIUS         Good, then it's time to sort out your expenses. Next stop, fees office.

EXIT JULIUS AND MEG.

RICK            OK, tell me about it.

DOUG           Let me start with our results. 52 per cent A star to Cs at GCSE, 57 per cent including...

RICK            Yeah, yeah, you're doing well, I get it.

DOUG           We deliver quality education...

RICK            You deliver education? You run a post office?

DOUG           No, a school.

RICK            Oh.

DOUG           But we could do even better if...

RICK            How much?

DOUG           Sorry?

RICK            How much do you want?

DOUG I wouldn't want you to think I just wanted your money, we want your wisdom, your guidance, your...

RICK How much money do you want?

DOUG I can show you a business plan, starting with an initial appraisal prior to market testing...

RICK Who do I have to sleep with to get a straight answer round here? How much?

DOUG £50,000.

RICK GETS OUT HIS CHEQUE BOOK.

RICK And you'll call it the Sir Rick Lorimer library, or sports hall, or whatever the hell it is?

DOUG We certainly will.

RICK WRITES A CHEQUE AND HANDS IT OVER

RICK Here.

DOUG Rick, that's – I don't know what to say.

RICK Just write me a nice letter, the sort I can show to government ministers. Philanthropic public-spirited businessman, you know the sort of stuff.

DOUG First thing tomorrow, Rick.

RICK I could make use of a man like you, Doug. You're dynamic. A go-getter. I like that.

DOUG Really?

RICK Here's the score, Doug. One day last year, I'm up Downing Street, chatting up the PM's wife, giving her a few investment tips, the way you do, Tony comes over –

DOUG (HUGELY IMPRESSED) Tony Blair?

RICK No, Tony of Toni and Guy.

DOUG Oh.

RICK Of course Tony Blair. So Tony says, hi, Rick, look, I'm setting up this committee. The Committee of Business Leaders on Excellence and Innovation in Education. Few guys out of the city, get together once every couple of months, tell the schools what to do. Want some guy who knows his way about to chair it. How about you? Well, OK, Tone, I say, I can do that, but I can tell you right now what us guys want from schools. Teach

the little buggers to find their way round a call centre and sell on the phone, you've cracked it. But it turns out he wants us to raise money for some of those crappy schools with poor kids in. You know the sort.

- DOUG Yes, yes, schools like mine. We've got 45 per cent eligible for free school meals – it's a rough and ready index of deprivation – and that affects the learning outcomes....
- RICK The what?
- DOUG Learning outcomes. It means...
- RICK Never mind what it means. Anyway, I say to Tony, I need a few head teachers on board, he says OK, go and buy some.
- DOUG Buy some?
- RICK He says, buy some hero heads. Likes phrases like that, Tony does. I said, yeah, but these guys, they need paying. It's human nature. He said, whatever.
- DOUG Whatever? He said, whatever?
- RICK He said, whatever. So here's the deal. I pay you £1,000 a day every time you come and see me or go and talk to a business guy for me.
- DOUG You pay it?
- RICK Well, strictly speaking the government pays it.
- DOUG It would come off my salary, of course, I wouldn't be at school those days...
- RICK What the hell you talking about? This is added value you're giving here, every grand they pay you could turn into fifty grand for some rat-infested sink school somewhere. Plus expenses, of course, you buy these guys lunch or dinner somewhere good. Sometimes you bring them here, I can get you a Parliamentary pass, got a few MPs who owe me favours. So you take them to the Lords bar, let them do a bit of rubbernecking, look there's a dodderly former Prime Minister, how exciting. You get a corporate credit card, take them to all the best places, government picks up the bill.
- DOUG What do I tell them?

UNSEEN, BEHIND THEM, JULIUS AND MEG ENTER. JULIUS IS SPEAKING QUIETLY TO MEG BUT OVER THE NEXT FEW SPEECHES SHE HOLDS HER HAND UP TO SILENCE HIM SO THAT SHE CAN HEAR RICK AND DOUG.

- RICK First rule of selling: first thing you sell is yourself. You watch me on Getting Richer Faster, how often you heard me say that? You tell them how you transformed your school, one week it was a rat-infested dump where the kids were all rapists who spent the day snorting coke and stabbing the teachers, the next week you turned up and suddenly all the kids had clean uniforms with Eton collars, said yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir, and they all got top marks and went to Oxford.
- DOUG It isn't quite that simple.
- RICK Sure, sure, takes a couple of weeks, I understand. OK, so you've sold yourself, then what? Now, these guys, they're top business people, they've got all the money they want, now they want a bit of respect. Sir Fred Moneybags, Lord Bill Stockoptions, Lady Mary Hedgefund. With me so far?
- DOUG But can we....
- RICK Maybe. I can make a case to Tony. What you can't do is promise. You can hint, you can give them hope, but if you promise and we can't do it – you've only got to do that once and word gets round the city, it's a small community, they stop trusting you. Got it?
- MEG Doesn't Doug have to be very careful not to give the impression that he's selling honours? You can go to prison for that.
- RICK He's not selling them. He's leveraging money for education from public-spirited business people. If, later on, the Prime Minister chooses to recognise their contribution to education in a tangible way, that's up to him.
- DOUG It's all right, Meg.
- MEG I don't want you getting in over your head. I know how you get carried away sometimes.
- DOUG Don't worry. Trust me.
- MEG Of course I trust you. But we're not used to this, you and I.
- DOUG We're in a different world now, Meg. This isn't my schools and your universities, this is the great world out there. Oh, Meg, Meg, we've scratched around for pennies long enough. It's our turn for a place in the sun.
- MEG Careful. People think of me as a woman with integrity. It's a distinguishing mark of the Meg Jones brand.
- JULIUS It's a precious political asset. And this will enhance it.

DOUG Listen to Julius. He knows what he's talking about.

RICK They're going to think: not only she's a woman of integrity, but her husband has raised tens of thousands for crappy schools.

MEG What on earth do you mean, crappy schools?

JULIUS He means: for educating our poorest citizens. That's what you meant, isn't it, Rick?

RICK Sure, sure. Lots of them with problems, like being black....

MEG You think being black's a problem?

DOUG Rick didn't meant it quite like that...

RICK Nah, one of my best friends is...

JULIUS Yes, well, Rick, I'm not sure that will help.

RICK OK, OK. God. Political correctness gone mad. So, Doug, it's a deal?

DOUG (LOOKING AT MEG, ALMOST PLEADINGLY) Well, yes, if...

MEG All right. If you're sure it's something you're comfortable with, go ahead.

RICK Great. There's a meeting of the committee next Thursday. My secretary will be in touch. Just tell her if you want a car sent for you.

EXIT RICK

DOUG Don't worry, love. Only good can come of it.

MEG I hope so. What do you think, Julius?

JULIUS I think it's a magnificent start to a luminous parliamentary career. The PM trusts Rick. Just the sort of go-getting entrepreneur Britain needs, I've heard Tony say so. Now, what else do you need to see?

MEG I'm still thinking about what we've just seen.

JULIUS Ah, the fees office. It's worrying you. I know, I know, you're a serious and idealistic person, that's why you're in politics, and this expenses system doesn't seem quite right to you.

MEG It's an odd system.

DOUG Odd in what way?

- JULIUS Well, Doug, it's not a conventional expenses system. But then, this isn't a conventional job. No normal person does this job. And the higher you go in politics, the odder you have to be. No Prime Minister is ever quite sane. You must have noticed that.
- MEG I thought I was going to live on my salary – and Doug's, of course. I hadn't thought about buying a London home.
- JULIUS The expenses system is designed to enable you to do that. Deliberately so. We have to work very long hours here.
- DOUG A London home? That would be great, if we could afford it. And you know, with the extra money I'll be making by working for Rick...
- MEG How much is that going to be?
- DOUG £1,000 a day, he said. If you can put some of your expenses towards it, we could get a flat overlooking the Thames, that'd be...
- MEG Don't get carried away, Doug. This expenses business isn't straightforward. I'm not sure what I think about it.
- JULIUS Look. I know what's troubling you. It troubled a lot of us. But think of it this way. MPs aren't paid what we're worth. A middle ranking civil servant takes home more than I do, and I used to be a minister, I've forgotten more about government than most civil servants ever knew. But I'm an elected politician, I have to worry about what people think. That civil servant doesn't.
- MEG But we do have to worry about what people think. Someone once said to me: don't do anything you wouldn't be happy to see on the front page of a national newspaper.
- JULIUS If we all lived by that rule, political life would grind to a halt. We can't put our own salaries up to we're worth, we'd get headlines about feathering our own nest, so we make sure our expenses include some compensation for our low pay. That way we get somewhere near what we're worth, and the taxpayer keeps our services. That's win-win.
- MEG So we're actually being paid more than our constituents think we're paid?
- JULIUS We have to be, or no one who was any good would ever do the job. It's a dog's life, being an MP. You're available all hours to anyone who feels like ringing you up, everyone thinks they own you, you're at everyone's beck and call, and people treat you like dirt. In any other job people are supposed to be

polite to you, but normal rules of civilised behaviour don't apply when you're talking to an MP.

DOUG You have power...

JULIUS We have no power. We're whipping boys. We'd have more power as low-grade middle managers. We have responsibility without power, the prerogative of the mug through the ages. Governments have power, not MPs. That's why the government leaves the expenses system alone – if it didn't pay us our expenses, it might have to let us influence policy.

MEG At least it's a platform, being an MP. The media wants to know what we think.

JULIUS Which just makes us fair game for every foul newspaper hack who wants something to kick. You know that columnist – Mervin Montague – the one who calls me “Soapy Bradshaw” just because I like to be nice to people. He calls me Soapy Bradshaw in print every time he refers to me, and he looks for chances to refer to me so he can call me Soapy Bradshaw. “Soapy Bradshaw slithered up to me in the lobby yesterday” – I have to pretend I like it, but I'd murder him if I thought I could get away with it. That phrase eats into me like a cancer.

MEG I know what you mean. I've just fought a high-profile by-election. People stand in front of me and abuse me and I have to smile sweetly. And the local newspaper calls me a harridan because I stand up for women.

DOUG I tell you, Julius, it was all I could do not to punch some of those people, the way they talked to her. Julius is right, darling, you deserve some compensation for that.

MEG AND DOUG GO OUT. JULIUS COMES TO THE FRONT OF THE STAGE WHERE HE IS JOINED BY MERVIN.

JULIUS Meg turned out well.

MERVIN A bit solemn, a bit inclined to be pious.

JULIUS But clever. Hardworking.

MERVIN and most important of all, conventional.

JULIUS And Doug – the perfect rising Labour MP's consort, doing good works in poor inner city schools, sitting on Rick's committee. I got him his pass so he could get into the Palace of Westminster whenever he liked – I called him my educational adviser – and after a couple of years he was here almost as often as she was.

JULIUS AND MERVIN GO OUT. DOUG AND LIZZY ARE SITTING WITH A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE.

- LIZZIE            A little early, isn't it, for (SHE PICKS UP THE BOTTLE AND LOOKS AT IT) vintage champagne. This one – it's at least £80 a bottle, isn't it?
- DOUG             Not here, the bars at Westminster are subsidised. I'm only paying £60.
- LIZZIE            You don't think someone might object to you spending public money on champagne for me?
- DOUG             Not at all. It's an investment in education. I see this bottle of champagne as part of the process of changing the image of schools. We used to think of education as being done on the cheap, grubby cheaply-decorated buildings, know what I mean. Well, as you can see, there's nothing cheap about the way educators entertain.
- LIZZIE            But there are still a lot of crumbling schools...
- DOUG             And you and I can change all that. You tell me that your boss made millions in the eighties, and now he wants to spend some of it doing some good. And that's what we're here for, me and Rick –
- LIZZIE            You mean Sir Rick Lorimer?
- DOUG             Yes, sorry, he and I are such old friends and colleagues, I forgot you haven't met him yet. He and I, you see, we're like that (TWINES HIS FINGERS TOGETHER.)
- LIZZIE            You must have some pretty special qualities to win the trust of a man like that.
- DOUG             Well, you know, he wants proactive people around him. Go-getters, risk-takers, pirates, that's what he calls his team, his inner circle. And of course we share a passion to make the world a better place. To give something back, you might say.
- LIZZIE            Of course, I can tell. I can see it in your eyes.
- DOUG             Can you? Yes, well. And of course that means networking. Knowing the right people.
- LIZZIE            You must have wonderful connections.
- DOUG             Connections?
- LIZZIE            The people you know...

DOUG Oh, that. Yes. Well. You know how it is.

LIZZIE Ooooh – very discreet. What would it take to get you to tell me a few stories?

DOUG A lot. You don't earn the trust of people like Rick by talking too much. You'll forgive me if I'm rather discreet.

LIZZIE I imagine you're a pretty powerful man, in your own quiet way.

DOUG To an extent. Of course, power – it's all relative – I'd prefer to say influence, really.

LIZZIE It's a great aphrodisiac, power.

DOUG Is it? Ah. Mm. I mean, the thing about power, you always have to understand the limitations of your power. Otherwise you overreach yourself. You know what I mean?

LIZZIE I know. But what with your power, and your wife about to be fast-tracked into the government, or so I hear.

DOUG Wife? My wife?

LIZZIE Some people in your position might be worried about having such a powerful wife, but you don't need to worry about that, do you?

DOUG No. Er, no. I'm not – not worried about my wife, you know. Not at all.

LIZZIE You do know about the job she's going to get? At the Treasury?

DOUG Oh, yes. Yes, of course. It's supposed to be secret.

LIZZIE Don't worry, I shan't tell a soul. It makes you a real power couple, doesn't it?

DOUG These things are relative. Look. You were saying earlier, there might be a substantial, ah, investment in education...

LIZZIE Yes. My employer really wants to put some money into some of your schools. Could be several million.

DOUG That's very public spirited.

LIZZIE It's not just being public spirited. He wants something back.

DOUG Such as?

LIZZIE He feels that he hasn't had the recognition he deserves.

DOUG Recognition?

- LIZZIE All sorts of odd people get honours these days. Sir this and Dame that and Lord the other, and what have most of them done? I mean, frankly, lots of them are really quite poor. Very worthy folk, I'm sure. But poor. It seems to be fashionable to be poor these days, doesn't it?
- DOUG That's what Rick always says. There's nothing romantic about being poor...
- LIZZY Exactly. It's just squalid. Now, my boss is a wealth creator. Even I don't know exactly how much wealth he's created, but he's got four homes, one in London, then there's Venice, San Francisco, and the most wonderful beach house just outside Sydney. You'd have thought that would be worth some sort of recognition, but no. Not so much as an MBE. An invitation to a Buckingham Palace garden party. Once.
- DOUG Scandalous. Just what Rick always says. The wealth creators ought to be top of the list for honours. Entrepreneurs, bankers, financiers, the people without whom we'd be – well, we'd be without them if we didn't have them, that's where we'd be.
- LIZZIE Yes. So – what can you do about it?
- SHE PUTS HER HANDBAG ON THE TABLE.
- LIZZIE If my boss could come up with – say - £5 million for your committee, what could you do about getting him a seat in the House of Lords?
- DOUG I'd have to go through, Rick, of course. And nothing's really certain.
- LIZZIE Come on. With your sort of influence and connections, surely...
- DOUG Well. In special circumstances I can go straight to Tony.
- LIZZIE You've got the ear of the Prime Minister? I thought you would have. Something about you told me.
- DOUG It's not well known. I'd ask you to be discreet about it. I'm sure you understand.
- LIZZIE Of course. But my boss would like to meet Tony Blair. And he'd like to meet him before he puts up lots of money.
- DOUG That's something Rick can fix quite quickly. If you can see your way to providing an initial £5,000 for Rick's committee, he can get you a five minute meeting with the PM and we'd arrange for a picture shaking hands. And if it was £7,000 Tony would have a brief conversation with him, tell him how much he

valued his entrepreneurial spirit, that sort of thing. And that immediately starts to establish your employer as a generous donor to education for underprivileged children. So it's win-win.

LIZZIE Good. And after that we can start talking serious money. Is it usual for you to recommend someone like my boss for an OBE, say, or a knighthood? That's part of what you do, isn't it?

DOUG Oh, yes. Absolutely. We do that sort of thing, Rick and I. Definitely.

LIZZIE And a large sum - investing say £5 million in a school – that would get him a peerage, right. Can you guarantee that?

DOUG Guarantee is a very strong word....

LIZZIE Don't pretend you're less powerful than I know you are. You can do it. You can have a private word with the PM, can't you? You do do that, don't you?

DOUG Oh, yes. Yes, I do that. All right. Look, I will make sure he gets a peerage. I'll speak to Tony personally. That sort of investment in education surely deserves the best sort of recognition. That will be Tony's view. You don't need to worry, I can fix it.

LIZZIE You're a remarkable man, Doug. If you had to put a figure on the amount of money you've raised for education by getting people peerages, what would it be?

DOUG Now, you mustn't – I mean, promising isn't what we do – it would be disgracefully indiscreet of me to....

LIZZIE Of course it would. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I've taken up a lot of your valuable time. I ought to go.

SHE STANDS AND PICKS UP HER HANDBAG.

DOUG But if I were to say in excess of £50 million....

LIZZIE More than £50 million? Really? Remarkable.

DOUG I think we feel that we're making a difference to young lives. That's what we feel.

LIZZY It's all very interesting. I'll report back. And we'll be in touch. £50 million. Well.

DOUG You haven't finished your champagne.

BUT SHE HAS GONE.

LIGHTS DOWN. WHEN THEY COME UP, CHAIRS AND TABLE HAVE GONE.  
ENTER, FROM OPPOSITE SIDES, MEG AND JULIUS.

JULIUS           Meg! Many, many congratulations. May I?

HE KISSES HER ON BOTH CHEEKS.

JULIUS           A well-deserved early promotion to the government. And after just two years in Parliament. The brightest and brainiest of our young MPs.

MEG              Thank you. It's a first step, Julius, that's all.

JULIUS           At the Treasury, too.

MEG              Yes, I was pleased about that. I feel I can do some good there. I've been saying for ages that the good times aren't going to last. We have to mend the economic roof while the sun's shining.

JULIUS           Yes, well, don't go saying that too loudly. Gordon doesn't like bad news, it spoils his temper. And he'll be Prime Minister before this Parliament's out, so watch your step.

MEG              Don't worry, Julius. I'm a practical politician. I don't sigh for the moon. Only I do sometimes think we could do more about the extremes of wealth and poverty.

JULIUS           I know, I know. We've done a few things. There's more money in health, more in education...

MEG              We haven't changed the way people live. And there's Iraq...

JULIUS           For heaven's sake don't talk about Iraq. Right or wrong, it's done, we can't change it. Meg – you have a wonderful future – but you serve your time, you defend whatever Tony and Gordon do, and then one day – one day, Meg, because you really are the brightest and brainiest - one day you will sit where they sit.

MEG              I know you're right, Julius, and thank you for keeping on saying it to me.

JULIUS           Look at me. I do nothing, I only say what conventional wisdom dictates, and everyone trusts me. I had a good few years in government, and then I was fired because Tony needed my job for some young man with powerful friends and sharp teeth, but I didn't make a fuss, and Tony sends me to Washington or Moscow or wherever he needs someone to say the right thing,

and that's fine by me. You'll go higher than I did. The next Prime Minister but two, that's what they're saying. .

MEG Julius. I owe you so much. I'll never be able to repay you.

JULIUS Now that's where you're wrong. I need some help for a development in my constituency. My seat might depend on it, come the next election. Your predecessor rather dragged his feet...

MEG I don't have the power to...

JULIUS Meg. In your new job, one phone call from you and my problem is solved, and if you tell me you've made that call before you tell anyone else so I can break it in the local press, my seat is almost safe.

MEG Really?

JULIUS Really.

ENTER RICK

RICK Meg! I've just heard the marvellous news. Right person in the right place.

MEG Thank you, Rick.

RICK I very much hope you'll be well disposed towards my schools committee.

MEG Is that my responsibility?

JULIUS Rick's committee relies on a steady revenue stream from the Treasury.

RICK I was never sure your predecessor understood the importance of our work. But you, on the other hand – with a husband in the business... Talking of which, Doug's joining me for lunch with a couple of guys out of the city. Don't suppose you'd care to join us? We could celebrate your news.

MEG Love to, but... I'm finding that a minister seems to be a slave to her private office.

RICK Never mind. You and I are going to meet tomorrow anyway.

MEG Really?

RICK My company's up for a PFI contract which you're responsible for. It's so comforting to know we'll be meeting a minister with a real grasp of the issues. I never felt quite comfortable with your predecessor. See you then.

RICK STARTS TO LEAVE

MEG Rick...

RICK Yes, Meg?

MEG Rick, I don't want to seem prissy, but shouldn't I bar myself from the meeting? Or at least declare an interest? You're up for a contract from my department, you're paying Doug, people might think that affected my judgement. Mightn't they, Julius?

JULIUS They might, but the two are separate. You have a system of Chinese walls.

MEG Chinese walls?

RICK Chinese walls. And the thing about Chinese walls is, they have Chinks in. Chinks? Get it?

MEG (ICILY) Chinks? Do you mean people whose ethnic origin is Chinese?

RICK Oh oh. Politically incorrect again. Never mind. See you tomorrow.

EXIT RICK

JULIUS Now, that's power, when Rick Lorimer goes out of his way to congratulate you.

MEG Mm. I have to be careful...

JULIUS Of course. Of course. You can't allow any suspicion of favouritism. Now, look out there, here's a test for both of us. There's that bag of bile Mervin Montague. We will greet him as though he were a long lost lover. It will be good for our souls. Mervin! Mervin, come and meet the Labour Party's rising star.

ENTER MERVIN MONTAGUE

MERVIN Julius, you slimy old seducer.

JULIUS (WITH HUGE SIMULATED AFFECTION) Mervin! Same old Mervin, but we love him for it, we do. Meg. Mervin Montague, the finest parliamentary sketch writer of our time – of any time. A national treasure. He can cut you up so delicately, you don't even know he's done it til you see the blood.

MERVIN I don't need introducing to Meg Jones, we're old friends. Aren't we?

MEG No. I mean, yes, of course we are.

JULIUS But what you don't know is –

MERVIN            That she's been fast-tracked onto the lowest rung in the Treasury? Thank you very much, Julius, but I don't need you for my political intelligence. Walked into the press gallery bar and three hacks told me within five minutes.

JULIUS            Marvellous news.

MERVIN            Could be. I'm afraid our paper tomorrow morning will contain less good news.

MEG                What do you mean?

MERVIN            Printed the story out. Thought you might want to see it.

HANDS A SHEET OF PAPER TO MEG. SHE READS IT WITH MOUNTING HORROR.

MEG                What – how the hell did you get Doug to say these things?

MERVIN            As it says in the copy. A female undercover reporter, posing as the aide to a very rich man. She probably had a recorder hidden in her handbag.

MEG                She must have made the quotes up. "In special circumstances I can go straight to Tony." He's never met Tony.

MERVIN            They've got it on tape. Amazing what a man will say to impress a pretty girl. Don't worry, Meg, my dear, it didn't go beyond a bit of flirting in the Lords bar. She's got better taste than to go for Doug Jones.

MEG                Thank you very much.

MERVIN            You're very welcome.

JULIUS            Oh, it was a honey trap. Really, Mervin – I might have expected it from one of the tabloids, but your paper ought to be above that kind of thing. Did you know about this?

MERVIN            It's a big political story – it's hardly going to go ahead without me being consulted, is it?

JULIUS            Of course, of course – Mervin's very respected, you know, he's the doyen of...

MEG                Yes, yes, you've told me, he's very important, he's the most important slimeball you know.

MERVIN            There's no need to be offensive. That's my job.

MEG                You're contemptible, Mervin. A worm. A bully with a bit of power. I bet you grovel to your editor.

MERVIN            You might live to regret saying that.

EXIT MERVIN

JULIUS            You shouldn't say things like that, not to political  
commentators. They can revenge themselves on you the very  
next morning.

END OF ACT 1

**ACT 2**

SPOT ON MERVIN, SEATED WITH LAPTOP ON HIS KNEE, TYPING AND SAYING THE WORDS AS HE TYPES THEM.

MERVIN           It was my sad duty last night to inform Meg Jones, high-flying wife of Dirty Doug Jones the priapic pedagogue, that her husband had been caught, if not with his pants down, at least wishing he had his pants down. And I regret to have to inform you that the fragrantly feminist Mrs Jones unleashed a torrent of abuse so vigorous, so colourful, so expletive-laden that her husband will require all his courage to venture past the plastic gnomes which no doubt adorn the Chez Jones garden, and confront the wrath of his famously humourless wife. . I can only hope that his balls are bigger than his brains.

ENTER RICK AND LIZZY, CLEARLY IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ANIMATED TALK.

RICK               I've said to you twice already, yes, I met Doug Jones, briefly. Yes, I brought him onto the committee, I thought a successful head teacher could help us. But I hardly know him. All the rest is pure fantasy. You flashed your legs at him and he said whatever he thought would impress you. That's all that happened.

LIZZY             He seemed to think you and he were quite close.

MERVIN           Do you two mind? This is my office as well, and I'm supposed to file my column in half an hour.

RICK               Mervin, will you kindly explain to this junior member of your paper's reporting staff that I am not in the business of selling honours, and that she's damn lucky not to be in the libel courts for her story this morning.

LIZZY             The libel courts might take some notice of the fact that I've got Doug Jones on tape saying the opposite.

RICK               Who the hell's Doug Jones? You might as well say you've got Mrs Pipsqueak from Nether Wallop saying it. He's some fantasist I hardly know, I think I've spoken to him once when I was introduced by his wife. He doesn't know anything at all.

MERVIN           Why are you getting so worked up? I mean, when did Rick Lorimer worry about people thinking he was powerful? You like all that. You know you do. Aren't all your city chums going to look at you with new respect?

RICK               There's a reason. Can't tell you what it is, but there's a reason. I didn't want this now. Could be very damaging.

LIZZY            In what way damaging?

RICK            Delicate negotiations.

MERVIN        Go on.

RICK            Can't talk about it.

LIZZY         Magnivox can't pay its debts, right?

RICK            Watch what you say.

LIZZY         I've got the names of the three banks which have withdrawn credit...

RICK            Not withdrawn. Don't say withdrawn, that's a libel, I'll drag you through every court in the country if you say withdrawn. The banks have a few legitimate concerns about liquidity which we as a board are addressing.

MERVIN        You were saying about suing the paper...

RICK            Just get your facts right. Get your facts right for once. That's all.

HE STORMS OUT.

MERVIN        Well. So where did you get that story?

LIZZY         It's called reporting, Mervin. You wouldn't know a lot about it.

SHE WANDERS ACROSS TO MERVIN'S COMPUTER AND LOOKS AT THE SCREEN. THE NEXT FEW SPEECHES ARE NOT AS ANGRY AS THE WORDS SUGGEST; THEY ARE MORE TIRED AND WORLD-WEARY.

MERVIN        I didn't deserve that.

LIZZY         What's deserve got to do with anything? Did Meg Jones deserve this?

SHE POINTS TO THE SCREEN.

MERVIN        Yes. She insulted me. I was upset.

LIZZY         She insulted you, so you hold her up to public scorn and ridicule, because you can. I'd call that a misuse of your power.

MERVIN        I'd call you an insufferable prig. It's not as though your stuff is kind and cuddly. You do more harm than I ever do.

LIZZY         They have nothing to fear from me unless they're corrupt.

MERVIN Mm. Talking of which, where have we got to with these Freedom of Information Act requests on MPs' expenses you're supposed to be working on?

LIZZY They're still stalling. But we'll get them. We'll get them in the end.

MERVIN Don't you ever think you have a rather sad life, Lizzy? Burrowing away in dusty archives for unremarked-on trifles, framing long, boring requests for tedious facts under the Freedom of Information Act, getting sad little teachers to cough their life stories in return for a faraway glimpse of heaven?

LIZZY No. I think I've got the best job in the world. I find things out that rich and powerful people would rather we didn't know.

MERVIN It's not where the future is. Your sort of reporting will be gone in five years.

LIZZY So I'd better do as much of it as I can, while I still can.

MERVIN You'll get poor, sad little Meg Jones, but you'll never get rich and powerful Sir Rick Lorimer.

LIZZY We'll get him too. We're nearly there. Didn't you believe in a better, cleaner, more truthful world? Once?

MERVIN Maybe. I forget.

JULIUS COMES TO FRONT OF STAGE.

JULIUS She was wrong, of course. The press never got Rick. The markets got Rick. He'd been buying fistfuls of debts all over the world, and when they all started to default, his business unravelled. He needed public money to bail him out, otherwise it was liquidation for the company and personal bankruptcy for Rick. He'd been so sneery about politicians, how they created nothing and lived off go-getters like him, but he needed us now. His friend Tony wasn't Prime Minister any more, and he had to deal with what he always called "that miserable Scottish bastard" Gordon Brown. And then Meg – still a treasury minister – weighed in with a public statement which, I must say, I thought very ill-judged.

DOUG AND MEG ON STAGE; DOUG AT DESK WITH COMPUTER, MEG STANDING. ENTER RICK, AGITATED, WAVING A NEWSPAPER.

RICK Why have you done this to me?

MEG Rick, I'm busy. If you want to see me, you make an appointment, you don't just come barging in.

RICK Did you say this? "Chief secretary to the treasury Meg Jones said: 'People like Rick Lorimer will have to learn that the public will not be fleeced forever. There will be no more multi million pound bonuses for failure. Greed isn't good. The party's over.'" What the hell are you trying to do to me?

MEG I have to protect the public purse.

RICK OK. OK. But did you have to... Look, I need a few minutes alone with you. (POINTING AT DOUG) Can we talk without the hired help?

MEG You mean my husband?

RICK Your – yes, of course, your husband, sorry, Dave.

DOUG Doug.

RICK Doug, didn't recognise you for a moment. Look, Meg, I want a bit of loyalty here.

DOUG What sort of loyalty would that be, Rick? Would that be the sort of loyalty you gave me? 'I hardly know this man, I believe I met him once, he's obviously a fantasist.' That sort of loyalty? A word from you and I'd have kept my job. I wouldn't have spent six hours in the police cells. The most frightening six hours of my life.

RICK Look, yeah, I'm sorry, but this is important...

MEG That was important too, Rick. The morning the police came round was bad. We could have done with a word from you that morning.

DOUG Seven in the morning, knock at the door, ten uniformed coppers. That's how they do it, get you unbalanced.

MEG Newspapers staked out the house to get a picture of me leaving.

RICK You were bloody stupid, Doug. Let you buy a pretty girl a drink and you'll tell her anything.

DOUG You said you could get honours for these people.

RICK I said don't promise. And I didn't tell you to go and blab it out to every pretty girl who flashes her legs at you.

MEG She's not a girl, she's a woman, don't be so bloody condescending.

- DOUG You told me to give these people what they wanted, and now my career's gone, and I'm lucky I've got an MP wife who can employ me as her researcher. And lucky she didn't throw me out to save her political career. That's how bad things are, Rick, and it's your fault.
- RICK No, it's your bloody fault, you're a loser who keeps his brains in his balls.... (PULLS HIMSELF TOGETHER WITH AN EFFORT.) I'm sorry. OK, Meg, I shouldn't talk about gir – about women like that. Doug, I'm sorry, but you have to understand my position, being seen to be close to you would have destroyed everything we were working for. Meg, I'm going down here, I need your help, I need you to be saying, OK, Rick, how can we help you out of this hole?
- DOUG How many of Meg's constituents give a damn whether you have to do without your next bottle of vintage champagne?
- MEG It's not that simple, Doug. All right, Rick, suppose I help you...
- DOUG You're not going to...
- MEG I said suppose. How do I justify that? I've got people in my constituency who are struggling to make ends meet, and people like you have just ensured that their lives are going to be even tougher.
- RICK OK. Look. Don't do it for me. Do it for the poor. It doesn't help them to watch me go under. It harms them. If I go down, their homes go down with me. If I'm screwed, they're screwed. You're an economist, you know that as well as I do.
- DOUG You thought, you could take all sorts of crazy risks, and if it all went wrong it was only a few little people who didn't matter who'd suffer.
- RICK Wealth trickles down. I get rich, they get a bit less poor. I get poor, they starve. If I'm not filthy rich, they're dirt poor.
- MEG What do you want?
- RICK I want a rescue package. But I want to make all the money back, so it doesn't cost the country a penny in the long run. I can do that. But only if I get a package that leaves me in the driving seat, leaves me to do what I want –
- DOUG You want Meg to make sure you get handed billions of public money, and you can go on fleecing your customers and start fleecing the taxpayer too?

- RICK Spare me the Marxist ideology. You're grown up, you know the score. The country can't afford to watch me drown, and it can't afford to watch me run off abroad – yes, I could do that. It can't afford to cut me loose, and it can't afford to tie me down either. All it can do is help me, and hope I survive. You may not like me but if you're going to look after anything else, you've got to look after me first. You'll be no use to anyone until you see that. Meg. Talk to Gordon for me.
- MEG Gordon's got an election to fight. He'll have to justify it. So will I.
- RICK Believe me, Meg, the Labour Party needs the rich. Your Party can't fight an election any more without our money. And you've said that the rich know best too often to back out now – if we say you're no good, everyone will believe us, because you've taught them to. We may be at the mercy of the government, but the Labour Party's at our mercy.
- DOUG For heaven's sake, you're not going to let him blackmail you.
- MEG There's something in what he says.
- RICK So you'll help me? You realise of course that I can probably do it without you. If Tony was still in Downing Street, I wouldn't have bothered even asking you. I just don't quite feel comfortable with Gordon, I'm never sure he's on my wavelength. But I can go direct to Gordon if I have to. Look. You've done something stupid. You should never have made that statement. There's still time to redeem yourself. Go to Gordon for me. Will you do it?
- MEG I don't think I will, no..
- RICK The Labour Party can't get along without us. We can take our money and our endorsement elsewhere.
- MEG We can try to get on without you. And if I have any influence over things, we're going to,
- RICK You won't help me? You're sure?
- MEG I've never been so sure of anything.
- RICK One day, quite soon, you're going to be very sorry you made that decision.

EXIT RICK. LIGHTS DOWN. JULIUS COMES TO THE FRONT OF THE STAGE

JULIUS           Of course, Rick got his rescue package, on his terms, without Meg's help. Well, what was Gordon to do? Years ago he nailed himself to the idea that people like Rick could do no wrong. He couldn't abandon it now. It brought Meg sharply up against political reality, and I'm glad to say that she learned from it. She nailed a smile to her face and told the newspapers how it was important to keep go-getters like Rick working for Great Britain PLC, and they spoke of her as a future chancellor. What she didn't know was that there was a time bomb ticking away under her – under all of us. Lizzy and her journalist friends had been putting in requests under the Freedom of Information Act for details of all expenses claimed by every MP. We knew that people who don't understand the pressures we work under wouldn't understand the way we claim our expenses. So we managed to block the Freedom of Information requests. It's embarrassing, of course, people are inclined to ask what you've got to hide, but so long as you just stonewall, you can get away with it. But we couldn't prevent someone from stealing a computer disc with all the information on it and taking it to Lizzy. And once the paper had that, it started to feed out the poison, a bit at a time, a few spoonfuls a day. It was a dreadful time, the unhappiest time I've ever seen in all my years in the House of Commons. Some of my colleagues were almost suicidal. On day three I met Meg in the corridor. Neither of us had had our day in the eye of the storm yet. But she knew hers was coming. She knew what they probably had on her. You could see it in her face.

HE MEETS MEG AS SHE WALKS ON STAGE

MEG               It's the waiting I can't bear.

JULIUS           I know.

MEG               Every time I see that wretched woman Lizzy, or that slimy commentator, I know they're thinking, that's Meg Jones, on Thursday, on Saturday, whenever it is, I'm going to put a match to her career and wreck her life. What fun that's going to be. Don't you feel that, Julius?

JULIUS           Yes. I feel that.

MEG               I see poor old Alec got the treatment this morning.

JULIUS           Poor Alec. I've had dinner in that flat he was claiming for. Nice place. But not luxurious, they're lying about that. All that stuff about antique furniture, all rubbish. Victorian tat mostly. I

know a little about the antique business. What did they say his dining table cost? £25,000? Rubbish. If he paid more than £10,000 he was done.

- MEG                   It was entirely within the rules, what Alec did, wasn't it?
- JULIUS               Of course. But it looks bad. People aren't going to understand. Not in the middle of a recession. If only it had come up when people felt well off.
- MEG                   Julius. Why haven't they come for you and me yet? Are they just enjoying watching us? Is it just so Mervin and Lizzy can smell the fear every time they walk past us?
- JULIUS               Try not to let them. Just smile brightly, and let them see your teeth.
- MEG                   They're going to come for us, one day, aren't they?
- JULIUS               Probably.
- MEG                   Julius, when I came here, my first day here, you told me...
- JULIUS               I know. I'm sorry.
- MEG                   What's going to happen to me?
- JULIUS               I don't know.
- MEG                   And to you?
- JULIUS               They won't care so much about me. It's not going to look good. Buying furniture at the taxpayer's expense is one thing. Antique furniture for tens of thousands of pounds is going to be seen as milking it. And a second home when you can get here from my constituency by tube in half an hour. I'll have a few bad days, and people will send me vicious emails and spit at me in the street, and I'll have to pay some money back, but I'll survive. If no one hates you, you can survive almost anything, even if they rather despise you. You, though – you're a rising star, you're a bit controversial, you've given some hostages to fortune. And after Doug lost his job, I'm afraid you may have pushed the boundaries a bit more than I'd have advised.
- MEG                   Yes. Yes, I think I've pushed the boundaries. We've always been a bit over-committed, Doug and I. And after Doug lost his job...
- JULIUS               I'm sorry. I feel it's my fault.

MEG                   Someone else would have shown me how to fix the system if you hadn't. (SHE POINTS OFFSTAGE.) Look at her. Smiling behind her mask because she knows whose life she's going to destroy next.

JULIUS               She's your best hope.

MEG                   What do you mean?

JULIUS               She's coming this way. You know what to do.

MEG                   Stay with me.

JULIUS               I'd be in the way.

MEG                   I can't do it.

JULIUS               You can. Fake it til you feel it.

LIZZY COMES ON. SHE LOOKS AS THOUGH SHE'S HEADED SOMEWHERE AND DIDN'T PLAN TO STOP. JULIUS FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND.

MEG                   Lizzy –

LIZZY                Meg. Good to see you. Excuse me, I just want to...

MEG                   I know. It's always a rush, this place. And you still have to be better at what you do than any man, don't you find that?

JULIUS EXITS QUIETLY.

LIZZY                Yes. Yes, I find that.

MEG                   You've got a young child, haven't you?

LIZZY                Just eighteen months.

MEG                   I wish I had children, sometimes. You get on the escalator, it takes you up, it takes you to parliament, it takes you to the government, sometimes I think it would be nice just to stop, take stock. Perhaps I should. I'm sure you're glad you did it?

LIZZY                I'm glad. Look, Meg, is there anything special?

MEG                   Yes, I know, you're under pressure. Do you – do you find it hard, holding down a pressured job as well as...

LIZZY                Yes.

MEG                   It must be. Especially when you have to spend so much of your time here in Westminster. Keeping ridiculous hours,

keeping up with the men in the bar. It's still like a men's drinking club, don't you find.

LIZZY In many ways. Look, I have to –

MEG I know, sorry, maybe another time. Maybe we should have coffee together, talk...

LIZZY What about?

MEG Oh, I don't know – women in politics – this whole expenses thing, I noticed you haven't gone for many women MPs yet.

LIZZY There was Julia...

MEG Oh, yes, Julia, and then...

LIZZY That was the first day, then the second day there was...

MEG Yes, that's right, that's right. I suppose – I mean, it's really your story, isn't it? Quite a feather in your cap?

LIZZY Not just mine. But principally, yes.

MEG Of course, the pressures on women MPs are especially strong. Having to prove every day that I'm better than any man, ... so the chance of a woman making a mistake must be several times as great as of a man making a mistake – but I'd hope it might be understood. Understood by other women, I mean.

LIZZY What's on your mind, Meg?

MEG I just wondered – I mean, if I was going to feature in this stuff – not that I've got anything to be ashamed of, but if it were to happen – any chance of a tipoff before it appears? Just so I could prepare my friends. My husband.

LIZZY I'll tell you what would happen. You'd get a call, late the night before, maybe from me, maybe from one of my colleagues. In time for you to give us a quote if you want to, but not in time for you to get an injunction and stop the paper. That's how it's done, and how it has to be done, otherwise we'd never get this stuff in the paper. I probably shouldn't tell you, but several of your colleagues could have told you that. Why do you think you might figure, Meg?

MEG No reason. I mean, I do employ my husband as my researcher, but everyone here knows that, it's perfectly above board. You know that, of course. If it wasn't for you he'd still be a head teacher.

- LIZZY I didn't do that to Doug. Doug did that to himself.
- MEG Yes, of course. I just meant, I couldn't be crucified for employing him to deal with my constituency correspondence, could I? It's within the rules. Someone's got to be paid to do that job. Lots of MPs employ their partners to do it.
- LIZZY Yes, they do. Of course their partners are supposed to be here every day, nine to five. If he wasn't here some days...
- MEG Some days he works from home...
- LIZZY Yes, but if, some other days, he was doing other work – say he was also employed quietly as a part time schools inspector, and some days he just sloped off and did that, while the taxpayer was paying him to deal with your constituency correspondence. Say that wasn't just some days, but most days, then it would start to look as though he was charging the taxpayer for work he wasn't doing. And you were conniving in the fraud. And that wouldn't look at all good. You see what I mean?
- MEG Yes.
- LIZZY So – is there anything you'd like to tell me?
- MEG No.
- LIZZY And of course you're entitled to claim for the mortgage on your second home.
- MEG Yes, that's within the rules, there's nothing in that.
- LIZZY But if you said your second home was your house in your constituency. And then, quite suddenly, you said that was your first home, and your second home was that nice flat you bought in London overlooking the Thames. Well, if you'd done that, people would ask why. And if the answer was: because you could claim more that way, then people would say you were milking the taxpayer for all he was worth. And if you were then found to be renting out the flat for eight months of the year, people might get quite angry.
- MEG I see.
- LIZZY It's often better for someone's reputation if they tell us about these things, rather than –
- MEG Yes.
- LIZZY Here are my numbers. Call me any time.



these other things. I thought your paper was more interested in me claiming £5 for a burger while I was travelling.

MERVIN Now, that one's strictly for laughs. The idea of a government minister shovelling a Big Mac into her fragrant mouth while she runs for a train...

MEG It's all snobbery isn't it? Wouldn't have said a word if it was lunch in the Gay Hussar.

MERVIN I lunch in the Gay Hussar two or three times a week.

MEG I know. You fill your fat, complacent face with goulash and Bordeaux. All on expenses, of course. What do you call us? Pigs at the trough? What about you?

MERVIN Didn't slimy Julius advise against upsetting me?

MEG I've already been fired from the government. What have I got to lose?

MERVIN You're still an MP for a few months. Still worth writing about. A ghostly presence in Westminster. Meg Jones whispered past me in the committee corridor last night. At least, I assume it was Meg Jones, because the white-clad figure went "whooooo" and I noticed a smell of sulphur.

MEG Very droll.

MERVIN And she cast no shadow.

MEG Dead woman walking.

MERVIN That's rather nice. Do you mind if I write it down? Dead woman walking.

MEG Be my guest.

MERVIN Well. Better be off. Have to tend to the living.

ENTER LIZZY.

LIZZY Why are you here, Mervin? It's my story. Keep out of it.

MERVIN My hobby, really. I take a morbid interest in the politically dead. I'm a political necrophiliac. Farewell. I have an appointment with the editor.

EXIT MERVIN

LIZZY I hope you didn't tell him anything.

MEG Why should I talk to either of you?

- LIZZY If you're going to talk, best talk to me. At least I'll report you accurately. He's forgotten anything he ever knew about reporting. It'll just end up justifying some mean little clever-clever sneer in his column. Anything to say about the PM's statement?
- MEG He's fired me from the government. It says so here. It might have been a courtesy if he'd told me before he told you. Damn! I meant that to be off the record.
- LIZZY Don't worry. Just give me a better quote, then I won't use that one.
- MEG All right. Here it is. I've been honoured to be a member of his...
- LIZZY That's no good, I said a better quote. What about his second statement?
- MEG What are you talking about?
- LIZZY Oh, you haven't seen it yet. There's a new statement from the PM. And one from the Home Office. It's too late to get either of them into tomorrow morning's paper, but it'll do for the next day. It'll be a way of keeping the story alive. Which is probably what Number Ten wanted. Keep the focus on you, then it won't be on anyone else.
- MEG What do they say?
- LIZZY The Home Office says it's handing your file to the police. They want an urgent investigation of your expenses. The PM's statement says you'll be banned from standing as a Labour MP at the next general election. He's taking the whip away from you. You're no longer a member of the parliamentary Labour Party.
- MEG It's over then.
- LIZZY Yes, Meg. It's over. Sometimes politicians cut adrift say they're going to appeal to the court of public opinion, but in this case...
- MEG Not a lot of point. It's so unfair. It's – I wish you'd go away, I want to think aloud and you'll only take it down and use it against me.
- LIZZY At least three other Labour MPs have done just what you've done, and their careers aren't being taken away from them. Yours is. You think that's pretty unfair, don't you?
- MEG No comment.

- LIZZY Do you think the Prime Minister panicked?
- MEG No comment.
- LIZZY You've been loyal to him. You deserved a bit of loyalty in return.
- MEG No comment.
- LIZZY He's left you swinging in the wind, hasn't he?
- MEG No comment.
- LIZZY OK. That's probably sensible, especially with a police investigation on its way. I'll give you some advice though. If you're going to say "no comment" to me, say it to all the other papers too. If you give the Mail a comment when you've refused us, our lot will be furious. And they'll make you suffer for it, believe me.
- MEG What the hell else can they do to me?
- LIZZY Meg, you've no idea. Daily humiliation and ridicule, long after you cease to have the smallest importance. A word from the editor to the loathsome Mervin and you find yourself featuring in his column every day, the most hurtful things Mervin can think of. And that's just part of it. A daily newspaper feeling vengeful is like a poison snake. And you're the perfect target. You haven't got the money to sue, and you're publicly tainted so you'd probably lose anyway. They could say anything they liked about you.
- MEG Do you enjoy your job, Lizzy?
- LIZZY Yes. I love it. I've got the best job in the media industry. Maybe the best job in the world. I get into the open things that powerful people would rather keep hidden. That's what I do, and I never want to do anything else.
- MEG But the rest –
- LIZZY The rest is crap. Co-operating with over-indulged egos like Mervin, watching the headline writers turn my work into a witch-hunt... But I reveal the truth about the powerful. That's what drives me. There aren't a lot of journalists like me around any more. No room for us in the new media. These days, newspapers under pressure, economy in trouble, they all want quick, easy copy, the sort of rubbish Mervin writes.
- MEG But the way you do it. Using a spy in the fees office –

LIZZY I didn't want to do it that way, but the politicians left us no choice. The parliamentary establishment – people like your friend Julius – thought they were so clever, blocking our Freedom of Information requests. So in the end, this was the only way. Ugly, and if your friends hadn't been so concerned to keep the public in ignorance we wouldn't have had to do it.

MEG And Doug? Why did you have to do that to Doug?

LIZZY We knew Rick was selling honours, but we couldn't prove it.

MEG Doug's a fool in some ways, but he was a talented teacher. He'll never be able to use that talent again, which seems a shame, from every point of view.

LIZZY I'm sorry, Meg. Doug was what military commanders call collateral damage. He was hurt on our way to Rick. And to Tony Blair. Look, I'll go. I'm no help to you. I just had to put those statements to you.

SHE STARTS TO GO OUT, AND MEETS DOUG COMING IN. THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER FOR A MOMENT. THEN DOUG WALKS PAST HER, AND AFTER A MOMENT LIZZY GOES OUT.

DOUG Meg, I'm so sorry.

MEG I know you are.

DOUG I delivered you into the hands of these bastards. I wanted to kill myself this morning.

MEG Don't do that. It would be really inconvenient.

DOUG I know. That's the only thing that stopped me. Meg...

MEG I know, Doug, I know.

DOUG Do you want us to split up?

MEG Probably. Yes.

DOUG Of course. We can't survive this. I just want you to know how sorry I am.

MEG I know how sorry you are.

DOUG Look – just for the moment – I'll go back to the country, and you stay in the London flat – is that –

MEG No, the London flat's got to go. Straight away. I need the money to pay legal fees.

DOUG Legal?

MEG I'm going to need lawyers, aren't I – to keep me out of prison?  
And I'm not going to get legal aid.

DOUG Oh God. I hadn't thought of that. I'm so sorry.

MEG Go away now, Doug. Let me think.

DOUG Meg, I'm so sorry.

BLACKOUT. LIGHTS COME UP ON LIZZY SITTING AT A TABLE. ENTER  
MERVIN WITH BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE AND TWO GLASSES.

MERVIN Champagne for the heroine of the moment.

LIZZY I sat at this table and drank champagne once before. Seems a  
long time ago.

MERVIN The scene of one of your early triumphs. But this one dwarfs  
the lot. MPs' expenses is the biggest story we've had for  
years. It's boosted the circulation. Only a temporary boost, I  
fear.

LIZZY Yes. It won't stop them making me redundant pretty soon, will  
it?

MERVIN Almost certainly not.

LIZZY And I don't suppose I can expect any support from you, can I?  
A word to the editor about how valuable what I do is.

MERVIN Lizzy. Lizzy, my dear. You can't expect the paper to keep on  
investigative journalists, not in this economic climate.  
Investigating costs too much. Send someone like you out for a  
week, maybe she'll come back with the crown jewels, maybe  
nothing, and then you've paid her salary for a week and got not  
one single line of copy out of it. These are harsh times. You  
can't run a business like that.

LIZZY You can, if you think finding out the truth matters.

MERVIN But it doesn't. Look at me. I write my column every day.  
There'll always be a little joke or two in it, it'll sound as though I  
know something even when I don't, it'll give them the thrill of  
reading someone who rubs shoulders with the famous and  
powerful. It will always make people think they're getting the  
inside track. Verbs in the middle of most of the sentences,  
nothing provably untrue, or at least nothing provably untrue  
and also libellous. The bean counters can quantify me.

Mervin Montague, fills three quarters of a page every weekday. My offer's still open, you know. Come and be my researcher. They're not going to make my researcher redundant. Lose my copy, there's a hole in the paper.

- LIZZY           What on earth would I want to be your researcher for? I'd rather be on the dole.
- MERVIN         One day you might get promoted and start writing my column. Isn't that worth a few years' drudgery?
- LIZZY           No.
- MERVIN         I could probably persuade them to keep you, you know. But I'd use up a lot of precious political capital, so I'm not going to. What are you going to do if they do fire you?
- LIZZY           I'm going to go on investigating, and I'm going to publish my stuff on the internet.
- MERVIN         No one will pay you for it. What are you going to live on?
- LIZZY           I'll find a way to make it pay. There has to be a way.
- MERVIN         Sure, sure. Come and work for me, Lizzy. I like you. You're smart and quick and clever. We could even have a bit of a fling together. Would you like that?
- LIZZY           No.
- MERVIN         Thought not. Don't say I never offered. I've got a reputation to keep up.
- LIZZY           Have you?
- MERVIN         That's not kind. You should have said, yes, I've heard all about your reputation. And fluttered your eyelashes a bit.
- LIZZY           But you can't revenge yourself on me, can you? I'm not famous enough.
- MERVIN         No. And the way you're going, you never will be.

BLACKOUT. WHEN LIGHTS COME UP, WE FIND MEG, RICK AND JULIUS.

- RICK            Look. It's important you go quietly. That's Gordon's view, as well as mine. If you go round shouting foul...
- MEG            You had millions and millions of public money, and you're going to be richer than ever. I had, well, maybe tens of

thousands, and a lot of it was money I was arguably entitled to, and I'm finished, and Doug's finished. It doesn't seem fair.

- JULIUS We know that, but there's a general election not three months away. It's no time to rock the boat.
- MEG Gordon looked after you, Rick. But not me. Why? Why you and not me?
- RICK Gordon's a realist. He knows he needs the risk-takers. Guys like me who'll risk everything on the throw of a dice.
- MEG So long as it's someone else's everything you're risking. You've conned Gordon into believing that the country can't manage without folk like you.
- RICK No, I believe it myself. Honestly. I'm an entrepreneur, I'm a buccaneer, I'm a pirate, I'm a risk-taker,. Britain wouldn't be in the state it is if there were more like me.
- MEG Why me, Julius? Why has Gordon picked on me? Why not – there are at least three other Labour MPs who did exactly what I did. They've not had the police put onto them. They're not going to spend the next few years in and out of police stations and lawyers' offices trying to stay out of prison, and spend every penny they've got on lawyers. They've not been told they can't stand for Labour next time. They just get up in the House and say they're very sorry, made a terrible mistake, never do it again, and it's all over. Why me?
- JULIUS It had to be someone. He had to show he was tough on expenses. Otherwise he's dead.
- MEG Why me?
- JULIUS Couldn't be Brian. He and Gordon are old friends. Couldn't be Janet, she and Gordon are old enemies and it would look vindictive. Three or four others it might have been, but they've all got a group of friends who'll fight for them.
- MEG It could have been you. £140,000 on antique furniture for your London flat. When your constituency's on the tube.
- JULIUS It was never going to be me. No one dislikes me. You – well, you were a bit of a loose cannon – not quite a safe pair of hands – look at the way you got the line wrong over the financiers and the bankers' bonuses. City didn't trust you, that was what was being whispered around, and that's deadly for a Treasury minister.
- RICK That's how it works.

- MEG            I'm really glad I didn't help you get your state handout.
- RICK           You might have survived if you had.
- MEG            What do you mean? Did Gordon – no, that's ridiculous.
- RICK            What's ridiculous about it? If the PM wants to know who's any good, he needs to take advice. And who's best qualified to give that advice? A guy who's shown he knows how to make money, that's who. I've made money, so I must know best. I know it's not politically correct to say it, but there's a reason why the rich are rich. Because we're better. You don't see the rich rioting in the cities, do you? You don't see the rich in gang fights at football matches? It's the poor that do that.
- MEG            You told Gordon I had to go? And Gordon listened? Is that all?
- JULIUS        It's not all, no. Nothing is ever all. It's just a part.
- MEG            And the rest?
- JULIUS        Well..... you were a bit of a solemn sort of feminist, and they didn't like that. You've got a tendency to go on about the poor, doesn't go down too well in the Labour Party these days. You were high profile. You didn't have that many friends here. And you had a husband who might embarrass the Party at any time. Someone had to be dumped on, and you were the safest candidate. I'm sorry, Meg. It's politics.
- BLACKOUT. LIGHTS COME UP. ENTER MERVIN FROM ONE SIDE AND JULIUS FROM THE OTHER.
- JULIUS        Mervin. Always a pleasure. I suppose my grovelling apology to the House will come in for the Mervin Montague treatment tomorrow morning?
- MERVIN        It will, Julius, it will. You should read it with particular diligence. It's one of my more entertaining ones. It starts: "Soapy's not-so-clean bill of health..."
- JULIUS        Mervin! So amazingly witty, as always, and we love him for it.
- ENTER RICK
- MERVIN        Rick! My cup runneth over.
- RICK            That investigative women of yours, Mervin. The harridan with the nice legs. Lizzy. She still with you?
- MERVIN        Went in the latest round of redundancies. A bit of an obsessive, we thought. Tunnel vision.

RICK                    Good. Never trusted the woman.

JULIUS                I was delighted to hear of the improvement in your fortunes, Rick.

RICK                    Not everyone was. Lot of jealousy about, you know.

JULIUS                Even so – it's going to be a political problem for us, giving you all that money. Taxpayers' money, they'll say.

RICK                    I'm sure there will. People who can't bear to see others doing well. Very fashionable to be poor these days. You'll handle that, though, Julius.

MERVIN                Naturally he will. Handling things is what Julius does.

RICK                    Good man.

EXIT RICK. JULIUS AND MERVIN GO TO THE FRONT OF THE STAGE, AS THEY WERE AT THE BEGINNING.

JULIUS                Well, we've kept you far too long talking about these things. Meg's still fighting off prosecution – she's spent all the money she and Doug ever had on lawyers, and she'll be out of Parliament in the summer. Doug's a supply teacher somewhere. I hated watching good colleagues being bullied and harried by journalists, but there it is. Gordon has just asked me to go to Washington and have a word with a few people, so that's what I'm going to do. And Mervin had fun with my apology to the House – but he can tell you about that himself.

MERVIN (READING FROM A PAPER) The story is told of Julius Bradshaw that while showing a group of visiting Americans round the House, he espied in the distance the then leader of his party, the bald Welsh windbag Neil Kinnock. Never one to miss a chance of hobnobbing with the powerful, Julius shouted "Neil" and all his Americans fell to their knees. The conventional explanation is that they misunderstood Julius's cry, but the truth is that they were trying to make their host feel at home. Julius Bradshaw's natural stance is on his knees. We all have a talent, and Julius's talent is grovelling. He does it with such practised perfection that mere mortals can only look on and admire.

JULIUS                Dear, dear Mervin. You see? Things are almost back to normal.

