

## *A better class of snacks*

[Jeremy Hardy](#)

[Special report: New Labour in power](#)

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It is perhaps true that Keith Vaz has attracted more flak than he might have done if he were white. It is likely that Peter Mandelson would be more popular if he were heterosexual, or if he seemed a bit more cheerful about the fact that he is not. It is, however, discreditable to defend the antics of high-profile people on the grounds that some of their critics have dubious motives. Still, it is more plausible that Keith Vaz gets extra stick for being a successful Asian than for being Europe minister. There is ingrained racism in the media, but, despite hostility to the single currency, I can't see the tabloids launching a campaign to make the police give us the addresses of Europhiles in our neighbourhoods.

I would be more impressed by the defence of Keith Vaz if I saw a letter from Satpal Ram thanking him for all the support he has given. Ram is probably Britain's longest serving Asian prisoner. Having found himself convicted of murder after being the victim of a racist attack, he might hope that Keith Vaz, who knows what it is to face racism, would be working tirelessly for his release. Perhaps he is, behind the scenes. I'd like to think so but I don't know. Politicians often say they are most effective when having quiet words in ears, but this tends to suggest they don't want us to know what they're doing.

I'm not going to argue that Satpal Ram is more deserving than the Hinduja because he was British before his troubles started. I have no objection to the Hinduja being British. In fact, it is a disgrace that citizens of our former colonies were disowned when we'd got all we wanted from our possessions. But it has

been observed that there are people in India who would like to talk to the Hinduja about some dodgy arms deals.

Satpal Ram was arrested because of self defence rather than defence contracts. He was a warehouseman, a small work-knife the only thing in his armoury when he was attacked. But, to be fair, he has little to offer by way of hospitality. One can buy a cup of tea and a Mars bar from the WRVS ladies in a prison visiting room, but the protocol usually has it that the visitor treats the prisoner rather than the other way around.

Conversely, one can have a high old time with the Hinduja. [Labour](#), Liberal and Tory politicians all flock to their knees-ups.

It has always created a stir, and has always happened, that Labour politicians hobnob with the wealthy. The right see it as an encroachment on their perks. And, when it has been done by the less socially versed, it has been seen as vulgar and embarrassing, wide-eyed Labour arrivistes tasting the forbidden fruit and dribbling it down their ties. These days, however, Labour ministers probably make tycoons feel positively common.

Tories must feel jealous of Mandelson. Many of them would love to be mates with a Murdoch. Mandelson is so well connected that his network links him to some fascinating people. You can get from him to Thatcher or Tim Bell in two steps, and to Augusto Pinochet in a third via either.

It is quite possible that Mandelson is so disliked by Tories because they believe the universal media myth that he won Labour the last election. In reality, all voters are allowed one vote each, and I'm not convinced he cast his for Labour. In fact, despite all protestations about his brilliance, it is becoming obvious that he is stunningly inept. It's just as well that he is wined and dined by the rich every night, as it seems unlikely that he's capable of feeding himself.

But there is a more serious issue in Labour's increasing flirtation with the rich. It goes beyond even party fundraising and the odd donation to the dome. The fact that millionaires have the best snacks adds to the glamour of being a New Labour politician, but it conceals something much more important, namely that Britain is being handed over to big business. It wouldn't much matter if Labour ministers were just fatally drawn to fancy folk and their nibbles - if they just gate-crashed Shell's Christmas bash, got pissed and insulted some people. What matters is that, in New Labour's scale of values, an achiever is a person successfully driven to attain wealth and power above all else; and such people are clearly suited to running everything. It's two steps from friendship to partnership to privatisation. Education Action Zones, City Academies, transport, construction and IT are all routes to the extension of corporate power.

And what makes the Tories so jealous is that they are no longer the chosen instrument of business. Labour is.

[comment@theguardian.com](mailto:comment@theguardian.com)

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