

Tangled webs

Christopher Huhne is the most recent in a long line of political disappointments, says **Richard Barr**



Aside from revelations that many of us have been feasting on horsemeat in the past few months, it was a week when my name sake, who had been dug up from a car park, was revealed to be the late Richard III and yet another former cabinet minister was been disgraced.

When politicians go bad, their misdeeds are frequently spiced by arrogant denials. Reminiscent of Shakespearean tragedy, their personality flaws unravel, leading to the inevitable loss of status, livelihood and freedom.

Here is a reminder of some of the more notorious political scandals:

John Stonehouse was a government minister who in the seventies faked his death before moving to Australia to start a new life. He was eventually caught, deported to England, and tried and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for various offences of fraud.

Jonathan Aitken, former conservative Chief Secretary to the Treasury, was accused by *The Guardian* of corruption in public office. He responded to the accusations with these words: "If it falls to me to start a fight to cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism in our country with the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of British fair play, so be it. I am ready for the fight. The fight against falsehood and those who peddle it. My fight begins today. Thank you and good afternoon."

He sued *The Guardian* but lied to the court. He was subsequently convicted of perjury and perverting the course of justice. He was sentenced to 18-months imprisonment.

Then there was Jeffrey Archer, who sued for libel and was also convicted of perjury and perverting the course of

justice. He received a sentence of four years imprisonment – which provided him with plenty of inspiration for his subsequent novel. I have to say that even though he was a 'wrong un' I have always enjoyed his books.

"When politicians go bad, their misdeeds are frequently spiced by arrogant denials... their personality flaws unravel, leading to the inevitable loss of status, livelihood and freedom"

For those with long memories there was the Profumo affair. This was perhaps the most salacious and intriguing scandal of the 20th century.

John Profumo was a conservative member of parliament and Secretary of State for War. In the early 1960s he started to have an affair with Christine Keeler, who in turn was having an affair at the time with a Russian spy. Rumours started to circulate and Profumo made a statement to parliament denying any impropriety. Subsequently he was forced to admit that he had lied to parliament and he resigned. I was only a teenager but I remember the grown-ups of the time being highly intrigued by the scandal. The Profumo affair had many ramifications which kept the press occupied for weeks.

In the early 1970s a friend introduced me to John Profumo who by then had decided to devote his life to voluntary work at Toynbee Hall, a social reform organisation

in the East End of London. As a very green law student, I was involved in a small social work project in London.

He invited me to lunch at Toynbee Hall. We all ate at a long table. He listened gently and sympathetically to my nervous splutterings. Afterwards I had many dealings with Profumo over several months. He was not only highly intelligent, but also immensely kind as well as being very supportive of projects like mine and others. He became the longest serving volunteer at Toynbee Hall. According to their website "he acted as a perfect intermediary between the poor and disadvantaged people of the East End of London and those at the opposite end of the social scale". He worked there till his death in 2006 and was awarded a CBE.

Some of the people I have mentioned here are now dead but none, so far as I am aware, is buried under a car park. I do not wish an early death on Chris Huhne but whether it would be fitting for him to be buried under a car park when he eventually gets the great speeding fine in the sky remains to be decided. Would it be too much to expect for him to do a Profumo when he is released from prison (if indeed that his next destination)? No one, not even Richard III, is ever purely bad and sometimes a good knock back turns a man or a woman into a saint.

After all there is a vacancy for the position of Pope, but somehow I don't think we will be seeing Pope Christopher the First any time soon.



Richard Barr is a consultant with Scott-Moncrieff & Associates LLP (www.scomo.com)