

Sorry. Not actually the hardest word.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/09/22/sorry-not-actually-the-hardest-word-nick-clegg-andrew-mitchell/

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Nick Clegg and Andrew Mitchell both did the right thing in apologising for things they did that were wrong. Yet both got it wrong. Any parent can tell you why.

An apology that is made for the benefit of the wrong-doer doesn't really count. If you confess to breaking that window with your football simply to be allowed to go to the cinema, then you get no moral credit. "Do you really mean that?" asks the mother/father plaintively, knowing full well that little Nick/Andy does not.

Clegg's apology was simply too late. And he didn't apologise for the thing that pissed people off. It wasn't that the Lib Dems had to change their policy on fees that made people cross. It was the fact that he didn't have the guts to be honest in the first place when he didn't really believe in the pledge he was making.

Mitchell's apology was at least fast. Not even this horrid little man with his track record of pompous verbal violence could fail to realise that calling a police officer a 'f**king pleb' is immoral, insulting and very bad politics. His mistake was to then to dispute the police version of events. At that point he sounds like a drunk driver arguing about exactly how far over the limit he was.

But do we apologise too much? The always thoughtful political columnist [Janan Ganesh](#) of the FT thinks that it might well put politicians off bold policies in the future for fear of offending people. He has a point. We live in pretty restrictive times when it comes to political initiative and the 'rise of remorse' is a symptom of that. An apology should be for a personal act of moral fault, not for a policy that has simply gone wrong or with which we disagree. That's why I don't think Blair has to apologise for the war in Iraq – however much you may think he forced us into it or screwed it up when it happened.

But I don't think politicians showing a degree of humility will stop them doing bold things. Learning to say sorry properly for genuine lapses will help restore faith in politics. A sense of [humour would help](#), too. Politicians are only humans doing a very tough – indeed impossible – job. If they would admit their failings perhaps we would have more realistic expectations of what they can deliver. With that kind of more open and modest political culture we might then be able to dispense with the silly game of having to force those in power to show manners.

UPDATE:

Iain Martin has written [a great piece](#) that captures the spirit of Nick Clegg's non-apology and the assumptions made by a political class who don't really understand why the public don't understand them.



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