

You've Got To Laugh: Why Humour Is Dangerous For Politicians

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I'm Sorry

Every time a politician cracks a carefully scripted joke, a little satire fairy dies. The worst are those conference speech gags that only the die-hard supporters find funny – like Peter Lilley's ghastly [Gilbert and Sullivan parody](#). But now the public produces the gags how should politicians respond?

Nick Clegg is [getting credit](#) for allowing Autotune to put their [brilliant \(but gentle\) piss take](#) of his [Tuition Fees 'Apology' party political broadcast](#) up on iTunes. The profits will go to charity. I don't doubt that even Nick might have chuckled at the spoof, but of course, he would have looked a complete git if he hadn't allowed it and that would have generated even more publicity for the video on other platforms.

Paradoxically, it was Nick Clegg who first benefited from online citizen political satire. At the last election the Twitter camapign [#IblameNickClegg](#) was a great way to help neutralise the mainstream media assault on the Lib Dem leader. The digital pranksters were [puncturing David Cameron's over-polished publicity](#) not Nick 'read my pledge' Clegg. And, of course, Gordon Brown's [own video nasty](#) and the 'bigotted woman' incident had put him in a very dark place that was way beyond a joke.

On that sunny May day back in 2010 in the Downing Street Rose Garden, Clegg and Cameron used humour to great effect to laugh off tough questions about their differences. Little did we realise how the joke was on us and that they were, indeed, a very well-matched comedy duo. At the time [I argued](#) that it was an effective strategy to suggest that they were prepared to step outside of the normal dull, boring, humourless routine of two-party politics.

Some claim that Clegg [might even benefit](#) from the current 'apology' ridicule. The Autotune version is not particularly vicious. It will put Clegg back in front of many students who held him in contempt. [Iain Martin](#) argues it might even win back their votes.

I am not so sure. Yes, most of the people who laughed loudest at the satire and were most angry at Clegg's coldly calculated remorse are probably implacable opponents. They will have enjoyed this [subtitled version of the apology video](#) that suggests it is a cynical piece of PR. Yes, the real target is not the voters, but Lib Dems at next week's conference who are thinking of changing their leader.

But overall, I suspect that the satire will play into a sense that Nick Clegg is now a risible figure. The trouble with being the subject of a joke is that to take it well you really need some humility. It's clear from the party political broadcast that Nick Clegg doesn't have that quality in much quantity. He is not sorry for what he's done, he's sorry for making the pledge in the first place. Even if (like me) you agree with the Fees policy and even if (like me) you believe that politicians should be allowed to change their policies and even their minds, this still feels that we are laughing AT Nick, not WITH him.

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