

## Nick Clegg's 'politics of envy': a brief history

*The phrase, used in response to the deputy prime minister's call for a wealth tax, has often been deployed by the right as a piece of general-purpose lefty-bashing.*

Michael White | August 29, 2012

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As Tory MPs go, mild Bernard Jenkin wouldn't claim to be an original phrase-maker. So when confronted with [Nick Clegg's](#) call for a wealth tax at breakfast time on Wednesday, Jenkin couldn't manage a snappier retort than to accuse the deputy prime minister of "[the politics of envy](#)".

The envious idea of chopping the heads off [tall poppies](#) can be traced to [Herodotus](#), though the ancient Greek pundit wrote about decapitating tall stalks of wheat. Poppies, wheat, investment bankers, Richard Branson – the idea is much the same.

Nowadays the charge, revived by an American called [Doug Bandow](#) in the 90s, is levelled against the left and invariably deployed by the right. It's not hard to see why. For every bloodthirsty [Robespierre](#) there must be a million gentle citizens who regard tax-evading millionaires as ripe for the politics of fairness over those of greed.

So when [George Osborne cuts the 50p tax rate to 45p](#) (only the poor need cuts to incentivise them) and faces "[millionaire's budget](#)" jibes, he accuses his critics of TPOE. When Barack Obama denounces unfunded Republican tax cuts for the rich (a hard charge to deny), he and his "socialist cronies" are [tarred with TPOE](#).

That sounds more admirable than saying that outsourcing American jobs, rigging the City's Libor network, or flogging worthless securities to pension funds deserves vast pay and perks. If talent, hard work, innovation and risk (with one's own money too) were the only road to uber-wealth, there would be less of a growing [99% to 1% problem](#).

Let's not take Jenkin's word on TPOE. Let's ask Warren Buffett, a man who made billions investing against the free-market herd. Sure there's class warfare, he says. "[It's my class, the rich class, that's making war – and we're winning.](#)"