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A barrelful of rotten apples [1]

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If your best mates clubbed together and gave you £103,000 when you needed it, you'd remember it, wouldn't you? Remarkable, then, that UK Work and Pensions Secretary Peter Hain didn't. He's accused of not registering seventeen donations towards his campaign for the Deputy Leadership of the Labour Party, totaling this amount. His forgetfulness is all the more astonishing when you consider that his campaign far outspent those of his rivals. So this was a large wodge of cash that public standards watchdogs weren't told about. Even Tony Blair, with his £500,000 salary from J P Morgan, his book deals and the rest couldn't simply miss £103,000.

Until Peter Hain went into Parliament, I always though him honourable. I opposed many of his views - and his abrasive ways of promoting them - but you can disagree with people and still think them principled. Politics of course forces people to compromise on their principles, so I've less respect for party politicians - but that's still no reason to accuse them of being crooked.

No, what's going on here is more subtle, and even more worrying. It's not that Peter Hain is a single rotten apple that can be ejected from the barrel and all will be well. No, they're all at it. Millionaire supporters funnel funds to the Labour Party through third parties who don't even know about it: half of Peter Hain's missing thousands is routed through some supposed think-tank; donors are attracted by the suggestion, however faint, that there might be a peerage in the pipeline.

What's wrong is that people in politics, both politicians and perhaps even more so their staff, think that they are above the rules. That their mission is more important than some tedious bit of book-keeping. That they can shuffle large sums around and nobody will notice. That how they raise and spend their cash is of little concern to the public.

Unfortunately, we live in an age of transparency, where every move that political folk make can come under the media spotlight. It means they have to be completely straight in how they conduct their business. The legislation to clean up party funding has been in place since 2000. It's truly alarming that so many politicians think it shouldn't apply to them.

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