

# Sir Philip Green sans Knighthood?

by Theodore Dalymple

The House of Commons wants to strip Sir Philip Green of his knighthood because it alleges that he is a spiv. I am perfectly prepared to believe that he is a spiv, though I cannot claim to have followed his career closely. At the very least he seems to be a man given to vulgar show.

A spiv is a person who dresses nattily, lives well even in hard times for others, and makes his living by disreputable means. How many members of our parliament and government are spivs, or hope to become spivs at the end of their political careers? Two of our last three Prime Ministers were clearly of spiv calibre, one of them indeed to spivs what the *Capo dei Capi* is to the Mafia. If Parliament deprived them of their pensions, then it might have done something useful.

Once you grasp the concept of spivvery, much about modern Britain becomes explicable. You have only to read the *Financial Times'* Saturday supplement, *How to Spend It*, to understand how much of our economy is in essence a spiv economy. The supplement is aimed not at people with more money than sense, but at a group of people far, far worse: people with more money than taste, for whom Sir Philip Green (if he still is *Sir Philip*) is a leader of fashion.

As for the way of making a living, it can be disreputable without being illegal. Part of our trouble is that people no longer distinguish between what is legal from what is permissible in any other sense. Often a person who is criticised for his behaviour will say, 'There's no law against it,' as if we had made the law the sole arbiter of how we should behave. Implicitly, though perhaps not yet quite in

practice, we grant our legislators totalitarian powers over our souls.

On the other hand, we often do not make the distinction between what is legal and illegal either. Tax avoidance is conflated with tax evasion. The one is legal as the other is not, but they are often spoken of in the same breath.

There is clearly something distasteful, as well as economically harmful, about tax avoidance as the key to great wealth in so many cases: but if we have raised up spivs to the summit of our economy and society, perhaps we should reform a tax system that turns accountancy into the queen of the sciences.

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