



## Anonymous classes blight *Vogue*

**ETHNIC CLEANSING IN** Ossetia, Vladimir Putin seeking sympathy, Kim Jong-il poorly, Hurricane Ike roaring, XL Airways in Carey Street, Eurotunnel on fire, the icecap melting, the Governor of Alaska winning, the Trade Union Congress interminable, the silly season at an end, war all over the place, and fundamental particles about to collide.

In the face of all this, ever the optimist, I turned to the latest issue of *Vogue* for a route out. The glossy *ennui*, the lovely women, the gorgeous clothes, the dazzling photographs – occasionally garnished with impossibly good-looking lads, oblivious equally to mishaps and disaster, looking out from the pages to some place beyond caring. That's what I paid for, and that's what I expected.

Imagine my horror when I noticed a tailored shift, embroidered with copper thread, appliquéd with black feathers and faceted sequins, from *Yves Saint Laurent*, executed in grey felt and black wool (cue this season's buzzword "austerity"). Yes, *austerity* is the word employed in *Vogue*. It is true that the simple shift costs £3,240, but nevertheless readers are assured the context is undoubtedly one of *austerity*. It was then that I noticed a coat being advertised for £49.99 from *H&M*; my astonishment was compounded when a *Vogue* supplement produced, "in association with *Next*", fell out of the volume, advertising stuff much,

much cheaper than anything in Victoria Beckham's posh ready-to-wear range. It gets worse, in the same issue there was a large fold-out of recycled paper bearing the legend, "As Seen in *Vogue*": matt photographs of the "Limited Collection" – it is actually called that – from *Marks and Sparks*, environmentally sound garments at fair trade prices. Evidently my attempt to escape across the border into *Haut Couturia* was an abject failure, wrecked by *Vogue*'s concessions to shrivelling asset values.

As the middle class flock to *Lidl* and *Aldi* the *Financial Times* is offering Château Lafite-Rothschild '94 for £295 a bottle, but even here the inducement is "free delivery". Discount shopping has, according to Joanna Blythman, "a sort of 'I'm-not-proud' inverted chic about it." Even Nicholas Cage was spotted last week nipping out of his home at Midford Castle for a spot of economising at the *Glastonbury Discount Centre*. It's no surprise then that knitting is making a comeback – of course knitting anything is much more costly than popping into *Primark*, but it's the authenticity that one's aiming for; it's a fair bet that darning socks will, as the economy careers downhill, overtake appliqué with copper thread and faceted sequins.

All this economising is rather jolly. It's a challenge, like seeing if one can manage to live like a poor person for a fortnight or Delia's delight that she has the "chance to help people over the challenges we face today: recession, world food shortages, things getting tough ahead" in her new weekly column. Austerity is a challenge, rather a chic challenge, it's true, but a challenge nevertheless. One should not trivialise these matters, particularly when living in poverty might make us carbon neutral or better organized: more appreciative of what we have. Living in poverty might help us to avoid being feckless consumers, or shiftless shoppers, heedless of the advantages of proper budgeting. Being poor might even enable us to learn to achieve "better discipline" in our lives and in our "commitment to God." This was what Pastor Mark Fairweather-Tall of Norwich Baptists found when back in the spring he

lived on £59.15 a week for the 40 days of Lent. Of course, it was just an experiment, but sobering and valuable just the same. Crucially, it reminded the pastor about “temptation”.

Pastor Fairweather-Tall’s experience was rather like Harriet Harman’s when she attended the Trades Union Congress in Brighton. There she discovered modestly paid people dissatisfied with their lot in life being tempted by well-upholstered union leaders to emulate the rich by demanding more of everything. The low-paid are becoming intractable and truculent. Cleaners and dinner ladies are unwilling to accept 2% of very little. These menials have forgotten Tony Blair’s proclamation at the 1999 Labour Party Conference that “the class war is over”; they appear determined to pursue the politics of envy with walkouts, days of action and demonstrations. They simply refuse to accept Joanna, *I’m-not-proud*, Blythman’s challenge in the *Daily Telegraph*. Making-ends-meet, and making-do is not an option. They’ve always gone to *Iceland* and *Poundstretcher*. There’s nothing new for them in *Barnardo’s* or *Oxfam*. They could give lessons on meeting the challenges of recession, which is why they would probably settle for 2% of Joanna, Delia, or Harriet’s income.

But clearly they have got the wrong end of Harriet’s stick. Harriet doesn’t want everybody to get paid more, but she does want to avoid people being stuck at the bottom of the heap. As the niece of the Countess of Longford, Harriet knows that “People’s life chances” are impacted by “where they were born, what kind of family they were born into, where they live and their wealth”; she knows all about the importance of being on top. Consequently she wants people’s life chances to move steadily upwardly from where they are now to where they ought to be. This is not, of course, about higher pay, but about higher aspirations. It is crucially about having the merit, like Harriet, to merit more. The focus must be on *the merit* not *the more*. That way people can move beyond the gloom that envelops the

*anonymous classes* towards the scintillation that we find sparkling around *Vogue*.

In striving towards the light Emily Rotberg, the winner of the *2008 Vogue Talent Contest for Young Writers*, stumbled upon the phrase, “anonymous classes”, when seeking a contrast to “the notable and notorious” in her discussion of eighties photography. In the fearless images of miners, waitresses and drifters she detects “a tension in the unvoiced questions”. Unfortunately the questions are banal: “why me?” and “who are you to ask?” My response to *Vogue* is: don’t ask. And, don’t mither about the recession, the less fortunate, the anonymous or the invisible. Stick to what you’re good at. We want what we paid for: “the joy of gossip” and the doings of London’s “New Bohemians”; we want lovely women, impossibly good-looking lads, and gorgeous frocks at outrageous prices.