



The Lampard Question

Before banks pay their senior staff the superstar wages of top footballers, they should ask if they are really buying superstars

"Who do you reckon you are? Frank Lampard?" When a child celebrates a playground goal with a salute learnt from watching *Match of the Day*, his friends can be relied upon to ridicule his pretensions. Yet as the banks consider the size of the bonuses to pay their senior staff, this schoolyard taunt becomes a useful economic inquiry.

Critics of the remuneration of bankers frequently invoke footballers' wages. The aim is to suggest that the bonuses paid in financial services are vulgar, unfair and a symbol of moral corruption. But this attack is wrong, for two reasons. The first is that paying large salaries is not vulgar, unfair or morally corrupt if it is the correct price for labour in a competitive market. The second reason is more important still. The economic justification for the high pay of top footballers is perfectly clear. That for top bankers is not.

The number of people able to play football of great calibre is extremely limited and the desire to watch this small group of players is great. If a large number of people are willing to pay even a small amount each, but are only willing to pay it to watch the best performers, then those performers will command an extremely high salary. Hence Chelsea's midfield star Frank Lampard earns more than £100,000 a week.

This does not represent a distortion of the priorities of a free society (each of the hundreds of thousands of fans contributing to Mr Lampard's wages is chipping in a small amount of his or her own income); and it is not immoral (it is a payment for Mr Lampard's great skill and professionalism, which are matched by only a handful of other similarly well-paid players). So why does the same reasoning not apply to bankers?

It is because bankers are being paid superstar wages without being superstars. Mr Lampard's contribution, and that of his fellow players, can be measured. The difference that each individual footballer makes compared with a replacement in the same position can be relatively easily identified. The pool of truly brilliant footballers is very small. And those even slightly worse than the very best have a very limited ability to attract the crowds that bring the big money.

None of these things is true of bankers. Many people working in the financial services industry are of very high calibre. They have an impressive intellectual grasp, show entrepreneurial flair and often combine a facility with numbers with a creativity that an artist can admire. The fact that these skills are impressive does not, however, make them rare. Or at least, they are nowhere near as

rare as the skills of the superstar football player. One of the main drivers of top football wages — that the skill being purchased is incredibly hard to find — does not apply to bankers.

It is also much harder to be certain that the contribution of an individual is being properly measured. The success of a business is often attributed to its top executives even when a change in fortune may simply have been the result of market conditions or the robustness of a particular brand developed years ago and by someone else.

The correct question to be asked by the owners and managers of banks is not therefore just about the politics of large bonuses but about their necessity. Do banks really need to pay such large wages in order to attract and retain the right staff?

It is said, in defence of high wages, that if the packages were wrong the market would have put them right. Yet the banking industry should surely be the last to argue that an incorrect price cannot persist. Banks were mispricing their assets for years. Could they now be mispricing labour?

Bank owners should deal with the high bonuses before regulators and politicians do. When managers ask for unreasonably large amounts they should be met with the child's reply: "Who do you reckon you are? Frank Lampard?"

Retrench or Reload

The shootings in Tucson, Arizona, present Sarah Palin with a strategic dilemma

When *The New Oxford American Dictionary* made "refudiate" its Word of the Year for 2010, it explained that "neither 'refute' nor 'repudiate' seems consistently precise, and that 'refudiate' more or less stands on its own, suggesting a general sense of 'reject'". A general sense of reject is exactly what will happen to the woman who coined the word, Sarah Palin, unless she finds the right language to respond to the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona.

The only response Mrs Palin has offered so far is to post a short message on her Facebook page. A perfunctory expression of condolence and a bland wish for "peace and justice" will not do when, all around her, partisans of the Republican and Democrat parties are debating whether Mrs Palin is guilty of helping to pollute the political atmosphere in a way that might have contributed to the tragic events in Tucson.

Of course, placing gunsight logos on a map of congressional districts, as Mrs Palin did during the midterm elections in November 2010, is not a direct invitation to a lunatic to take the symbolism literally. Nor did she quite mean what she said

when she declared that the task for Republicans was not just to retrench but to reload.

But this is still not the stuff of civilised political dialogue and neither is it the action of a serious politician intent on a conversation with all the American people. Hence, the way that Mrs Palin now conducts herself will be a telling indication of the extent of her public ambition. This episode confronts her, whether she knows it or not, with a reminder of the limitations of the political strategy she has chosen so far. The strategic choice she makes could define the rest of her political career.

Since she summarily resigned her post as Governor of Alaska in the summer of 2009, Mrs Palin has managed to have it both ways. Her reality show and her tours of the talk-show studios have introduced her to a national audience. At the same time, her regular political interventions have cemented her position as the darling of the base of Republican activists.

The shooting in Tucson has brought forward the moment that a choice has to be made. If Mrs Palin does want to mount a serious run for the White House, she needs to turn to the political

centre. If she responds defensively, and that would include saying nothing at all, then she makes that inevitable move all the more difficult. She will be choosing, whether consciously or not, the world in which politics meets celebrity, in which problems can be exaggerated for the sake of ratings. The benefit will be to Mrs Palin's bank account; the cost will be to her political credibility.

If, however, she chooses a more emollient tone, Mrs Palin will signal her awareness that too close an association with the fringe elements of American politics is toxic for her chances of ever gaining the presidency. In essence, as Jonathan Martin put it pithily on the Politico website, Mrs Palin now has to decide "whether she wants to be Ronald Reagan or Rush Limbaugh".

In the wake of the shootings, President Obama will try to fulfil his campaign pledge to civilise the discourse of politics in America, much as President Clinton sought to do in the wake of the terrorist attack on Oklahoma City in 1995. It could be an important moment for his leadership. Mrs Palin now has to ask herself whether she will help him. For every conceivable reason, she should.

Theatrical Troops

The Tricycle's production, *The Great Game*, is a free-wheeling triumph

In accepting the Nobel prize in 1997, Dario Fo, the Italian playwright, said that a theatre "that does not speak for its own time has no relevance". *The Great Game*, a necklace of 12 playlets, strung like pearls across seven hours of drama that explore Afghanistan's history over the past 170 years, has been deemed so relevant that the Pentagon has commissioned two command performances next month.

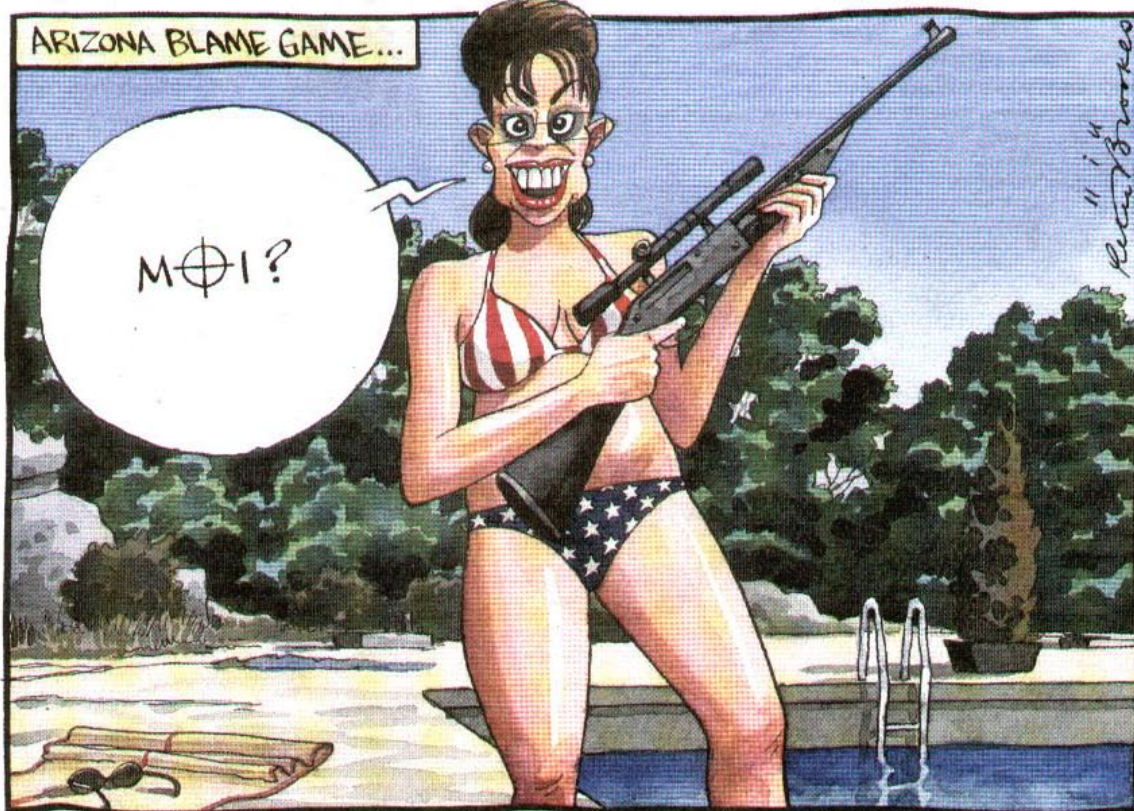
The idea of staging *The Tricycle Theatre's* production in Washington is so that generals, and soldiers heading to Afghanistan, might come away thinking what General Sir David Richards, Chief

of the Defence Staff, thought after seeing the show in London; that "if I'd seen the plays before being deployed to Afghanistan for the first time in 2005 it would have made me a much better commander".

The success of *The Great Game* is a triumph for a small theatre in North London. But it is also much more than that. It shows that The Tricycle company — whose play on the Scott arms-to-Iraq inquiry was performed in the Palace of Westminster, and whose Guantánamo drama was staged in a US congressional building — ranks as Britain's leading political playhouse. It shows that if

you offer audiences theatre that demands effort, but is also challenging and theatrically stimulating, they might not desert you for *The X Factor*.

It shows that generals realise that, when going to war, it is as useful to pack history books in your kitbag as bullets. It shows that foreign armies in Afghanistan have blundered through incomprehension of the challenge they faced; also that for all such blundering, nothing excuses the barbarity of the Taliban. It shows that art can still tell truths that newsreels alone cannot; that the theatre of war need not always be played out on a battlefield.



A new opening in Afghanistan's theatre of war

A fringe play transferring from London to the Pentagon will teach soldiers that their enemy's history is their own

Ben Macintyre



A small, highly trained unit is being deployed in the Afghanistan conflict, armed with weapons that have never been used before in that protracted war. These are, on the surface, unlikely combatants: a troupe of actors from North London performing a seven-hour play, covering 150 years of Afghan history.

Next month in Washington, the Kilburn Tricycle Theatre will perform *The Great Game*, a marathon series of plays depicting Afghanistan's turbulent past, before an audience of top brass, US government officials, veterans, injured soldiers and serving troops. The all-day performances have been arranged, at the direct instigation of the Pentagon, in an extraordinary alliance between British theatrical talent and the American military machine.

Finally, after ten years of war, America's military chiefs seem to have woken up to the realisation that success — or the avoidance of abject failure — in Afghanistan depends on understanding that racked country, not merely subduing it. This is not a publicity stunt, but a deliberate tactic

to deploy a crack team of luvvies on the cultural frontline.

As General Sir David Richards, Chief of the Defence Staff, remarked after seeing the dozen half-hour playlets in the tiny North London theatre: "This series of plays — if I had seen it before I had deployed myself in 2005 for the first time — would have made me a much better commander."

That is a brave and remarkable statement. It is a tribute not just to the power of theatre, but also to Britain's mastery of this new and thriving form of documentary-drama. It acknowledges that soldiers of all ranks are simply better at their jobs if they know, culturally, where they stand.

For most of human history, troops have been fed on a diet of strict

Few of the British in Kabul know this is the third Anglo-Afghan war

propaganda or popular entertainment: Vera Lynn, Girls Aloud and some undemanding cheap fiction, chicken feed for the cannon fodder. *The Great Game* is of a different order of intellectual magnitude: challenging, balanced, nuanced and very long.

The plays, arranged chronologically and divided into three parts, tell the sweeping story of 170 years of invasion, occupation and conflict: the successive intrusions by the British, the Soviet Union and now the Americans; the rise of the CIA-backed Mujahidin; the

warlords and the rule of the Taleban. It tells of diplomacy, warfare and ordinary lives; the frustration and helplessness of successive outsiders bent on doing good; the pride, courage and brutality of the Afghan people.

The modern echoes are, at times, deafening. In the opening play, with British Forces facing catastrophe in the First Anglo-Afghan War, one character from 1842 declares: "Somebody in London is saying it's costing too much, we must make economies, we must halve the bribes we pay to tribal chiefs. We are stuck in a country nobody understands, upholding a puppet king nobody wants."

The Great Game is a collection of plays about politics and ideology, but these are not politically ideological plays, intended to justify or condemn American and British involvement in Afghanistan. Instead, they portray the messy reality, the layer upon layer of convoluted history we share with Afghanistan. Even the title is grimly ironic. The phrase "the Great Game" was made famous by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*, but it was coined in 1829 by Arthur Conolly, a British explorer and intelligence officer for the East India Company when the struggle between Britain and Russia for domination over Central Asia got under way.

Conolly described the "beauty" of Russian and British plans "to civilise Asian races"; it was all a great game, Conolly thought, until he was flung into a bug pit by the ferocious Emir of Bokhara, accused of espionage and eventually beheaded. There was

nothing great or beautiful about this game, and there never was.

When I visited Kabul on the first anniversary of the invasion, I was struck by how few of the British troops knew that this was not the first but the third Anglo-Afghan war. Most, when discussing the origins of the conflict, saw it as a new phenomenon, arising directly and immediately from events in New York on 9/11.

Precisely the reverse is true of most Afghans, for whom the past is an

The Pentagon's strategy is connecting American minds to Afghan hearts

organic, shared and continuing experience, a story told and retold, nurtured and learnt. In parts of the country, Afghans still refer to the British as the "English tribes". The British and Americans are embedded in Afghanistan's tribal past as surely as we are mired in her present.

The Great Game will offer the ranks of American soldiers who watch it next month an emotional link to Afghanistan's history, something that lectures, news reports and propaganda can never achieve.

These plays do not hector or justify. They present the blunders of outsiders, but also the cruelty of the Taleban and the stolid, feuding tribal mentality. Like all the best theatre (and, for that matter, the best journalism), the stage offers insight, information and

honesty, leaving moral choices to the audience.

Seven hours is a lot of theatre. A dozen playwrights and 20 British actors may seem a puny force to take on the massed ranks of the US Army. Some in the audience will be shifting uncomfortably in their seats next month at the huge Sidney Harman Hall theatre in Washington. The bemuddled Pentagon brass may squirm to hear the wife of a latterday soldier declare: "You are changing nothing... you can change nothing." But they will also see him respond with the story of an Afghan girl, blinded by the Taleban for the crime of going to school.

A play cannot furnish answers, but it can provide invaluable perspective. I doubt that a single member of that audience — general or squaddie, veteran or rookie, gung-ho or doubter — will leave the theatre still believing that the Afghan conflict is simply about "them" and "us", or the here and now.

The battle for hearts and minds in Afghanistan has become a cliché, but the Pentagon's newest strategy is startlingly original, connecting American minds to Afghan hearts through the power of the stage.

Theatre may not help to win the war in Afghanistan. It will not accelerate the withdrawal, or reduce the bloodshed. But it may at least convince the men and women fighting this war that the enemy's history is also their own, and that their current mission is only the latest chapter in a long and tragic game without winners.