

The only awards that really matter

ROBERT GRIFFITHS

ROBERT GRIFFITHS rounds up the year's most notable and notorious public figures receive their just desserts.

YET again, Britain's mass media have snubbed the South Croydon Bugle and Advertiser's political awards ceremony in the plush surroundings of Ruskin House, held shortly before Christmas every year in order to discourage non-members of the Christian community.

Only the Morning Star's Ann Douglas managed the trek from north London to that distant staging-post for the South Pole, better known as Croydon. Last Thursday, she packed into the finely upholstered Mandela Lounge to witness an event which this year contained more than its usual share of melodrama. Generously sponsored by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and the US private equity fund Tell Sid We're Buying Up Britain Investments, the event was already awash with Magners Irish cider before the master of ceremonies took the stage.

Former Olympic sprint champion and Old Etonian Jeffrey Archer rose to open the proceedings, sporting a Santa Claus outfit so new that price tags still dangled from the billowing sleeves.

"My lords, ladies and gentlemen," he began, thereby excluding most of the audience of Ruskin House regulars from the greeting. "I have been asked to comere this distinguished occasion by the United Nations Association in recognition of my outstanding record as a fund-raiser for charity," the former Conservative Party chairman lied.

Then the master storyteller reached into his sack to delight the audience with the first of many surprises. With a flourish, he pulled out by its ears a well-scrubbed and shiny Jonathan Aitken, a former Cabinet colleague and fellow member of the Tory Old Felons Fraternity - or TOFF.

Aitken had personally sponsored the first prize of the evening, the Jonathan W P Aitken Sword of Truth and Trusty Shield of Fair Play.

"For services to the Swiss banking industry and to the procurement of prostitutes for degenerate, corrupt Arab dictators ... step forward the entire senior management of BAe Systems!" Aitken enunciated in his seductive Old Etonian drawl.

The sword and shield were accepted on their behalf by an overjoyed trade union official. He explained that the company's directors had been busily engaged in selling rapid-fire Uzi machine-guns to south London street gangs that afternoon, capturing vital market share at the expense of French and Russian competitors.

"This contract will secure hundreds of jobs for my members who clean the streets and dig the graves," the official pointed out before revealing that he would be meeting his BAe "social partners" at a Keep New Labour Out of Prison fund-raising dinner later that evening.

Then, amid scenes of mounting excitement, Nobel prize-winning author Jeffrey Archer read out nominations for the Reginald Prentice Mink Turncoat made from the black and silver pelts of a thousand of God's less fortunate creatures. "Former revolutionary Trotskyist and dope-hazed shopkeeper Alan Milburn ... former left-wing firebrand and scourge of European Commission bureaucrats Neil Kinnock ... former red-flag-flying council commissar Margaret Hodge ... all have betrayed every political principle they once so loudly espoused," chuckled decorated Korean war hero Archer, "but none more comprehensively so than ex-Stalinist champion of unilateral nuclear disarmament, democratic rights and prompt payment of Communist Party dues in accordance with Rule 5 sub-clause (b) ... pray stand to attention for John Reid!"

At this point, the Mandela Lounge shuddered to the crump of stun grenades as the room filled with smoke and a phalanx of SAS and secret service personnel smashed through the doors, followed by a serene Reid in his trademark grey suit.

As the guests were forcibly fingerprinted, the Minister for Homeland Security spoke softly in his avuncular manner, his voice barely audible above the whirr of helicopter blades in the gardens afore and aft the Mandela Lounge.

"I used to be a communist, but then I also used to believe in Santa Claus," he rasped, shooting an incredulous glance at lifelong honorary Mensa member Archer. "More recently, I believed in weapons of mass destruction buried in the Iraqi sand-dunes," he confided to his audience, their mouths still agape as skin linings were scraped for DNA samples.

"Now I believe that our country is in danger of being overrun by millions of crazed Muslim terrorists and Bulgarian plumbers within the next 45 minutes," he declaimed in emphatic yet soothing tones.

Not everyone in the Ruskin House audience agreed with him, and they were arrested. Next up was the priceless Aneurin Bevan National Health Service Bejewelled Crown. Beaming with the indulgence of one who suffers fools gladly, Patricia Hewitt regally acknowledged her reward for "services to stuffing the mouths of PFI contractors with gold." Adapting her remarks to an audience of five-year-old children, she patiently explained that "the best way to honour Nye's legacy is to shut down as many A&E units as possible while privatising anything which survives."

Hewitt also chided Archer for not including her in the nominations for the Mink Turncoat award. "I made my political career on the back of the National Council for Civil Liberties before sitting in the very New Labour Cabinet which is turning Britain into a police state," she reminded the former world chess champion who, fortunately, did not inherit the embarrassment gene.

The presentation of the Peter Hitchens Mighty Quill for Smiting Marxist Infiltrators made for a distressing interlude. Tribune columnist Paul Anderson was helped to the front of the room by two full-time carers to make his acceptance speech. Unfortunately, as the sedative wore off, he showered the front two rows of guests in spittle while railing against the Islamo-Fascist-Stalino-Trotskyite conspiracy gripping Britain's anti-war movement.

Still, a roaring trade was done in Morning Star umbrellas before Anderson retreated under a hail of empty cider bottles.

An undeterred Archer then dug deeply into his sack to extract a giant soft toy, the much-coveted Big Brown Rat for Leaving a Sinking Ship. As in previous years, there was no winner because the most obvious recipient still appears reluctant to jump.

But this year's decision prompted an unusual protest by former parliamentary private secretary Chris Bryant, one of the ex-Blairites who launched an abortive coup attempt against Tony Blair in September.

Bryant had turned up to the Ruskin House ceremony clad only in his Y-fronts, claiming the award as his own. He was led away by security staff protesting - absurdly - that this was his usual mode of attire when appearing in public.

While Reid's visit had upstaged what should have been the highlight of the night, the Field Marshal Haig Chipboard Coffin for Senseless Sacrifice in an Ignoble Cause still caused a flurry of tedium. This time, it was the turn of Secretary for War Des Browne to shoulder the award on behalf of Tony Blair, the Prime Minister being engaged elsewhere helping the police with their inquiries.

Paying tribute to his predecessor, Browne told those guests still conscious that, "like Geoff Hoon, my ambition is to rise and fall without a trace." But even as he spoke, Ann Douglas slid gently under the table to join the remainder of the audience in a comatose state, an empty bottle slipping from her grasp to fall beside the pen and notebook in a pool of spittle and cider. Nobody was awake to witness Archer being apprehended by police on suspicion of stealing a Santa Claus suit from the local theatrical supplies merchant.

• ***Robert Griffiths is general secretary of the Communist Party of Britain.***