



# INDEPENDENT

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## Boost for Miliband as union members back his reforms

### New poll shows ordinary workers want Labour leader to go further

By **ANDREW GRICE**  
Political Editor

Ed Miliband's plan to recast Labour's relationship with the trade unions enjoys strong support among ordinary union members, fuelling claims that their leaders are "out of touch" for opposing them.

A YouGov survey for the *Labour Uncut* blog also suggests that Mr Miliband can reap an electoral benefit if he sticks to his guns and forces

through his changes. Some 16 per cent of the public say his reforms make them more likely to vote Labour at the next election, with only 4 per cent saying they are less likely to support the party – a potentially significant boost in a close election.

On the opening day of the TUC conference yesterday, union bosses accused the Labour leader of trying to break the party's link with its union founders.

Mr Miliband shrugged off warnings

that his plan could bankrupt Labour as unions warned that only 10 per cent of their members would actively "opt in" to paying money to the party. At present, they have to "opt out" if they do not wish to support it financially.

Mr Miliband, facing his gravest crisis since becoming Labour leader, is adamant that the case for sweeping reform has been strengthened by the collapse of disciplinary action against members of the Unite union over allegations of vote rigging in the parlia-

mentary-candidate selection process in Falkirk, Scotland.

In an embarrassing climbdown on Friday, Labour cleared Unite of breaking party rules. But Labour insiders suggest this happened only because key witnesses were pressurised to withdraw their allegations of vote rigging, although no such evidence has emerged.

Remarkably, the poll reveals that Mr

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**MPs must share the blame for the BBC mess**  
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### NICOLA ADAMS

**I can make boxing history again**  
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### FELIX DENNIS

**I gave David Frost his hairiest moment**  
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### CAN A KISS CHANGE A PRESIDENT'S MIND?

Two protesters wearing Vladimir Putin masks kiss at a rally in Paris against the Russian President's recent anti-gay crackdown. More than 50 cities took part worldwide yesterday in a Global Kiss-In to protest against Russia's oppressive stance on gay rights leading up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

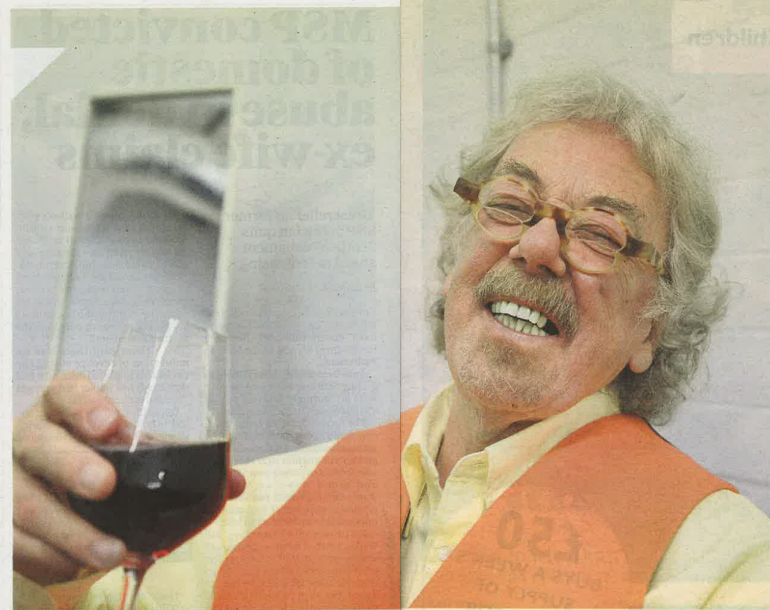
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# The poet inside a Sixties radical turned multimillionaire

Felix Dennis's brushes with death haven't lessened his vigour or his personality, says **Ian Burrell**



**E**ven a visit, seven years ago, to the sumptuous and Baroque surroundings of his London pied-à-terre was no preparation for half a day in the company of Britain's most flamboyant media mogul on his country estate.

There's no one like Felix Dennis. The poet and publisher sends a chauffeur to the train station and a drive through the Stratford-upon-Avon streets the greatest Bard once trod leads to a Domesday village where Dennis has owned a manor house for 27 years.

At the end of a winding lane, between several luxurious outbuildings – one containing an indoor swimming pool where giant horses carved from African cedar stand at waterside on their hind legs – visitors encounter a tattooed man in a "Security Dog Handler" T-shirt and an angry canine, part of the 24-hour patrol team. Onwards past a maze, between figures of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, William Blake and Thomas Paine, the first sign of the Seigneur: the Segway he uses to propel himself around his 600 acres.

Dennis, 66, is recovering from throat cancer – the closest of his three flirtations with death, following a serious thyroid illness and a crack-cocaine addiction. He sits down at a kitchen table with a view of more of the 56 statues in his "Garden of Heroes & Villains". It is a remarkable collection. On the skyline, Lawrence of Arabia, 14 feet high aboard his favourite camel, Jeddah, is situated on a ridge to ensure

a silhouette before the sunset. "I like to keep the art of bronze figurative sculpture alive," Dennis says. He has a list of future subjects. Is there a committee? "No! Well, a committee of one."

One way or another, the owner of *The Week*, *Auto Express* and *Viz* is making his mark. This week he will plant an oak sapling, the one millionth native broadleaf tree in his Heart of England Forest. "Whosoever plants a tree/ Winks at immortality," as he wrote in one of his poems.

He will shortly publish his eighth book of verse. His poesy – which uses modern themes to regenerate largely forgotten techniques including sestinas and sonnet cycles – is very popular, and so are his live readings, backed by customised video and sound. "How many poets do you know – and I know I am boasting – who can put 800 people in a theatre, charging £20? Give me one that lives! I do it all the time." Humility has never been a strong point.

Dennis had a further reminder of his sign of the Seigneur: this month when his former adversary Sir David Frost died. As a young radical in 1970, Dennis invaded the stage of *The Frost Programme* and became the first person to use the C-word on British television before squirting Frost with a water pistol.

"You said a four-letter word on television, big deal," Frost rebuked his unexpected guest.

"OK, man," a long-haired Dennis responded, "how many times have you said a four-letter word on television?"

Now a multimillionaire with 70 personal staff, three homes on the West Indian island of Mustique and more in America, this former counter-culture icon – who was briefly jailed in 1971 after an obscenity trial relating to his satirical magazine *Oz* – looks back on the Frost episode with amusement. "I'm afraid that I'm personally responsible for the delay in all broadcasts to the Great British public. When it says 'This is *The 10 O'Clock News*' – no it's not!"

## DENNIS IN VERSE THE FOG OF AGE

The fog of age begins as morning mist,  
A word forgotten here, a name, a face,  
Your keys left in the shop while you insist  
You had them in the car. The extra place  
You laid for dinner. Stopping in the hall

To realise you can't remember what  
It was you came to do. The hopeless trawl  
Through memory: "What was it I forgot?"  
Yet mist has its advantages – what's near  
Is dearer to the eye and to the heart  
When shielded from confusion at its rear.

An April cherry tree revealed as art!  
The jumble of our younger years  
Give birth  
To veils that clarify each thing of worth.

## Felix Dennis grew up without a father and lived in a house without electricity

During the Seventies, he and Sir David were frequent fellow passengers on Concord. "The first couple of times he just glared at me but in the end he admitted it was probably the most important marketing for 'David Frost the brand', as he called himself."

Dennis – who has never married but has a long-standing partner in Marie-France Demolis – grew up without a father in a house without electricity, using scraps of the *Surrey Comet* as paper in the outdoor privy. He is a Labour supporter (and former donor) who has yet to forgive the party for Tony Blair's foreign policy.

Dennis is also scathing of Blairite environmentalism, describing the National Forest as a "New Labour Forest". "You give a farmer money to plant trees and can't stop him chopping them all down in 25 years, but by then Tony Blair has retired and doesn't give a monkey's."

He has planted 2,500 acres ("five Hyde Parks") and says he remains committed to the project simply because "I like to see the change that comes over land when you reintroduce the natural habitat – the return of wildlife and watercresses and insect and fungi."

This is not the guilt trip of a man who has made a fortune through publishing on paper. "I want to nail the idea of a 'dead trees' industry," he says, telling of his helicopter rides over the softwood forests of Finland and Canada. "There are tens upon tens of

millions of trees planted by the paper industry. The softwoods used to make paper are a crop. They are replanted when they are felled. We do not use oak trees to make paper!"

He doesn't look like a cancer victim and the surgery hasn't inhibited his humour (his latest poetry tour is called "The Cut-Throat Tour: A Smile from Ear to Ear") or his hospitality. After making coffee, he waits for midday and then plucks a bottle of his favourite Pouilly-Fumé from the fridge (though he is obliged to take his wine with water).

In 2007, Dennis sold most of his US publishing operation – including the globally lucrative title *Maxim* – to a private-equity group for £121m. The

business he retains, he says, is "the largest technology publisher in the UK". He was setting up computer magazines such as *MacUser* in the Eighties when tech was the niche world of the geek. According to latest

## "How many poets do you know – and I know I am boasting – who can put 800 people in a theatre?"

accounts, which conveniently materialise before him, the company has grown 7 per cent in the past year as its titles make the transition to tablet and mobile formats.

He started writing poetry only 13 years ago, during a very serious thy-

roid illness, but he has written 1,537 poems and his verse has been compared to that of Rudyard Kipling, another of his sculpted heroes.

This, he says, is unfathomable for someone who has spent his adult life convinced he failed his 11-plus.

There is a bronze that features Felix himself as a schoolgirl, waving a copy of the infamous "Schoolkids Issue" of *Oz*. It's hidden in the very centre of the swirling yew maze and it appears to be saying: "How did I end up here?"

Felix Dennis's 'Did I Mention the Free Wine?' *The Cut-Throat Tour* continues today. For more information and to buy tickets, go to [felixdennis.com](http://felixdennis.com).



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