

Political Hot Potatoes  
by Alice Rodgers

1. Warmer

- a. Look at the picture of the potatoes and the definition of the idiom “hot potato” and answer the questions.



hot potato DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS

NOUN COUNTABLE INFORMAL UK 

WORD FORMS +

DEFINITIONS 1

- 1** a difficult issue that people try to avoid dealing with or discussing

1. What would you do if someone told you to catch one of the potatoes from the picture and threw it to you?
  2. How is a hot potato similar to a “difficult issue”? What is the relationship between the picture and the definition?
  3. In your opinion, why do people use idioms like “hot potato” instead of using clear language like “difficult issue”?
- b. In pairs, think of as many examples of “hot potatoes” that people typically do not like discussing.

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## 2. Language focus

- a. Read the text below and underline all the idioms in the text.

## Students and the 2010 British Election

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“Last year was the ten-year anniversary of the British student movement. Can you believe it? I remember I was a student myself during that time and campaigned for the government to support students more and to not increase tuition fees. It became a political hot potato and the topic really divided the nation. Not to get on my soapbox about this but...it was such an important issue, and it was fantastic to be out there defending students. My friends and I got really involved, and it became a huge part of our lives. On the 10th November 2010, we organised the biggest workers’ and students’ demonstration that the country had seen in decades. The government spin doctors at the time tried to make us look like lazy students who wanted to protest instead of studying. Some newspapers even said that we could easily afford the proposed tuition fees, and that we were just rich champagne socialists, but it didn’t feel like that to me. After all, the movement mobilised people from all walks of life, rich and poor. “

It all started after the General Election in May 2010. Some of us students really believed the socialist promises of Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrat party, and a lot of students voted for him in the election. We were especially attracted by his promise to not increase tuition fees in the country. It looked like finally the election wouldn’t just be a two-horse race between the Conservatives and Labour.

When the election results came in, the Conservative Party won the most votes and seats, but they didn’t have enough seats to be able to form a government, so we had a hung parliament. So what happened? Well, the leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, had no choice but to ask Nick Clegg to form a coalition government with him. So many of us thought: “What? Nick Clegg and David Cameron? Nick Clegg who in his election campaign campaigned for the rights of students, and David Cameron who campaigned to drastically cut spending in universities and to increase tuition fees? What strange bedfellows!” Despite that, Nick Clegg accepted the offer of forming a government with the Conservative Party.

The day eventually came for politicians to vote on the tuition fees bill, which would allow UK universities to triple the amount of money they charged students. And sure enough, Nick Clegg and several other Liberal Democrat members toed the Conservative Party line and voted *for* the increases. We all wondered, “was Nick Clegg just economical with the truth in his election campaign, or did he out and out lie to us?”

The decision to support the Conservative party was political suicide for Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrat Party. Thousands of students and the people supporting them certainly voted with their feet in the local and general elections after that. In the 2015 General Election, the Liberal Democrats lost 48 seats in the House of Commons (the elected lower house of the parliament of the UK), leaving them with only eight MPs. This is when Nick Clegg announced his resignation as party leader”.

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### b. Match the idioms on the left with their definitions on the right.

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| 1. hot potato                | a. to say things that are not true, or to not tell everything that you know  |
| 2. get on your soapbox       | b. to do what you is expected of you without creating problems for others  |
| 3. spin doctor               | c. someone that is unexpectedly connected with another person or thing in some way   |
| 4. champagne socialists      | d. a competition in which it is certain that only two people could possibly win  |
| 5. two-horse race            | e. someone with left-wing political opinions who is very rich. This word is often used to show that you dislike people like this |
| 6. strange bedfellows        | f. someone whose job is to give journalists information that makes a politician or an organization seem as good as possible      |
| 7. toe the line              | g. to tell other people your opinions in an annoying way   |
| 8. economical with the truth | h. to express an opinion by not going to a place   |
| 9. political suicide         | i. a difficult issue that people try to avoid dealing with or discussing   |
| 10. vote with your feet      | j. something that a politician does that is likely to have very bad results for their political career                           |

### c. Re-write the following sentences using the idioms from exercise B.

- When the cost of a small coffee doubled in price, customers were not happy and just stopped going to that café.
- In the press interview, she knew she had to just repeat what her company had told her to say because, if she hadn't, she would have lost her job.
- He's always going on and on about climate change and just won't shut up.
- Oh, I can't take those activists very seriously. They complain about the price of public transport, but they have so much money!
- The politician and the priest were quite an odd match, but they worked together on a peace mission.
- When my landlords told me they would not increase my rent over the next five years, they weren't being completely honest.
- After watching all the party leaders speak, it was extremely clear that only two of the speakers were serious presidential candidates.
- In the USA, the issue of gun control is a topic that people try to avoid talking about.
- As soon as the debate finished, the representatives from both parties were saying that their candidates had won.
- Years later, it was clear that the President's decision to go to war had been the reason she lost the election.

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### 3. Language practice

- a. In pairs, choose one topic from your list of “hot potatoes” from the warmer and discuss it with your partner. Try to use as many of the idioms as possible.

**Sara:** *What do you think about the crazy price of going to college?*

**Amira:** *Hey, before you **get on your soapbox** about how much it costs, just think about why it is that expensive. Would we get good professors if colleges were much cheaper?*

**Sara:** *Sure, but students are starting to **vote with their feet**. More and more people are studying online nowadays.*

### 4. Extension activity: Discussion

- a. Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Do you think politicians are always economical with the truth?
2. Which two politicians from your own country would you view as strange bedfellows?
3. Why do you think so many people around the world don't toe the line and follow rules protecting them from the coronavirus?
4. What act would be definite political suicide for the leader of your country?
5. Who are the spin doctors that you most often see on the news?

#### Answer Sheet 1: Language focus b

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. <i>i</i> | 6. <i>c</i>  |
| 2. <i>g</i> | 7. <i>b</i>  |
| 3. <i>f</i> | 8. <i>a</i>  |
| 4. <i>e</i> | 9. <i>j</i>  |
| 5. <i>d</i> | 10. <i>h</i> |



#### Answer Sheet 2: Language focus c

1. *When the cost of a small coffee doubled in price, customers voted with their feet (and stopped going to that café).*
2. *In the press interview, she knew she had to toe the company line because, if she hadn't, she would have lost her job.*
3. *He's always getting on his soapbox about climate change.*
4. *Oh, I can't take those activists very seriously. They're nothing but champagne socialists!*
5. *The politician and the priest were strange bedfellows, but they worked together on a peace mission.*
6. *When my landlords told me they would not increase my rent over the next five years, they were being very economical with the truth.*
7. *After watching all the party leaders speak, it was extremely clear that it was a two-horse race.*

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8. *In the USA, the issue of gun control is a real political hot potato.*
9. *As soon as the debate finished, the spin doctors from both parties were saying that their candidates had won.*
10. *Years later, it was clear that the President's decision to go to war had been political suicide.*