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John Dant
Zoe Flood
Kim Hardman
Meghana Kumar
Adrienne Rivlin
Daniel Russell

Design

Matt Hasteley

Photography

Frederic Aranda
Matt Bryant
Jon Harle
Tim Hetherington
Hugo Robinson
Brent Stirton
Toby Wilkinson

Illustration

Maya Evans
Nick Hayes
Guy Shrubsole

Business

Alex Beecroft

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Cover photograph by Brent Stirton

[Photography Brent Stirton]

the best i

are common proper

AS F SCOTT FITZGERALD said: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Whilst we may not profess to possessing this ability ourselves, we certainly look to promote it.

The Oxford Forum is, yes, another magazine, of which you are likely to have reached saturation point. In return for your attention, we hope that we can offer you an, albeit brief, experience that will inform, entertain, and perhaps most importantly provoke discussion in your mind and with others.

The Forum is perhaps unique in the diversity of contributors - ranging from a first-year undergraduate to the editor of *The Financial Times* magazine, to a former Cabinet Secretary. We value the contributions equally – all are informed and, we believe, informative.

After the devastating events of Boxing Day last year, there were enquiries as to whether there had been a sea-change in the way the public give – would this be the start of a new age of generosity? The notion of change is one that we look at quite seriously throughout this, the first issue. Is our a world a changing one? Do we stand teetering on the edge of a new era? Or are perceived upheavals simply another example of the shifting patterns of history?

Poised between two influential elections, the implication of neo-conservative ideology in the US is evaluated by way of the Project for the New American Century, and Britain's own future through cases made by representatives of all the major, and less major, challengers to Labour. Elections elsewhere, such as in the Ukraine, that herald so-called revolutions are taken at more than face value, whilst the effects of high political machinations in Northern Ireland and between France and the US are investigated. Arafat's death and its consequences are analysed, as is the possible integration of Turkey into the European Union.

The changing nature of our society is further explored through pieces on the internet, education, on the role of the media in politics and the way in which conflict is reported. Culturally, the rise of political biography, reality television and the now-mass nature of travel are all topics of discussion.

Of what relation to Oxford though? Historically a centre for enquiring minds, what better place in which to locate a magazine aiming to provoke debate?

Thanks go, of course, to all those who have contributed for taking a chance on an idea.

In the spirit of discussion, comments are welcome, if not actively encouraged.

Zoe Flood
editor@oxfordforum.com

deas
rty

tsunami Tales

MEGHANA KUMAR was in India when the tsunami hit

WE HAD GOT up early to see the sun rise. Since my cousin and his friend are from Bombay and I live in London, opportunities like this are few and far between. There was a big row before we set off – my aunt announced that she washed her hands of the whole business – our plan was utter foolishness and if any drunken fishermen attacked us, well that was our problem. When we got to the beach, it was still dark and quite chilly. The moon was out and the light from it bounced off the water, illuminating the creamy crescents of the waves as they crashed around.

That's the most vivid picture in my mind of that morning – the almost unnatural violence of the sea. I have been going to this stretch of beach in Chennai, Tamil Nadu for as long as I can remember – my grandparents' house and the beach are synonymous in my mind – and the water has never churned with the kind of energy with which it did that morning. Of course, an hour later, the sea was to become a terrifying rampaging monster displaying a power and brute force almost unheard of. My cousin, his friend and I were lucky. Ours is the familiar tale of the fortunate who for whatever reason were spared an impending disaster – a disaster which at the current toll count is believed to have claimed over 220,000 lives.

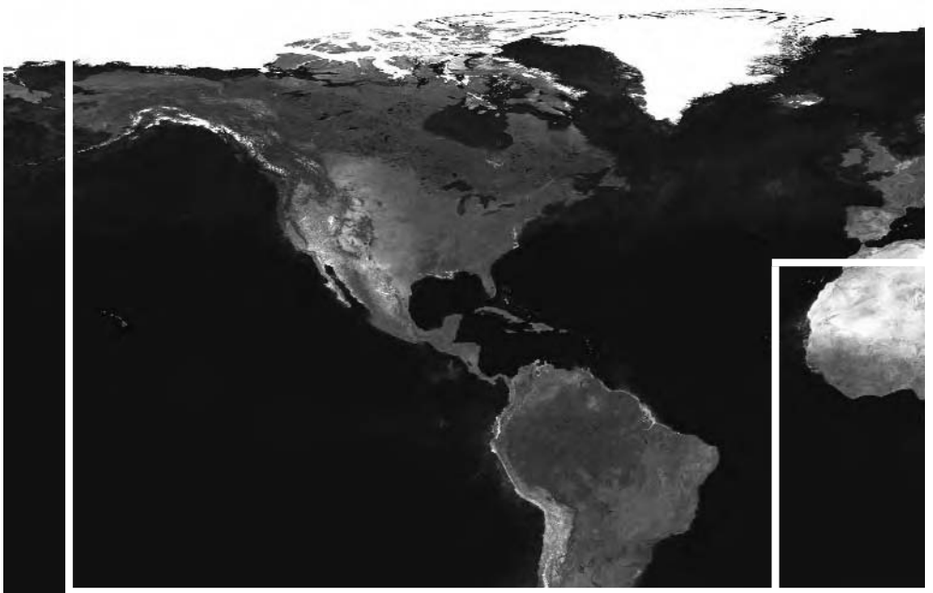
When we got back to the house the television was on. Reports of the earthquake off the coast of Sumatra were coming through. The reports and the reporters seemed to be very confused – here was one of the largest earthquakes in 40 years and yet its effects on a human scale seemed to be relatively small – about 30 people killed. News of the full disaster was extremely slow to filter through. Even after the first tidal waves had begun to hit, news reports were sketchy, saying only that the "water had risen and come right in" on certain stretches of beach.

We were curious about what had happened and so decided to go back. Even then the view that met my eyes gave no indication of the devastation and havoc wreaked by the sea. The water had come right in, past one of the high rise walls and had left its filmy imprint on the sand. It was only later that my father told me the two small villages we would see in the distance on our early morning runs had been flattened. This much was clear from the beginning – that those who had been hit hardest were the poor. Tamil Nadu is a coastal state and many of those who died were the fishermen and their families – those who worked, lived and played by the sea and who were ultimately consumed by it.

The full effects of the tsunami began to be known by early evening on Boxing Day. However the guessing game of the number dead was still being played when I left India, ten days later. The images were horrific. Pictures of bodies lying in the muddy water, mothers wailing, mass graves and flattened villages filled every page of the comment magazines. It also became clear that tourists and holiday-makers had been killed alongside the thousands of Asians. The sea had spared no one. One commentator in *The Hindu*, the largest newspaper in the South, tried to make some sense out of the tragedy by suggesting that perhaps international rifts will be forgotten as countries come together for the relief effort. We can only hope.

By the time I left India, thoughts were turning to the survivors. Efforts were being concentrated on helping those who had escaped. In Tamil Nadu, there is much focus on the plight of the surviving fishermen who are unable to sell what they catch as people are fearful of the diseases brought up the water. Yet they still display an amazing dignity. Waving aside the huge charitable donations, they ask only for money enough to replace their equipment so that they can resume work and try and return back to some semblance of normality. A way to escape from the current hell.

Meghana Kumar was in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, on December 26, 2004. She is studying PPE at Christ Church College, Oxford



after Arafat

REBECCA
of grief a

I KNEW ARAFAT HAD finally (officially at least) died when the first muezzin's call to prayer on Thursday morning didn't end. It began as usual around 4am but on Thursday it continued until noon. Partly in denial, and partly in a haze of early-morning confusion, I dragged myself out of bed. I passed Ream, my landlady. She didn't offer her usual daily recognition. Her black figure passed me quickly; she was in a hurry to mourn. The streets looked strange, and were beset with an unusual atmosphere. The shop doors were all shut and firmly locked, hiding the usual colour and vibrancy of Beit Sahour, and turning the beautiful stone walls of the old city into a metal corridor.

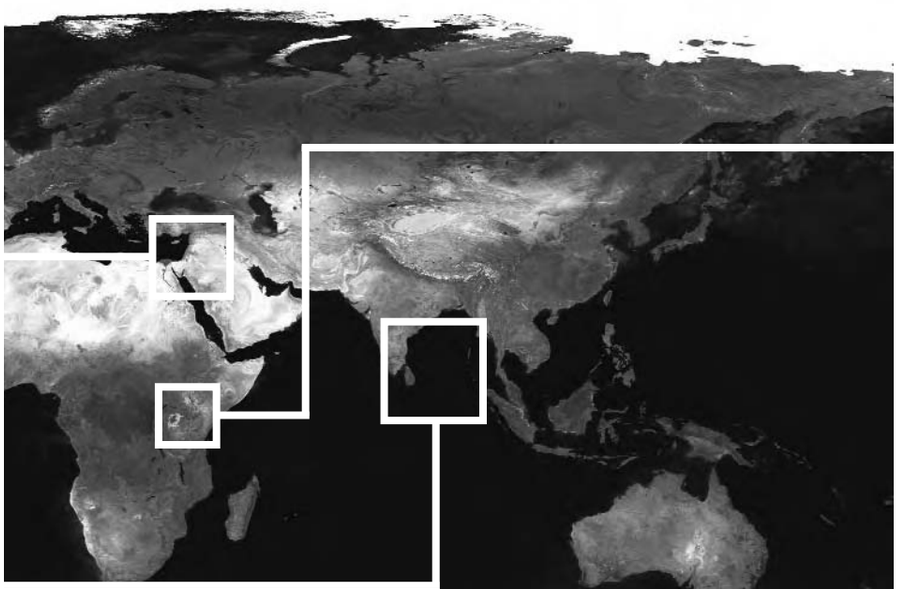
I came to the main street, where the rubble of the busy bus park, usually hidden by waiting passengers was clearly visible. Only a few yellow taxis drove by. I turned to ask a bystander:

"Why is everything shut? Arafat?"

"La La, Arafat is dead. Everything is shut. Shut for three days."

The next day I found myself fighting for my own place in 'the history in the making', or whatever else this death would come to represent; change, hope, peace or just a State funeral in two and a half countries…I trudged through the checkpoints and piled into one of the taxis bobbing around in the sea of yellow cars and mini vans. I was accompanied by a feeling of anticipation; the type which characterises any major event. In fact a sense of anticipation pervaded every inch of the atmosphere from the checkpoint to the bus park and then continued to coat Ramallah's own metal corridor of 'mourning' shops.

All of us – mourners and spectators alike – approached the desecrated compound, although the Mutaka was now cleared of the many blown-out and over turned cars which today had been replaced with a new influx of Palestinian flags. These flags stood tall upon rusted oil drums and hung from blown out



CA TYRER witnessed the outpouring
f at Yasser Arafat's funeral

walls. Men sat on chairs on the third floors of buildings. The absence of a fourth wall revealed their presence. Every remaining wall, every concrete block, every pile of rubble was loaded with spectators. The crowd gained in density and intensity and it gradually pulled me out of my comfort zone. Bodies were pressed closer together, although the atmosphere still seemed festive rather than aggressive.

Shouts preceded a human wave which before long had pushed its way through the crowd. I moved as far to the side as space would allow. Bodies on top of bodies, until the wave came closer, carrying with it more gun shots, soldiers, party members and of course the tense faces of the photojournalists with their cameras held high. One photographer was pushed into me before being swept past – managing to offer an entirely unneccessary but characteristically English, "I'm sorry".

The space expanded slightly, but only momentarily as the wave then seemed to pull back and retrace its steps. I sought refuge in the higher spaces; away from the main stream of people leading from the helicopter pad to the ruined buildings. The crowd dispersed but the gun shots increased. The two helicopters which had brought the President's body rotated their way back towards the sky. People waved but were then forced to cover their faces from the dust.

It seemed symbolic; in a display of solid national unity Palestine said farewell to its leader, but was then forced to turn away – a well-adapted survival technique; a reflection of the internal uncertainty, denied freedoms and the squeezing suffocating pressure of the Occupation.

Rebecca Tyrer is working for* News from Within*, an English-language magazine jointly produced in the Palestinian Territories and Israel. She completed an MPhil in Development Studies at Jesus College, Oxford

radio Rescue

ROB LEWIS reports on the radio station that is fighting the war against the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda

THE WAR IN THE north of Uganda has long been termed 'Africa's forgotten war'. Indeed, in October 2004 the UN's head of Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, saw fit to dub it "the biggest neglected humanitarian crisis in the world". Amidst the violence and insecurity of the war-torn territories, a radio station has emerged as a symbol of peace and a weapon against the rebels.

Mega FM is a community radio station that has been broadcasting 24 hours a day for eight years from the town of Gulu, in the heart of the rebel-affected area. It has acted as an important source of information for the mostly illiterate and impoverished population of the region. More strikingly, appeals broadcast by the station for an end to violence appear to be having a significant effect on the rebels, and some have claimed that it has contributed to the surrender of over 15,000 former insurgents since 2002.

Uganda's war is both savage and strikingly incomprehensible. For 18 years Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels have terrorised large areas of the north of the country. Kony himself is the epitome of his bizarre, cultish rebel army. He professes to believe himself to be a prophet, led by spirits who tell him what to do and whom to kill.

Nowhere in the predominantly Acholi northern territories is considered safe from his wandering army. They target the civilian population; pillaging land, murdering indiscriminately and abducting children. Boys are brutalised and converted into soldiers, while girls are forced into sex slavery.

In the centre of the LRA's battleground, the emergence and survival of Mega FM is remarkable. The radio station is protected by a number of armed guards, but the station regularly receives threats from the LRA warning it to stop broadcasting.

Yet despite these dangers, the station remains on the airwaves and is a vital source of information for the people in the area. Audience research has suggested that Mega FM is listened to by 51 per cent of the population of northern Uganda.

Its most important programme is 'Dwogpaco' – literally, 'come back home'. Broadcast three nights a week in the local Lacholi language, the programme appeals to LRA soldiers to defect and abandon their rebel army. Its most effective tactic has been to interview recently returned soldiers, attempting to convince rebels that the Ugandan government will obey its promises on amnesty.

In late 2004, for instance, the show hosted 'Dr. Ocitti', age 23, and Walter Olanya, 20 – both of whom had applied for amnesty earlier that day. It is believed that both were near-starving, and had numerous injuries.

This tactic employed by the radio station to help bring an end to the terror in the region appears to have significantly alarmed the LRA leadership. Soldiers face death if they are caught in possession of a radio, as Kony attempts to prevent his captive army from knowing the truth regarding the futility of their cause.

Information is a crucial weapon in this civil war. Francis Komakech, 18, who was abducted at such a young age that he's not even certain which year this took place, believes that if his former comrades knew about the amnesty, they would leave the LRA.

"As a soldier in the bush you cannot listen to the radio, so those still in the bush don't know. But if they could hear it, they would believe it and the war could come to an end," Komakech said.

Despite the hard work and positive gains, suggestions that one radio station alone can bring down the LRA are certainly too optimistic. Yet there can be no doubt that Mega FM is an innovative and effective way to fight this brutal army. With luck, further positive action by the international community will bring an end to the terror in the region.

Rob Lewis spent five weeks in Uganda in July 2004. He is studying History and Politics at Queen's College, Oxford

hacks in Ghana

MARY MORGAN reflects on her time at *The Statesman* in Accra

ONE PHONE LINE for all incoming and outgoing calls, and for internet use. Blocked, mostly. Three working computers, which only the 'trained' typists were allowed to use anyway – often for playing solitaire, whilst waiting for the reporters to handwrite their stories, ready for being mis-copied into print. No sub-editing procedures made for some hilarious mistakes; one day, the paper ironically celebrated a national seminar held to nurture and improve the 'riting' skills of its journalists.

The Statesman is one of the top three or four non-state-run national newspapers in Ghana, a country in which democracy is only 13 years young, and real freedom of the press more infantile still. Working for the paper for six weeks last summer, I was surprised by the relaxed attitude with which journalists there approach their work. Lack of infrastructure is a problem – twice power cuts meant that the paper simply failed to come out at all – but there is also no sense of urgency or immediacy; no real sense of 'news' in the British sense. An horrific road accident outside the capital would be unlikely to make the front pages, or even the papers at all, partly because even the coverage provided by the national press association is scant in the provinces, and partly because that's not what the newspapers are all about.

working for masqueraded as a more 'intellectual' rag, beyond the political spin that was at the core of its existence sometimes it seemed they would run anything at all. A double-page spread containing the full transcript of a recent Kerry speech constituted the entire features offering one weekend; no comment, no analysis, a quarter of the paper given over to a foreign election candidate no one cared about.

Ghana is a country in transition, and there are few more striking constrasts between the old and the new than within the media itself. A tangible sense of national pride leaps from the pages of the daily papers, yet it is still traditional tribal ties that explain many of the political feuds dominating its news pages.

The glamorous lifestyle of my chauffer-driven, Armani clad and egotistical editor might seem a simple illustration of the division between rich and poor in this country, as 'Gabby' strides the office barking into the mobile phone the rest of his journalists are unable to afford, but a visit to his family 'headquarters' revealed the source of this wealth. Gabby may run a newspaper and host several TV shows, but his 'celebrity' status is largely thanks to the tribal connections and his grandfather's position as Chief which helped get him there in the first place. His

'Fake Pastor vomits three live lizards'…a favourite

With the exception of the state-run *Daily Graphic* and one or two others, virtually the entire press is unashamedly political and opinionated, making little pretence to be anything else. At *The Statesman*, 'news' had to tow a very strong government party line, particularly in the run-up to elections last December; the Foreign Minister happened to own the newspaper, after all, and the editor-in-chief happened to be his cousin (a fair bit of money also happened to change hands over various stories, from what I could see).

With a print-run of only 4,000, and a circulation that barely leaves the capital, *The Statesman* is typical of the 20 or so daily pamphlets that come and go on the streets of Accra. Much of the propaganda is so blatant as to be ridiculous – the sex scandals dreamt up by some of the more radical papers were childish to the extreme – and whilst the newspaper I was cousin the Foreign Minister is just part of a wider grip on power – his grandfather's 40 wives must have done their job well.

In a society still so influenced by hierarchical structures and traditional allegiances, with a relatively new and precarious democracy, I inevitably encountered many cultural differences in the media. We may grow immune to the tittle-tattle tabloid trash that screams celebrity scandal at us from the red tops every day, but the superstitious yarns emblazoned across the front of Ghana's answer to *Hello!* are perhaps no more note-worthy there. "Fake pastor vomits three live lizards," was one of my personal favourites, only marginally more believable than, "Ghost eats murderer".

Mary Morgan worked at* The Statesman *in Accra, Ghana during August 2004. She is studying History at St Edmund Hall, Oxford

after the siege Beslan

ANTON CHERMENSKIY visits those left behind

MARGARET BASAEVA is a teacher. She has no qualms about speaking to journalists, but when she does so she is reluctant to give out her surname. It is not that Margarita is worried about how her neighbours will react to her talking to the press – in Ossetia there are many Basaevs. It is quite simply that Margarita is ashamed of her name after the massacre at Beslan.

Beslan is a town of several thousand people, 25 kilometres from the North Ossetian capital Vladikavkaz. Indeed, the use of the term 'town' is generous: this is a place of simple houses – of little roofs behind the mountains. But on September 1 last year this small town became infamous the world over. On the first day of the new school year, a group of terrorists led by Maragarita's namesake, Shamil Basaev, took over Beslan School N1 and the bloody events that followed were reported globally. According to the official account, finally released by the authorities on December 30, 330 people died in the massacre – 186 of them children. For a town of Beslan's diminutive size, the death toll was massive.

North Ossetia is usually thought of as a Christian republic, but the population of Beslan contains a Muslim element, most of whom originate from the neighbouring province of Ingushetia. Ivan, a Christian resident of North Ossetia, described the province as "much like Israel". He added, "like Israel, we are surrounded by Muslim nations: Kabardino-Balkaria in the west, Chechyna and Ingushetia in the east." Tension between the Christian and Muslim communities has remained strong since the massacre. Nobody in Beslan was left untouched by what happened at the school; almost everybody knows one of the dead. Some lost their entire family. In Beslan, the living envy the dead.

Those who have lost in Beslan cannot forgive. Another member of the community, Zarina Lalieva, lost two children on September 1, and she is unable to discuss the events of the day without breaking into tears. Like most of the town's population, she is sure that the terrorists who led the school siege were Ingush and Chechens. "When one of them died on the first day [of the siege], they organised a ritual dance." said Zarina. "That's their custom: when somebody has died in the war; he is ready for the burial ceremony. They were dancing around his body like crazy; nobody was touching it.

[Photography Anton Chermenskiy]

Only Chechens and Ingush have this custom."

As the 40th day from the massacre approached – and the official mourning period ended – Rusian Aushev, a former president of Ingushetia, warned that a new Ossetia-Ingushetia conflict might break out. Beslan resident and pensioner Eduard Kargiev affirmed this opinion: "This cannot be forgiven", he raged to me. Despite his advanced years he is still thirsting for revenge. He also felt that the authorities were to blame for the tragedy, saying, "Where were MVD [Russia's ministry of internal affairs], FSB,and other special forces? The terrorists' truck had to pass many, many kilometres."

Fortunately the most pessimistic prognostications have not been realised and the terrorist action at Beslan has failed to create a new religious conflict in the Caucasus as yet. On the final day of the official mourning period, there was an incident that could have sparked further bloodshed – an Ingush was abducted in the region. Yet police are not convinced that this was related to the school massacre; the individual in question was a wealthy businessman, so a usual 'property distribution' could well have been all that was at play. The authorities were, nevertheless, braced for repercussions when the mourning period had elapsed, and most MVD forces were out on alert.

The relatives of the dead are adamant that the government should not be permitted to interfere in their tragedy. According to Ossetian custom, men do not wash or shave during the 40-day mourning period; women dress all in black, but on the 40th day their black shawl is supposed to be tied to the grave of their dead kin. Many are still to do this. Neighbours suggest this is a bad omen – that it will bring misfortune upon the house. The most superstitious claim that this disregard of traditional observances will cause the children of the household to die, and will bring poverty to their parents. But for many this does not matter. As Ivan explained, "They know who planned all this, and they wait for the hour. Those responsible won't live long – revenge may not come instantly, but it will come." In the Caucasus, they know how to wait.

Anton Chermenskiy is a correspondent for* Echo of Moscow*, an independent Russian radio station. Translated by Misha Gavrilovich

George Monbiot
in his own words

GEORGE MONBIOT can be counted amongst that rare breed of columnists consistently able to write something original about the world. A weekly institution in the pages of *The Guardian* since the late 1990s, the Oxford-educated son of a former Conservative MP has repeatedly put paid to the belief that promoting environmental causes requires a suspension of 'common sense'. Indeed, so confident is Monbiot in the rational force of his arguments that he was prepared to take on – and defeat – the great bastion of botany David Bellamy in a public debate over the use of wind farms last summer. In conversation with *The Oxford Forum*, the journalist was true to form, lamenting the corporate career path accepted by so many Oxbridge graduates.

'PEOPLE WHOSE progressive credentials were impeccable – who honestly believed that they were going to do good in the world when they left university – are suddenly panicked by the fact that everyone else appears to be getting jobs in the City, so they figure they'd better get a job in the City or they're going to lose out. They don't necessarily realise that everyone else is similarly being panicked by their reaction. Always what you hear is, 'I'll just do this for a few years and then I'll do what I want to do – I'll just earn some money first…' It is the height of self-deception. As soon as they become involved in that world, they acquire spending habits to match it; they then find it impossible to detach themselves.

"It's a personal tragedy for them; it's a global tragedy that a lot of very able, intelligent, very well-meaning people have been lost to the causes that need them and I really urge any student reading this to think very hard before joining that Gadarene rush to become part of the institutions of the enemy.

"Because this is the enemy we're talking about. It is becoming ever clearer that the main thrust of the financial institutions and multinational corporations is to compete with – and out-compete – the poor for limited resources. What that means is that if you are working for a merchant bank, or a major pharmaceutical corporation, you are involved in a trade which is effectively shifting resources that are used as necessities by the poor into the hands of the rich, where they are used as luxuries."

Yet Monbiot is only too aware of the temptations faced by those with 'the world at their feet': "We are fighting our own innate tendencies. There is no point at which people can be satisfied: look at someone like Rupert Murdoch – he is worth billions and yet he spends his entire life trying to make yet more money. It is a form of mental illness, and yet it is an incredibly powerful factor in human relations."

With regard to his writing, Monbiot is grateful for the free rein he enjoys: "*The Guardian*, unlike certain other newspapers, gives its columnists more or less total freedom. Occasionally they will call up and say 'Have your checked this?' or 'Have you considered such and such?' but it is always constructive. It is not 'You can't possibly print this in our newspaper' and they will always give me the option to keep it how I wrote it if I want. So I feel very fortunate. It is a rare historical anomaly to have a publication which grants you such freedom. Indeed, I wouldn't work for them if it didn't. I would be virtually unemployable if it wasn't for *The Guardian*. I don't know who would take me.

the Green Party is…closer to a just set of policies

At a time when, more so than for generations, the future of British politics seems genuinely 'in the air', the columnist is confident that the way forward does not lie with today's mainstream parties. "The Labour Party and the Lib Dems are both completely captured by corporate interests. They simply do not represent the common man. Personally, I vote Green. Whilst I don't agree with everything that they stand for, the Green Party is a lot closer to a just set of policies than the other parties in Britain at the moment. I was briefly involved with the Respect coalition, but I got out for a couple of reasons. First, because they failed to strike an electoral accord with the Green Party, and second because I mistrust George Galloway. The problem with Galloway is that he became the de facto figurehead without sufficient consultation. I was involved with Respect before he was, and I thought it had lot of hope, but he is just not the right man for it."

Forces reckoned

Liberal Democrat

SIMON HUGHES believes his party is well on the way to overtaking the Conservatives

THE PURPOSE of political parties is clearly to be in government, not in opposition. When the Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988, that was our purpose too. Of course, as a Liberal Democrat I will seek to put the best interpretation on our progress since then. But let us start with unarguable fact. Since 1988, we have had three general elections – I shall return to these sources of 'outcome evidence' in a moment. The input evidence – party membership, mentions and money – is important, but not determinative. And influence and input in the process of deciding the law and policy of the land is more complicated to determine. (In a typically British and incongruous way, one of the areas of growing Lib Dem influence recently has been in the House of Lords.)

So back to the general elections. The crude facts are these: Liberal Democrat seats have gone from 22 at the time of the party's creation to 20 in 1992, 46 in 1997, 52 in 2001, and 55 now; Conservative seats have moved from 376 in 1987 to 336 in 1992, 165 in 1997, 166 in 2001 and, with Robert Jackson's defection as I write, back to 165 now. Approximate votes cast were: six million Lib Dem and 14 million Conservative in '92; 5.25m Lib Dem and 9.5m Conservative in '97; and 4.75m Lib Dem and 8.25m Conservative in 2001. Lastly, shares of the vote were: Lib Dem 18.3 per cent in '92, 16.8 per cent in '97 and 18.3 per cent in 2001, and Conservative 42.8 per cent in '92, 30.7 per cent in '97 and 31.7 per cent in 2001.

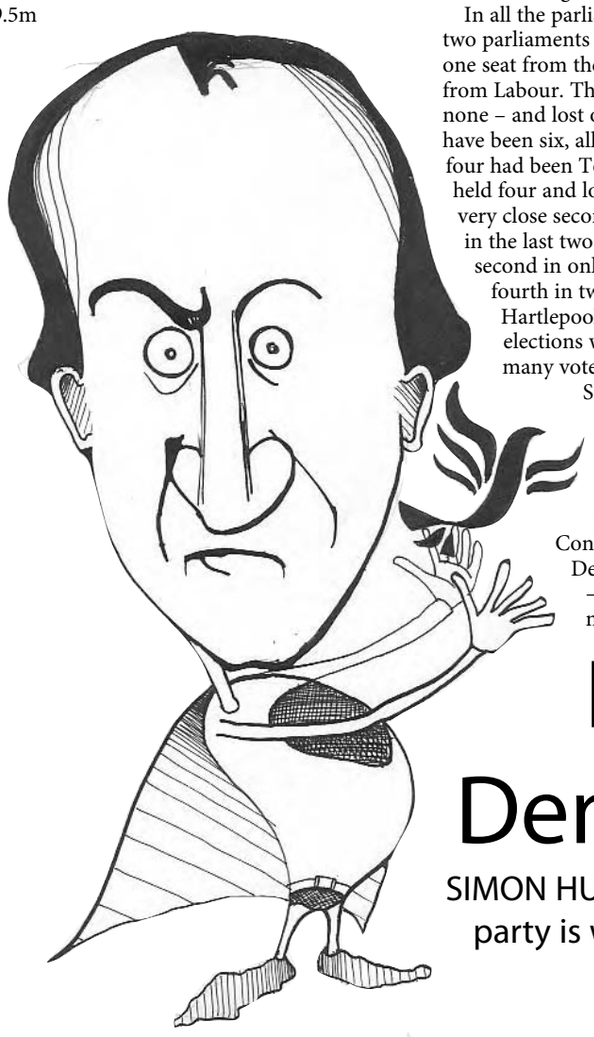
Now back to the direct question. The bald figures above show that Liberal Democrats have grown exactly two-and-a-half times in seats since our creation. Conservatives now have only just over two-fifths of the seats they had in 1987, and twice in a row had their worst result since the middle of the 19th century. The Conservatives were eight million votes ahead of the Lib Dems in 1992, and only 3.5m in 2001. Lastly, the Tories had a 24.5 per cent lead over the Lib Dems in share of the vote in '92, and only 13.4 per cent in 2001. Even the sceptic, the pessimist and the conservative would be forced to admit that we are closing the gap!

In all the parliamentary by-elections in the two parliaments since 1997, we have won one seat from the Conservatives and one from Labour. The Conservatives have won none – and lost one to us. Since 2001, there have been six, all in Labour seats, of which four had been Tory in recent history. Labour held four and lost two to us. We came a very close second in a further two and third in the last two. The Conservatives came second in only one, third in three and fourth in two (Ogmore and Hartlepool). And across the six elections we polled nearly twice as many votes as the Tories.

So there you are. Them's the facts. Unexpurgated! There is even more good news for the Liberal Democrats. In many of the remaining parliamentary seats that the Conservatives hold, Liberal Democrats are in second place – and in many of these, the number of Labour voters last time was greater then the gap needed for us to beat the Conservatives. Under the first past the post system, more and more people are accepting the need to vote tactically. Moreover, the polls show only about one in ten voters thinks the Conservatives can win the next election. Liberal Democrats are consistently now over 20 per cent in the opinion polls (better than at any comparable time since we were formed) and traditionally rise more than the other parties during the election campaign. In recent memory the great British public has tried and rejected the Conservatives and might want to go somewhere else before looking to them again. And if they accept that it is us who have been the distinctive, effective and real opposition in the last parliament – on Iraq, ID cards, tuition fees or fairer local or national taxation – then we can potentially win the case to be allowed to be the official opposition too. And we are united, don't have to keep changing our leader, and have not seen a huge haemorrhage of our membership over the last 16 years. With young people and Muslims we are now the party of choice. More *Daily Mail* readers like us. Civil servants brief us. And the media increasingly rate us.

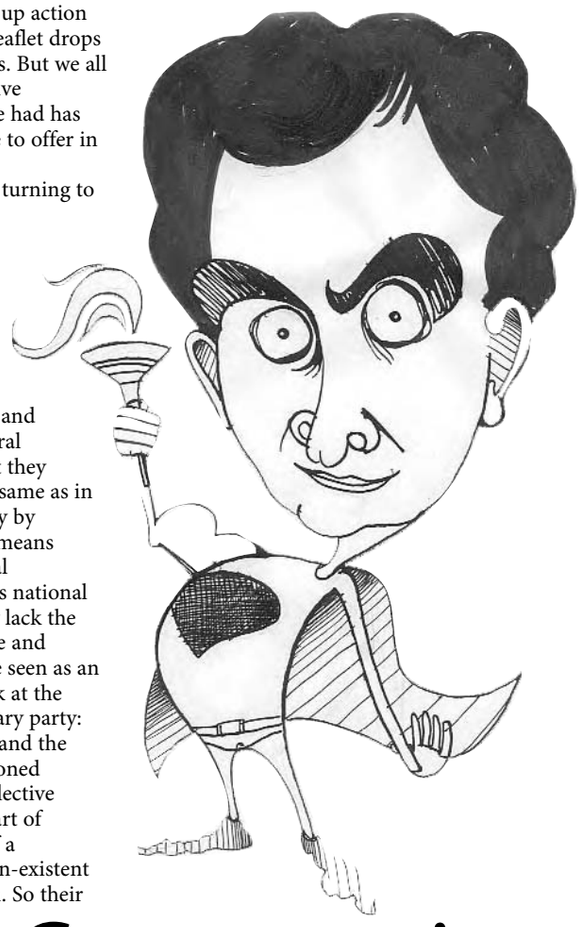
There is nothing that says we in Britain, or even England, must have a wholly or mainly two-party system. Or that the Conservatives must be one of the two main parties. Few other countries – besides the USA – have had such unchanging two-party politics. Voters are less tied by family and tradition and are more independent and volatile. And Britain is becoming a more liberal society. I hope and sense that just as liberal democracy is on the march around the world, now is the time for us to be on the march here too. Not just in Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. But in places as different as Chesterfield and Guildford. When Southport, Winchester, Harrogate and Bath can be won from the Conservatives by Lib Dems, so can the rest of traditional Tory territory. And if we want to be in government, and soon, then we need to supplant the Tories – even sooner. We're on the case, and on the march! And all new friends and supporters are welcome.

Simon Hughes MP is President of the Liberal Democrat Party



[Illustrations Nick Hayes]

to be with?



Conservative

GEORGE OSBORNE, though, thinks we've been here before

EVER SINCE DAVID Steel urged his party to "go back to your constituencies and prepare for government", Liberal party leaders have been desperately trying to establish themselves as heads of government in waiting. So they produce turgid manifestos, unveil spurious shadow budgets, and now style their front-bench spokesman as 'Shadow Ministers'. None of it has worked.

For the reality is that today's Liberal Democrats remain firmly the third party of British politics. Any serious analysis of the recent electoral performance of the parties swiftly punctures their inflated claims to be replacing the Conservatives as the "effective opposition". In the European Elections on June 10 2004, they came fourth across the UK, and fifth in Wales, with a total of twelve MEPs; the Conservatives have 27. At Westminster the Conservatives, even after the poor 2001 election result, still have three times as many MPs. In local government, which is supposed to be the territory where Liberal Democrats do best, they control just 30 councils; the Conservatives control 152. As for the great momentum the party likes to boast under Charles Kennedy, it now has 4,695 councillors – fewer than the 5,078 under Paddy Ashdown in 1996. Across the country there are 51 councils – urban and rural in both north and south – which have no Liberal Democrat representation whatsoever.

These facts give the lie to the much trumpeted Liberal claims that they are on the way to being the official party of opposition. The question people should be asking is not "Why are the Liberals doing well?" but rather "Why haven't the Liberal Democrats done a lot better?" After all, they have carefully positioned themselves to attack the Government from the left and pick up on anti-Iraq war feeling. If they aren't going to make their breakthrough in this Parliament, with the opportunities they have had, when are they ever going to do so?

The answer is: never. Let me give you three reasons why.

First, the Liberal Democrats can no longer count on the one notable advantage in campaigning which they used to enjoy over the other two main parties. In the 1990s, there is no doubt that the Liberals made progress by developing an effective style of 'pavement politics', involving things like organising petitions, stirring up action groups and making regular leaflet drops about local community issues. But we all do this now, so the competitive advantage the Lib Dems once had has gone. They have nothing else to offer in its place.

That is because, turning to the second reason why they haven't done better, the Liberal Democrats are essentially a ramshackle coalition of shifting local interest groups and populists. They have no central identity or core beliefs. What they say in one place is rarely the same as in another. They are united only by electoral opportunism. This means they can be effective as a local campaigning force, but not as national party aspiring to office. They lack the consistency, national purpose and therefore the credibility to be seen as an alternative government. Look at the make-up of their parliamentary party: one half resemble Tory wets and the other half look like old-fashioned socialists. The concept of collective responsibility, an essential part of establishing the credibility of a government in waiting, is non-existent on their so-called frontbench. So their Treasury spokesman openly favours replacing the entire NHS with a social insurance health system, while their Health spokesman openly opposes any reform at all to the existing structure of the NHS.

The third reason why the Liberals have not made the political breakthrough they yearn for, is that they cannot make the transition from being a party of protest to a party of power. You can see that in local government. They are much better at winning councils than they are at holding on to them. They cannot make the transition from seeking power to holding it. In last year's local elections the Liberal Democrats lost four of the eleven councils they controlled. They even admit this problem to themselves. In the ironically-named *Who's Who in the Liberal Democrats* this year, they say: "One significant disappointment in recent times has been our record in defending councils where we form the administration. After the elections in 2000 we had 27 majority councils… But of the 27 four years ago, there are just twelve where we still have a majority after these [most recent] elections".

In other words, they can be an effective force of protest but are ineffective when it comes to the key test – undertaking the responsibility that goes with power. This can be seen in the way they conduct themselves as an opposition force in Parliament. For example, they campaign to scrap tuition fees but they won't say where they would find the money to pay for it. Their Party Leader says "central government could achieve a great deal more by doing a great deal less", but almost every policy he proposes would expand the role of government and increase taxes.

So there is simply no convincing evidence that the Liberal Democrats are on the verge of a breakthrough. They continue to attract a fifth of the vote in most polls, up just a couple of points on average from a few years ago, and continue to lose councils/seats to Conservatives. Their record in the recent European elections and in local elections shows that they are not about to scale the ramparts of power. So when Mr Kennedy tells his troops this time to go back to their constituencies to prepare for government, we can all be forgiven for taking it with a pinch of salt.

George Osborne MP is Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

an Outside

It did not take long for the UK Independence Party's glee at landing twelve seats in last year's European elections to turn sour. Robert Kilroy-Silk, the sensitive chat-show host turned Europhobic vote-winner, transpired in October to be not quite the unambiguous asset he had first seemed to UKIP, announcing his leadership desires to a reluctant party hierarchy. These ambitions thwarted for the time being, Kilroy-Silk has resigned the UKIP whip in Brussels in protest (though remains a party member), and the on-going crisis seems to have lessened the likelihood of the party actually winning seats at the next General Election. Nonetheless, its ability to eat into otherwise Conservative constituencies renders it a potentially crucial factor in 'swing' areas. Set up in 1993, in protest at the Maastricht Treaty, UKIP spent its early years in the shadow of Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party. Yet the collapse of that vehicle after the 1997 election, along with the prevalence of Euroscepticism in Britain, enabled it to make a first breakthrough at the 1999 European elections, returning three MEPs that year. The party counts Geoffrey Boycott and Jonathan Aitken amongst its (distinguished) supporters.

ROGER KNAPMAN, Leader of the UK Independence Party, explains his party's policies and asks 'Why vote UKIP?'

UKIP PROPOSES TO govern in the people's name and in the popular cause. For, so long as our every law must conform to the edicts of the EU (and over 70 per cent of British legislation is now one-size-fits-all ordinance, initiated in and imposed in Brussels, only to be rubber-stamped in Westminster), no other party can truthfully make that claim.

Self-determination is, for us, an unwavering principle. It is wholly inconsistent to go dewy-eyed over the plight of the Tibetans and to maintain that they should have freedom to govern themselves whilst lending support to the undemocratic rule of Britain by the EU. We support the cause of a free Tibetan people just as we support that of the British.

A vote for UKIP is a vote for self-determination...for us it is an unwavering principle

All votes for other parties are therefore wasted votes – a minor shuffling of the deckchairs on the grand but doomed ship State over whose course the crew have no control. A vote for UKIP is a vote for self-determination. We may not attain government this time round, but every vote cast, every seat won, tells the soi-disant political elite, "Enough! You owe your job and your status to us. You will now do our bidding."

Many fought and died for the freedom of the British people to govern themselves. The EU reintroduces a democratically unanswerable, absolute monarchy. The Commission is unelected and cannot be removed. The Parliament operates behind closed doors, its members sometimes thousands of miles from their constituents and all but unknown to them, allowed to debate only legislation implemented by the Commission, in speeches kept to a strict maximum of 90 seconds duration.

It is paradoxical if unsurprising that, as communications have become more and more rapid and the people better informed, their rulers have retired deeper and deeper into their Brussels keep.

Just so did the 19th century Tories respond to the advent of the railways and the mail-coaches, whilst logic – and the rather more robust people of the day – clamoured for reform and the broadening of the base of democracy. Back then, revolution was averted only thanks to the resolve and foresight of a small group of people concerned at once to preserve our institutions and to innovate. Those men had faith in the people to govern themselves. We share that faith.

Independent Working Class Association

SOMEWHAT SURPRISINGLY, for a party whose expressed aim is to achieve "working class rule in working class areas", the IWCA is keen to stress that it is not socialist in outlook, and rejects trade unionism. Instead, the movement which was founded in 1995 "in anticipation of the anti-working class nature of any future Labour administration", places much weight on finding original solutions to individual problems faced by particular working class areas – with drug abuse and crime often its top priorities. It advocates community initiatives ahead of perceived 'one-size-fits-all' Whitehall approaches to these issues, and claims to target itself towards social campaigns rather than electoral politics.

Whilst still very much on the fringes of the UK political scene, the IWCA has had some success in local government elections – not least in Oxford, where the party's leader Stuart Croft become its first elected representative in May 2002. It now holds three seats on Oxford City Council.

Chance?

COUNCILLOR MATT SELLWOOD is Deputy Leader of the Oxford City Council Green Group, a member of the Green Party Regional Council, and an undergraduate at New College, Oxford

WITH TWO MEPs, seven MSPs, and the most Principal Authority councillors of any non-mainstream English party (62), the Greens should be well placed for an excellent performance in this year's General Election. Unfortunately, however, the first-past-the-post system affects us as much as any other small party, and while we are predicting our best ever performance, it is unlikely to be good enough to gain us any MPs at Westminster. Even in places like Oxford, where we regularly achieve 20 per cent of the city-wide vote in European and local elections, it is unlikely that we will do anything other than save our deposits and build awareness of Green ideas for other, winnable elections. It is a sad indictment of the current system of election to Westminster (and perhaps a contributory factor to the turnout of this election probably being the worst since the introduction of universal suffrage) that a party which garnered over a million votes in the European elections of 2004 will end up with no representation in Parliament.

There are bright spots, however – our overall share of the vote has been consistently increasing even in first-past-the-post elections, and we are confident of exceeding the number of deposits that we saved in 2001 (our most successful General Election campaign to date). We also have a number of targeted seats, in which we are hopeful of overtaking one or both of the main opposition parties. One such seat is Brighton Pavillion, in which the party's Male Principal Speaker, Cllr Keith Taylor, will be standing. He gained 10 per cent of the General Election vote in 2001, and in the European elections the Greens beat Labour across the city of Brighton. There is a strong possibility of securing second place for Cllr Taylor this time round – in which case, roll on 2009! It might even be possible for us to take the seat this year, if we weren't hamstrung by the other great bugbear of progressive political parties – lack of funding. Our stance on social justice and sustainability means that large donors are hard to come by – we were outspent by a factor of at least six by UKIP in the European elections. We are determined to stick to our principles and not to be bought by wealthy donors or corporations – but this, inevitably makes victory even harder to achieve!

Of course, no summary of the Green Party's election chances published in Oxford could be complete without noting the terrible loss left by the death of Dr Mike Woodin, our Principal Speaker, Leader of the Oxford Green Group, and electoral strategist extraordinaire. We hope that in 2005 we will be able to build on the marvellous foundation of his achievements in the General Election of 2001.

A solid fixture on ballot papers for some two decades now, the Green Party is still to better its performance in the 1989 European election, when it polled nearly 15 per cent of the vote (beating Paddy Ashdown's Liberal Democrats by some nine points). Indeed, the 2001 General Election witnessed 135 of the party's 145 candidates losing their deposits. Nonetheless, the Greens' presence in Oxford is notably strong, with seven seats on the City Council – making this the closest the party comes to an electoral 'heartland'.

Beyond the obvious environmental slant, Green policies comprise an eclectic blend of humanitarian liberalism and a traditional community focus. In London, for instance, the party was the first to advocate a Partnership Register for same-sex couples, whilst simultaneously calling for every Londoner to have a Post Office within easy walking distance.

Liberal Party

WHEN THE BULK of the Liberal Party merged with the SDP in 1988 – forming the Liberal Democrats – a rump of disaffected members refused to accept the new hybrid, believing it would sacrifice liberal ideals for Social Democracy in the event of any clash. Almost 17 years later, the 'true' Liberal Party wheezes on, with a handful of local council seats in Liverpool, Gateshead and Hull its proudest boast. Led by Steve Radford – one of those Liverpool councillors – the party marries traditional, Asquithian liberalism with a strong environmentalist edge (it would commit explicitly to restoring the ozone layer, if in power). The Liberals aspire towards "a world in which all peoples live together in peace under an effective World Authority", but oppose the Euro.

British National Party

THE BRITISH NATIONAL Party rarely misses an opportunity to stress that it is not a racist organisation – though it was hardly hanging its head in shame last December, when leader Nick Griffin was charged by the police with incitement to racial hatred. Established in 1982, as a merger between John Tydall's National Front and a number of smaller 'nationalist' parties, the BNP's support has ebbed and flowed over the years, though rarely exceeds single percentage figures in any given constituency. However, some commentators expressed concern that the movement's popularity was on the rise, after it won three local council seats, in Burnley. Yet the party's fortunes presently seem to be on the wane. It failed to attract sufficient votes to send an MEP to Brussels last year, whilst a BBC documentary shown over the summer did much damage to attempts to shake off its racist image.

RESPECT tell THE OXFORD FORUM about their hopes for the general election

THE FIRST PAST the post system in parliamentary elections does make it more difficult for small parties to get elected and then establish that they are a credible electoral alternative. However it is not insuperable. Where disillusion with all the established major parties is great and there is a small party which many voters think can be elected breakthroughs can occur. We had our first Respect councillor elected just six months after coming into existence.

Credibility can also come from winning to Respect MPs and councillors originally elected by standing for another party. Both the personal vote that an incumbent candidate can build up and the profile an MP or a councillor can establish can go a long way to establishing the high threshold of support required to get elected or re-elected.

Nonetheless Proportional Representation does make it easier for small parties to flourish. Forms of PR now exist in a number of elections across Britain, for example in elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly and to the European Parliament. These forms of PR remain weighted in favour of the established parties, but if a breakthrough can be made on the lower threshold required, again this can be a launch pad to establish wider credibility. We favour a change to a fair form of PR for all elections so that electors are more accurately represented in the democratic process and we would expect to grow very rapidly in such circumstances.

Small parties like Respect have to plan their campaigns for growth very carefully and we intend to continue to do this over the next few years. We will target a small number of carefully selected constituencies in the coming General Election in order to maximize the impact of the human and financial resources available to us at the moment. We hope in particular to make a unique parliamentary breakthrough in East London where we topped the poll in the European elections. We will then target a significant number of council seats in future local elections where we intend to build on our success in winning council seats and winning councillors disillusioned particularly with New Labour to join a principled alternative in the form of Respect.

Success however will not only depend on our electoral tactics and a possible change to PR, but on the growing disillusionment with the established parties over issues such as the war on Iraq and the disastrous occupation, the erosion and privatization of the health service and many other issues. We are confident the circumstances which saw the lowest ever poll at the last general election since the universal franchise was established are not going to go away. On the contrary we think they are going to get worse and this gives us confidence that Respect will continue its rapid growth.

Established in the wake of George Galloway's expulsion from the Labour Party (after describing Tony Blair and George Bush as descending "like wolves" upon Iraq), Respect is unashamedly socialist in outlook – with a manifesto that includes the renationalisation of Britain's railways and an increase in the minimum wage to £7.40 per hour. The party's initial momentum – helped along in no small part by Galloway's maverick persona – was checked somewhat by a disappointing European election performance in 2004, but it has since secured a local council seat in Tower Hamlets, London, and Galloway himself stands a decent chance of stealing pro-war Labour MP Oona King's Bethnal Green constituency at the coming General Election. Yet Respect has faced opposition from some of a more liberal leftist outlook – not least columnist Nick Cohen, who recently dubbed it "a party of the right, not the left".

Peace and Progress

CORIN REDGRAVE, actor, human rights campaigner and founding member of P&P talks about the party's goals

AS A PARTY committed to change in the UK's foreign policy approach, Peace and Progress has a vast pool of potential support upon which to draw. Two million people marched against the war on Iraq, so – assuming that figure represented between a quarter and a sixth of all those who were opposed – our constituency numbers from eight to twelve million people. Our core constituency matches the core components of that February 2003 march – i.e. Amnesty, Medical Foundation, CND, Church groups, university and sixth form students, teachers, artists, performers, writers, and members of the public services. (UNISON, both nationally and locally, are strong supporters of our sister campaign, the Guantanamo Human Rights Commission.) We have members in every region of England, and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our members are of all ages.

Since the party will only have been in existence for six months or so, we shall have a hard fight to get elected. But we shall fight hard. And this election will be exceptional for the numbers of voters who are utterly disgusted with the government, but reluctant to register their disgust by voting Tory or Lib Dem, so we can expect surprises.

Some have argued that opponents of the war will face too much choice at the coming election. Yet we have close relations with the Green Party, and good relations with Respect and the Lib Dems. Moreover, these parties' policies and ours overlap only to a degree. For instance all were against the war, but the Lib Dems support (critically) the occupation. Only the Greens and P&P campaign for disarmament and banning the arms trade. Peace and Progress alone bases itself on the language and agenda of the 21st century.

In the next general election P&P will stand Guantanamo detainees as candidates. In their constituencies we will ask all other parties' candidates to stand down in their favour, so that they may be returned unopposed, as a symbol and pledge that never again will Parliament allow our citizens to be detained without trial, and as a guarantee that never again will Parliament pass laws to imprison anyone, British or foreign, without the right of habeas corpus and a fair trial. Our aim is to put human rights at the centre of the political agenda. We shall speak for all who want a country where justice in law, social justice, and human rights are paramount: a country of peace and progress.

Just as the Green Party defines itself by its environmental stance, so the Peace and Progress Party – formed in November 2004 – campaigns predominately on the single issue of human rights. Chiefly a reaction against the current direction of US foreign policy, the party counts amongst its founder members the actors Vanessa and Corin Redgrave, along with Amzat Begg – father of British Guantanamo Bay prisoner Moazzam.

Beyond its foreign policy proposals (which, predictably, include the complete withdrawal of UK forces from Iraq), P&P wishes to see the repeal of much UK anti-asylum legislation, and would close down detention centres were it ever to taste power. Yet its hunger in this regard is perhaps questionable: Vanessa Redgrave has gone on record claiming "We wouldn't want to rob the Liberal Democrats of the chance to oust Labour."

Lost Voters

DAVID BUTLER advises wavering voters on where to place their votes in the next General Election

IN A BRITISH GENERAL Election every voter is wasting his time. Since 1910 no MP has been elected with a majority of only one vote even though there have been over 20,000 constituency battles in those 94 years. So the likelihood of any single citizen affecting the outcome is utterly negligible, certainly insufficient to justify the cost in terms of the time and trouble of going to the polling station, let alone of agonising over which way to vote.

Yet the great majority of us still do vote. Even in the record low turnout of 2001 almost 60 per cent of the nominal electorate cast a ballot and, granted the state of the register, that meant that at least 70 per cent of those who could have voted actually went to the polling station.

Why did so many bother? There are several overlapping explanations. Some vote from force of habit, some from an ingrained sense of civic duty, and some from an illusion, fostered by the parties, that the cross on their ballot might really make the difference. A great many are impelled by a desire for self-expression: they take the opportunity to record a view on how the country should be run. In 2001 they found satisfaction in being part either of the eleven million who wanted the government to stay in office or of the fifteen million who didn't. There is a fundamental appeal about the American bumper-sticker 'Don't blame me. I didn't vote for them?

So, in 2005, how should the wavering citizens behave?

First, let us hope they will actually vote. By doing so they will, if only in the most minimal way, reduce the national shame of falling turnout.

Second, let us hope that, if they have any deep ideological or hereditary commitment to one of the major parties, they will continue to express it. 'It is what Dad or Mum would have liked me to do'. Why not be loyal to a family tradition, an ancestral conviction of which party is best for the country we live in? Moreover these traditional loyalists give stability to the system. If all voters behaved like open-minded jurymen election would show wilder swings; ill-performing parties in government or opposition are guaranteed against annihilation by the faithfulness of their habitual supporters.

Third, if their natural party has small hope of winning in their constituency, they should consider voting tactically, in order to defeat whichever of the two main local contenders they most disapprove. More satisfaction may be gained by helping the lesser of two evils to win than by recording support for a virtuous no-hoper. Politics is about power and, in a hung parliament, a change of one in the party balance could be crucial to how the country is governed.

Some vote from force of habit, some from an ingrained sense of civic duty, some from an illusion... that the cross on their ballot papers might actually make a difference

Fourth, anyone who has developed views about the conduct or the policy positions of their MP or of his principle opponent can use his vote as a personal rebuke. MPs, even if safely re-elected, can be very conscious of the swing against them, comparing it to what has happened to their colleagues.

Fifth, if they are unconstrained by past loyalties, or tactical possibilities, or if they feel disillusioned with the party they might be expected to support, they should consider an expressive statement. The real choice of government may lie between Labour and Conservative. But if you can't stand either of them, say which of the alternatives best reflects your priorities. It may be true that in much of the country the Liberal Democrats are far from any possibility of victory while, almost everywhere, the Greens, UKIP, the BNP and Respect haven't a hope. But whatever support each of these party secures, they will brandish it as a propaganda weapon in the years to come. If you really want to nail your ego to the banner of opposition to the Iraq War you should vote Liberal Democrat – or, if you feel spiritually on the left, vote Respect. If you are seriously opposed to Britain's involvement with Europe you should vote UKIP. If you have nightmares about immigration you should perhaps vote UKIP or even, God help you, BNP. And, if for you the environment is the most central issue, you should make a statement by voting Green.

All politics involves compromise between idealism and practicality. It is hard work being a conscientious participant in democracy. The first-past-the-post voting system inflicts on you a brutal choice. Ancestry or ideology may offer you a simple answer. But if it doesn't, you have some hard thinking ahead for, despite the odds against one voter's cross on a ballot-paper making a difference, it surely is poor-spirited to opt out of sharing in the national decision.

David Butler is a Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford and has written the guide* The British General Election of… *for every General Election since 1951

Why the Tories fail to grasp the right values

MELANIE PHILLIPS makes a case for the importance of moral politics

ONE OF THE remarkable features of the age is that, as the Prime Minister becomes ever more unpopular and his government ever more distrusted and disliked, the Conservative opposition seems quite unable to persuade voters to support it instead. The prevailing view among Tory MPs is that the party is failing to connect with the voters because it has still not changed in the way society itself has changed. So it tries to persuade people that it is as committed to diversity, social inclusion and lifestyle equivalence as the Labour party. But why should anyone vote for the monkey when they can elect the organ-grinder?

The Tories' problem is that they no longer know what they stand for that is distinctive. And the reason for that is that they are paralysed by Tony Blair, who they think has parked his tanks on their lawn. They have failed to grasp two fundamental points. The first is that despite Labour's hard-line rhetoric on subjects like law and order and its flirtation with the market in public services, its values are firmly on the post-modern, post moral left. In other words, Labour's tanks are not parked on their lawn; they are pointing instead at the very values Conservatives are expected to defend.

The second point is that, as a consummate politician, Tony Blair understands that Middle Britain is looking to politicians to give them security and stability — in other words, conservative values. There are millions of voters who feel that the values to which they subscribe, upholding morality and order and attachments to the nation and its identity and traditions, are being systematically destroyed.

Tony Blair has sensed this. Unlike the Tories, who maintain that the victory of George W Bush can teach them nothing, Mr Blair seems to have understood that 'It's the values, stupid' may well apply to the British election, too. So while the Tories are trying to pretend they are not-conservative, the Prime Minister is busy sending out signals that he is. Ironic — but then what divides people these days makes nonsense of those old political boundaries. For we are in the grip of a culture war, being waged by a left-dominated intelligentsia against the bedrock values of the country.

This war has managed to shift the centre of political gravity so that anyone who does not share these approved values is defined as extreme. Look at the reaction to the appointment of Ruth Kelly as Education Secretary. Ms Kelly, a devout Roman Catholic has the Wrong Views about issues such as abortion, euthanasia and stem-cell research (she's against) as well as the Wrong Views about traditional family life and marriage (she's in favour). As Education Secretary, she is now in charge of the Government's teenage pregnancy strategy

[Illustration Nick Hayes]

and its policy on sex education. Both feminists and the Frankenstein-industrial complex that regards human life as merely a warehouse of useful body parts are therefore extremely alarmed. More striking is their assumption that their view is axiomatically the neutral centre-ground, and that Ms Kelly's views are personal, idiosyncratic and extreme and therefore an imposition on the public sphere – simply because she is religious, and her views do not accord with the secular humanism that drives both the left and science-worshipping public policy.

For these views can brook no opposition whatsoever. The left believes that its secular, materialistic, individualistic and utilitarian values represent not a point of view but virtue itself. To be right-wing is therefore not just an opposing philosophy; it is beyond the moral pale.

This is, of course, deeply illiberal. But then the left has hijacked the word liberal and, cloaking itself in it, has transformed it into its opposite. It redefined the liberty at the heart of liberalism as licence – thus destroying the moral rules which make freedom a virtue. And then onto licence it spliced the socialist doctrine of state-enforced equality. The result is a toxic combination of egalitarianism and permissiveness: a marriage between the old left and the new nihilism.

This is deeply hostile to both the Jewish and Christian moral codes which underpin western culture and the liberalism that sprang from them. For these were all moral projects based on differentiating between right and wrong.

But our worship of individual rights and self-realisation led to the post-modern deconstruction of objective reality and the concept of truth. In their place came moral and cultural relativism, under which everything became a matter of subjective opinion, morality was privatised and duty and responsibility turned into an affront to individual choice and the sacred right to self-fulfilment.

On the great battleground issues of family, education and social order, the networks of formal and informal legal and social sanctions that restrain behaviour in the interests of others have thus been progressively dismantled. They have been supplanted by a culture of 'rights', in which groups designating themselves as marginalised or oppressed by the majority demand equal status and the end of moral 'judgmentalism'.

And what started out as an eminently decent impulse for tolerance has turned into something quite different. Because there is now an absolute taboo against hurting people's feelings, the very idea of normal behaviour has had to be abolished so that no-one would feel abnormal.

So behaviour such as sexual promiscuity or fatherless children became regarded as normal. On the other hand, those who advocate mainstream values such as fidelity, chastity or duty are accused of bigotry because it makes people who do not uphold these values feel bad about themselves – the ultimate sin.

As the props of marriage have been kicked away, it has become progressively emptied of meaning and families break up ever more frequently. Meanwhile, anti-social, harmful or illegal behaviour such as drug-taking or under-age sex is either tolerated or even promoted. And the education system has been progressively emptied of knowledge, with an explicit animosity towards teaching British political history and transmitting the values of the nation.

So what's been the result? The creation of social and moral deserts in communities where there are no committed fathers, relationships are transient and children's lives are devastated. Increasingly unstable cohabitations, with corresponding rises in domestic violence and mental and physical fragility. A rising tide of child distress, ranging from depression to suicide, under-achievement and anti-social behaviour.

There are millions of voters who feel that the values to which they subscribe are being destroyed

In the school curriculum, knowledge and objectivity have been replaced by subjective opinion and feelings; overcoming obstacles and coping with setbacks or failure have been all but written out of the script; and what children are taught has to be 'relevant' to what they already know, instead of introducing them to experiences beyond their own lives. So our education system has become the motor of the 'me' society, which appears hell-bent on committing social and cultural suicide.

Despite this fundamental onslaught upon our liberal traditions, none of this is being questioned. This is mainly because in Britain there is no equivalent to the American neo-conservative phenomenon. In America in the 1970s and 80s, the neo-cons decided to challenge this collapse of morality and social order among those who called themselves liberals.

The neo-cons are wrongly held to sit on the furthest extreme of the political right in America. This is a bad mis-reading. Most of them are disaffected former liberals – in the famous quip, liberals who were 'mugged by reality' – and registered Democrats; indeed, their founding father, Irving Kristol, is an ex-Trotskyite. Their campaign was prompted by two major factors: their horror at the social and moral wasteland they thought had been created by Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' welfare programmes, and Democratic senator 'Scoop' Jackson's hardline approach to the Soviet Union.

In alliance with what is called the Christian right, which surged in popularity in recent years simply because mainstream Americans recoiled from the mass fatherlessness, murder epidemic and collapse in educational standards they saw all around them, the neo-cons effectively reinvented progressive politics. Taking on reactionary Republicans, they gave the Republican party an agenda for social justice and, because of the success they had in areas such as crime or welfare, also managed to drag the Democrats behind them.

Their programme was simply an attempt to rediscover civic virtue through moral responses at home and abroad. And it achieved significant success. Welfare reform, abstinence education and the promotion of committed fatherhood all reduced the rate of teenage pregnancy and stabilised the rate of babies born out of wedlock.

They also realised that the real cause of spiralling crime lay in the prevailing zeitgeist that there were no absolute values or principles and that everyone could choose how to behave. They countered this by the 'broken windows' theory of law and order, by which small scale disorders – such as abandoned cars, graffiti, begging, urination in the street and the eponymous broken windows themselves – were all ruthlessly addressed, which reclaimed the streets and transformed the climate so that large-scale crime was at last effectively tamed.

So why has this influential way of thinking not crossed the Atlantic? Why have the Tories not had their own neo-con epiphany?

Unlike in America, conservatism and religion have parted company in Britain. While Republican middle America is staunchly Christian and the churches are vigorous in their promotion of conservative values, the Church of England is the Guardian at prayer. Its response to a culture which worships at the shrine of instant gratification is itself to genuflect before it – and then wonder why its pews are empty.

As for the Tories, they are divided between social and cultural conservatives on the one hand and wannabe nihilists on the other, both fighting for the soul of the party – and the wannabe nihilists are winning.

A forward-thinking world view is one that genuinely cares for the improvement of individual human beings. If we don't want a savage war of all against all, we have to encourage good behaviour and socially useful attachments and discourage the bad and socially harmful. In other words, moral distinctions are crucial. It is a lesson which British politicians have yet to learn.

Melanie Phillips is a columnist for the* Daily Mail *and author of several books

freedom of identity

SHAMI CHAKRABARTI explains the reasoning behind her opposition to the Government's ID card scheme

THE INFORMATION Commissioner Richard Thomas, described by some as Britain's information watchdog, has said of the Government's plans for identity cards: "My anxiety is that we do not sleepwalk into a surveillance society".

Liberty shares these concerns, and therefore we are opposed to the proposal to introduce a national identity card scheme. We believe it won't tackle terrorism, identity fraud or any of the high-profile problems it is purportedly designed to address.

We have looked at, and have serious doubts about, the security of a crucial part of this scheme; the national register which is a national central database. Successive British Governments do not have a good track record with large scale information technology projects. The recent updating of the NHS' IT system, for example, went five times over budget. ID cards are already going to cost you £85, with further charges every time you change details such as your address. The scheme is now calculated to carry a total cost of £9bn; given the habit of such schemes to run over budget, the final cost could be many times that. Liberty believes that this amount could be better utilised in pursuit of a safer society rather than being spent on ID cards.

Liberty's main concerns about this scheme are the risks to the rights of privacy and freedom from discrimination that we believe outweigh any benefits of centrally recording and sharing personal information. Liberty is not alone in its concerns about the scheme and the Identity Card Bill currently going through Parliament: only 31 per cent of the respondents to the Home Office consultation on ID cards responded positively about the idea.

Despite this opposition, only 93 MPs voted against the Bill on its second reading in the House of Commons. Unless this situation changes, Britain will for the first time in its history have a compulsory permanent identity card system.

If this happens, would Liberty's concerns be realised? In short, should anyone be worried? Britain is not a police state and those who are proposing the bill are clear that if you have nothing to hide you will have nothing to fear. In saying that we do have something to fear, we have to admit that we cannot look into the future and predict precisely how an ID card scheme will fare, but we can look at the experiences of other countries that have had them, and indeed look into our own past. Britain had a temporary ID cards scheme during the Second World War that was not abolished until 1951.

Finally, we can look at the experience of ID cards in Britain during the Second World War. Liberty accepts that in exceptional circumstances, such as a war, there is a case for taking exceptional measures like ID cards. Yet when MPs looked into the operation of the system in 1950 they discovered that the original three purposes of the cards (conscription, rationing and national security) had mushroomed to 39. The proposers of the current scheme have spent much time assuring us about what the cards will not be used for – however the experience with schemes such as this is clear; if you introduce it for one reason the Government will find plenty of other ways in which to use it. This was recognised in 1951 and the cards were abolished.

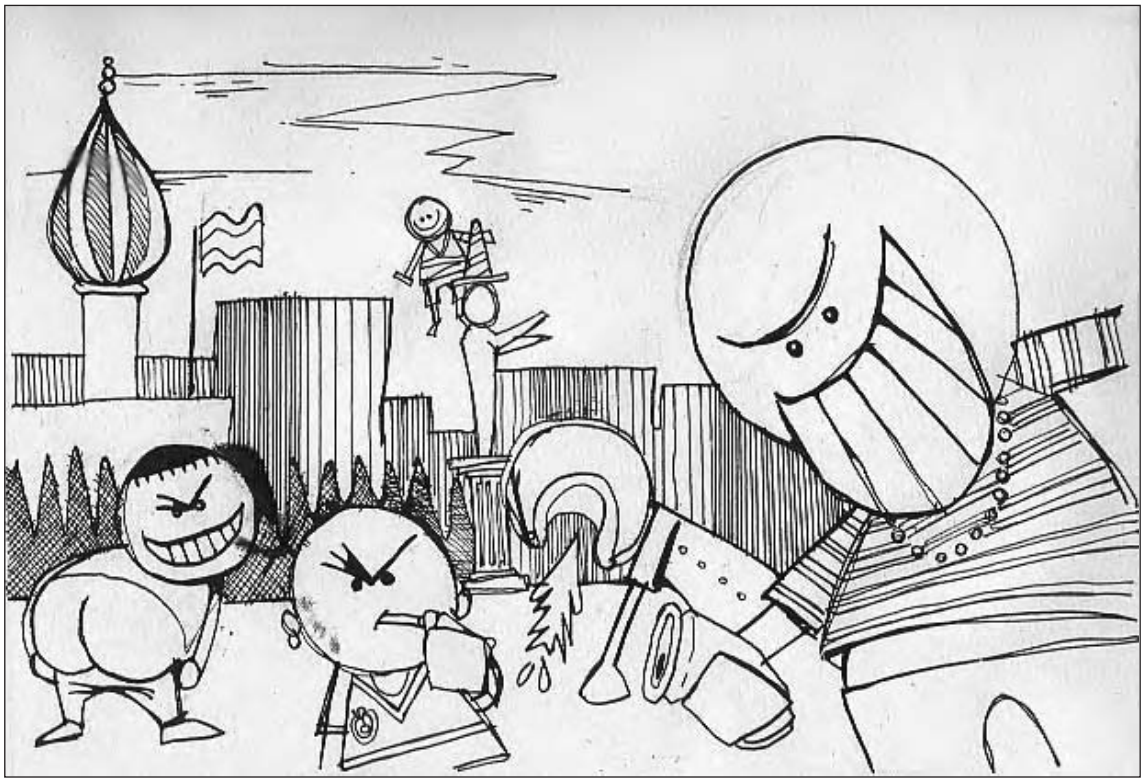
> ID cards…will result in the diminuation of…liberty… We have nothing to hide from this Government, but we may have much to fear

The proponents of ID cards tell us they will be useful in the fight against terrorism; yet the Spanish have a full identity card scheme that failed stop the atrocity of the Madrid bombings. The proponents of ID cards tell us that they will help fight crime and benefit fraud; yet the eleven European countries which have ID cards have very similar rates of crime and benefit fraud to the four who do not.

Most of all, the proponents of ID cards tell us that there will be no adverse impact on ethnic minorities and non-nationals. Unfortunately, the experience across Europe is that the colour of an individual's skin determines the card's impact – and that it is an adverse impact. In France, young Algerian men are overwhelmingly more likely to be stopped and asked for their ID card than others, despite the fact that the card is supposedly voluntary. In Germany, where the card is compulsory to carry at all times, Turkish Gasterbeiter report that the card is used to support discriminatory policing.

We cannot tell the future and it is easy to be alarmist about ID cards. But there are good reasons to be alarmed. They will result in the escalation of racial tensions and the diminution of privacy and liberty, with absolutely no commensurate gain in security. We have nothing to hide from this Government, but we may have much to fear. For these reasons Liberty will keep on campaigning against the current proposals for ID cards.

Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, will be speaking at an Oxford Union debate on ID cards this term. To find out more about Liberty's views on this and other subjects please visit **www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk**



Brits abroad: a less-than-pleasant symptom of a shrinking world

The death of distance

FRANCES CAIRNCROSS explores what the new economy does for the old

TO ANYONE under 18, it might seem odd that auctions on eBay, stag parties in Prague and call centres in Bangalore should all be signs of dramatic technological change. Yet all are products of the Internet revolution. With the collapse of the dotcom bubble, it seemed to many that the revolution was over. Wrong – as in previous moments of big technological change, most people overestimated the short-term effects and underestimated the long-term.

Lots of the effects will take time to show through, but will nonetheless be profound. Technological change has a bigger impact on the way companies do business, the way governments operate and how people lead their lives than any other force, economic or political.

So far, the most visible impacts have been on companies. That is not surprising: companies always tend to be early adopters of new technologies because they are striving for competitive advantage. But lots of the expensive electronic kit that companies bought five years ago turned out to be more or less useless. It has taken time for companies to begin to see what Internet technologies can do.

Take eBay, the most durably successful of all dotcom start-ups. What is most remarkable about the online auction giant is not that it is a valuable company but that it has emerged as a new distribution channel of lots of smaller companies, home businesses that can buy and sell their wares through its user-friendly portal. According to eBay between 130,000 and 150,000 people are such active traders on its auction site that they make their living from it. If all these people worked for eBay, it would be one of the 50 largest private employers in the United States.

Or take easyJet's cheap flights. Stelious Haji Iaonnou claims that the Internet is as important an innovation as the jet engine for

[Illustration Nick Hayes]

air travel. Certainly it has provided budget airlines not just with a cheap distribution channel, but with a new pricing model, in which prices adjust to reflect changing demand. It is a model that will one day doubtless be applied by theatres and concert halls to fill their seats. But again, there has been a further, unexpected effect. The budget airlines fly to lots of places that young Britons would barely have heard of a generation ago. Result: instead of running amok on Spanish beaches, the young can now invade the centres of some of Europe's more distant cities. But travelling to a city centre arguably teaches people a little more about culture – even if only beer-drinking habits – than travelling to an artificial seaside resort.

Or take, again, the Bangalore call centre. Suddenly, the pressures that have long applied to goods are hitting service industries. Companies are dividing their activities geographically in new ways: goods manufacturing goes to China, the world's factory, simple services to India, and high-quality co-ordinating activities stay – for the moment – at home. Globalisation is not entirely the product of the Internet and cheap long-distance communications, but it would not otherwise have moved so far.

Not only do complex technologies have unexpectedly wide effects; so do some extremely simple ones. One of the most important technologies of the past decade has rarely been noticed as such: the pre-paid mobile-phone card. It has transformed communications in developing countries more than just about anything else, bridging the digital divide like nothing else. The invention of mobile phones has allowed developing countries to acquire telephone networks speedily, without labouring to erect fixed-wire networks in countries where the distances may be large and the terrain unfriendly. But the pre-paid card allows someone with no bank account or credit rating to acquire a phone – and to know in advance what the calls will cost. In poor countries, those are hugely important characteristics. No wonder 97 per cent of Vodafone's phones in Albania are pre-paid.

More transforming technological change is only beginning. Once telephone calls migrate from wires (or current wireless) to the Internet, they break free of the constraints that have bound them. Already, Indian mothers in Delhi have telephones with an American area code, allowing them to make cheap "local" calls to their children working in California's Palo Alto. The consequences of merging video, voice and data will unroll over the next decade. Some will bring change as dramatic as the rise of email, the Internet's most ubiquitous consequence. That innovation has radically altered the pattern of both working and social life, allowing people to conduct simultaneous conversations with the person in the next office and colleagues on the far side of the world. It is fashionable to complain about the way email eats into working time. In fact, for many people, email is precisely what work has increasingly become.

The next big question is when government will follow where companies have led. Just as companies tend to be early adopters of new ways of doing things, governments tend to come late. There is no competition to drive them forward, and technologies that force restructuring (as the most revolutionary ones always do) cause political upheavals and turf wars that encourage postponement and delay. In time, though, the Internet will transform the public sector even more than the private. After all, governments everywhere are their countries' biggest service providers. And the Internet's main impact is on the efficiency with which services can be delivered.

What might that mean? Governments have been nervous of outsourcing call centres to India, say, partly because of issues of security; and yet privatised giants such as electricity and water companies increasingly outsource computer work, if not call centres, to Asia. Governments have been nervous about experimenting with franchising, and yet the Internet offers splendid ways to monitor and measure that allow franchises to be managed with greater precision than ever before. All those Gordon Brown performance targets would be the perfect basis for outsourcing services from schools to social services, if problems of privacy and the opposition of public-service unions could be overcome.

Because the consequences of a new technology are so rarely apparent in its early stages, economic and social change will be less predictable in the next two or three decades than it has been in the past. But the Internet, by allowing people to pool guesses, may actually improve techniques for forecasting the future – thus helping to reduce the very uncertainties that its existence creates.

Technological change has had a bigger impact on how people live their lives than any other force, economic or political

***Frances Cairncross is Rector of Exeter College, Oxford and author of* The Death of Distance *and* The Company of the Future**

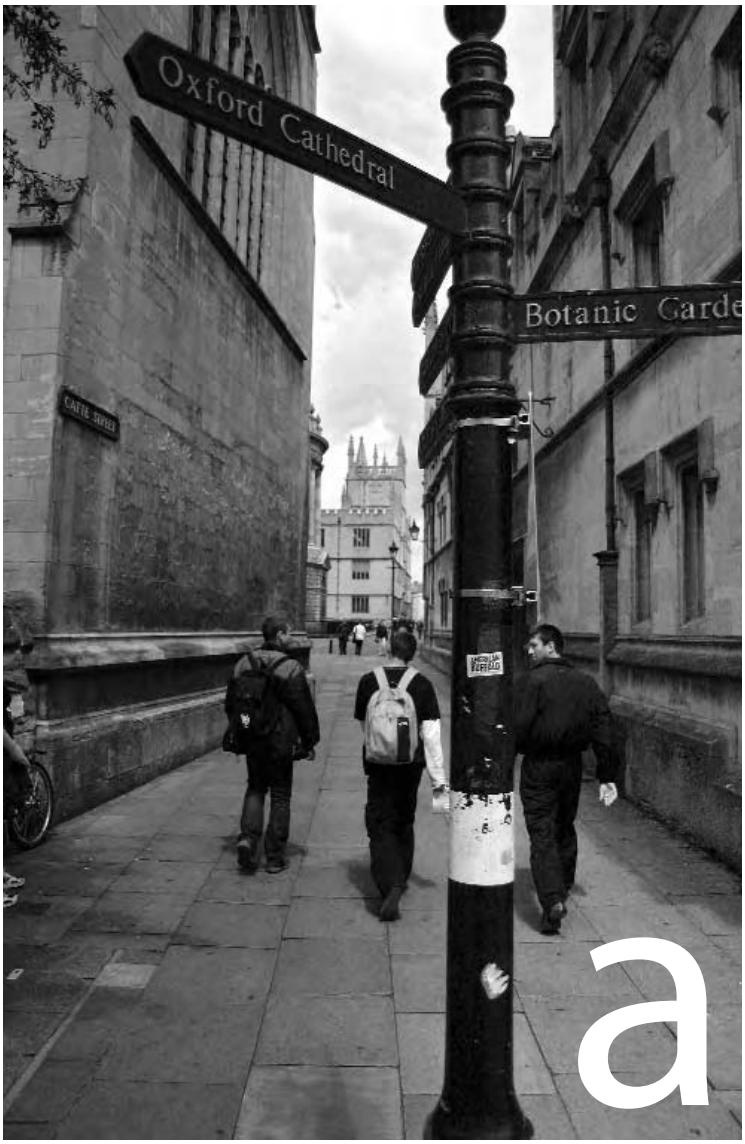
A credible alternative?

OVER THE PAST two years, the standard leftist critique of the 'mainstream media' – rolled out whenever positive coverage of privatisation, or UK soldiers, prevails – has assumed a whole new tone. Far from the tired lamentation of monopolistic media barons, 'hell-bent on pursuing shady agendas', the talk is now of new dawns – of a golden era lying in wait. After an Iraq conflict that saw arguably the most insightful coverage provided by two inexperienced 'bloggers' – Iraqi Salam Pax and Jo Wilding, an English law graduate who witnessed the April 2004 bombardment of Fallujah – optimism is rife that the Alternative Media could finally be offering an alternative.

It is a pleasant thought. That the degree of power possessed by Rupert Murdoch and his ilk is hardly conducive to journalism playing its traditional role as the 'fourth estate' does not need elaborating; news written by those with the purest of motives to 'tell the world their story' seems, on the surface, by far the most desirable type. Yet claims that blogging, and 'open publishing' news sites such as *indymedia.org*, are moving into a position to challenge the more conventional channels of information suffer from a major pitfall: if anybody with a PC and access to the net can become a journalist, precisely what is one to believe?

Take *indymedia*, for instance. That site's 'newswire' section accepts submissions from any would-be correspondent; the resulting coverage ranges from adverts for theatre productions to claims that George W Bush has authorised the use of napalm in Iraq. Without any credible codes of conduct or international libel legislation to prevent against exaggerations and half-truths, it is simply impossible to know just what to believe. What is more, there is a real risk that genuinely inventive, worthwhile writers are simply being swamped by the huge numbers of self-important melodramatists that call the web their home – but how are the sites in question to filter out the interesting from the excruciating, without facing allegations of (wholly un-Alternative) 'censorship'?

The mainstream media may not always embrace objectivity, but at present the fact that it is so comprehensively edited remains to its decisive advantage.



a political Education

LORD BUTLER writes about higher education finance and the law of unintended consequences

DOES ANYBODY believe that any British Government would deliberately set out to weaken British Universities? Does anybody believe that any Government would want to see chemistry or music departments being closed? Does anybody believe that any British Government wants to reduce academic freedom? Does anybody believe that any British Government would deliberately discourage students from opting for higher education? Does anybody believe that any British Government would have wanted to provide huge financial incentives for British universities to admit foreign students in preference to UK/EU ones? Does anybody believe that any Government would have wished to have been given the torrid time which the present Government has had over this issue in the last three years?

Yet the policy which successive British Governments have adopted has achieved, and is achieving, all these things. The halving of Government support per student over the last 30 years and the squeezing of university

[Photography Matt Bryant]

salaries has, everyone agrees, seriously weakened the competitive position of British universities and is forcing universities to close departments which the Government would have wanted them to maintain. Successive Governments, while supporting the principle of academic freedom, have increased their intervention as they have reduced their financial support. The present Government, while bravely taking the unavoidable step of requiring a contribution from students to their tuition – a step which previous governments shied away from – has created the prospect of debt which must appear like a ball and chain around the ankles of students in their adult aspirations. The fact that British universities can only charge the true economic costs of their courses to those from outside the European Union creates a massive incentive to universities to recruit foreign students. Walk down the street of any university town and it is clear that this is happening. Given that the total capacity of British universities is limited, this must be making higher education less available to home students.

How has it come about that public policy has produced, and is producing, so many perverse outcomes – outcomes that no one would have desired? Harold Macmillan once famously said that what threw Governments off course was "Events, dear boy, events". In this case a more accurate answer would be "Politics, dear boy, politics".

The root cause for the difficulties which higher education and so many other services in Britain are facing today is a seismic shift in public attitudes which became manifest in the 1970s. The history of the twentieth century up to that time was that Governments had raised taxes to finance two world wars and had kept them high to finance good quality public services for all in peacetime. In the 1970s it became clear that voters wanted more of their money left in their pockets to spend on all the new goods and services which became available to them as the world settled to peace – cars and other consumer durables, foreign holidays and so on. So they wanted lower taxes – but they had become used to universally free public services.

Higher education had become one of those free services – free for all, whether rich or poor. It was not like secondary education where there was a private sector alongside the public sector. Even though universities were private sector institutions, the whole cost of tuition was met by the Government and less well-off students were given maintenance grants to cover their living costs. Middle-class parents, who had opted for private education for their children, heaved a sigh of relief when those children reached university age and passed into the educational responsibility of the State.

Given the pressure for lower taxation, this state of affairs would probably not have been sustainable, even when only five per cent of students passed into higher education. But the public pressure for lower taxes coincided with a praiseworthy effort by Government to make higher education much more widely available – available, in fact, to every young person capable of taking advantage of it (and, in these anti-ageist days, to older people as well). The combination of the increase in students and the downward pressure on taxation led to a massive squeeze on university funding per student. At places like Oxford, the only way of attempting to maintain standards has been by living off the capital – both physical and financial – which we were lucky enough to have. Even in our fortunate position, however, that could not go on forever.

Hence, the present Government's decision – so long overdue – to produce a new source of finance for universities by introducing a modest charge for tuition and to replace maintenance grants by loans. Hence also the resistance to that policy, shown by voter research at the last General Election to be the most unpopular of all the Government's policy initiatives during its first term – unpopular with poorer families because their children were faced with what appeared to be the accumulation of massive debts to cover their university living expenses, and unpopular with middle-class families because they were losing the right to free higher education which they had come to regard as their reward for supporting their children through private secondary education.

Faced with that unpopularity, the Government felt forced to announce a review of their higher education policy. For more than a year the mountains laboured and at the beginning of 2003 a mouse was produced – or perhaps the policy would better be described as a camel, since it was a compromise designed by a committee.

The ceiling on the tuition fee was to be raised but only to £3,000, a level which is inadequate to cover even universities' current deficits, let alone the need to raise academic salaries to a level more competitive with American universities. To minimise the disincentive effect of a higher tuition fee, it is to be repaid post-University as a tax on salaries above a qualifying level. But this may still be seen as a disincentive both to entering higher education and to entering more modestly rewarded public service professions afterwards.

To enable the benefit of this low fee policy to be confined to UK/EU students, it is not available to non-EU students – so universities are left with the strongest possible incentive to recruit foreign students to whom they can charge economic fees. And the final irony is that the Government is not likely to be any more popular as a result of the higher education policies it has introduced in this Parliament than it was at the end of the last.

Nobody would have wished for any of these perverse consequences. What then is the solution? Since the perverse consequences arise from politics, logic suggests that the solution lies in removing the intervention of politics so far as possible.

There was a time, before the privatisation of the electricity and gas industries, when every increase in electricity or gas tariffs was considered an act of the Government and was in consequence an issue of acute political controversy. As a result Ministers had to intervene to keep price increases as low as possible and the industries had to limp along, unable to finance the investment necessary to make themselves and their contribution to the British economy internationally competitive. And Ministers did not escape the unpopularity attaching to the tariff increases. This situation was put right by the privatisation of the energy industries. Nowadays those industries can fix their tariffs at a level which enables them to operate efficiently and the Government is not blamed.

Universities do not need to be privatised. They are private sector organisations already. Those which wish it should be freed to sell their brand in the market place in return for an undertaking – which it would be the proper role of a regulator such as OFFA to supervise – that they have a structure of bursaries and loans which make it possible for any student of the necessary ability to attend, whatever their financial means. Universities should accept an obligation to do as the private American universities do – admit the student first and then consider what financial arrangements are necessary to enable the student to take up the offered place. Competition between universities would ensure that fees did not go through the roof.

It is in the interests of everyone concerned – universities, students and politicians – to get higher education out of Government intervention. Then we might have a structure of policies which did not produce so many perverse and unwanted outcomes.

How has it come about that public policy has produced, and is producing, so many perverse outcomes – outcomes that no one would have desired?

Lord Butler is Master of University College, Oxford, and a former Cabinet Secretary

an undue burden

MICHAEL HUGMAN explains why debt relief is both necessary and viable

IN THE WAKE of the devastation wreaked by the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the G8 has agreed to a moratorium on debt repayments from the affected countries – equal to $5 billion a year. Gordon Brown quickly attempted to link this move to the much wider programme of debt cancellation that he has been backing. With the UK in the chair of the G8 from now until June, and holding the EU Presidency in the second half of 2005, debt relief will figure high on the international political agenda this year.

However, the governments of Australia and the United States were quick to state that a debt moratorium for Asian countries does not imply wider debt cancellation in the future, and many economists have voiced their doubts about such programmes. How do we reconcile this opposition to debt relief when faced with such striking evidence of the role of debt in the crippling poverty of the developing world?

Debt relief by G7 governments started in 1988, but failed to establish clear goals or a framework for negotiations. In 1996 the World Bank and IMF announced the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt initiative – the first time that these multilateral lending institutions joined the process of debt relief. Together with a commitment from the Paris Club (which represents donor countries in the financial markets) for greater concessions, this finally provided a systematic approach to debt relief that had been previously lacking.

To qualify for HIPC, countries must first face an unsustainable debt burden, defined as having a debt-to-export ratio above a critical threshold. The country must also satisfy the IMF and World Bank that it has a good track record of reform, together with sound policies that meet key conditions set for each country (these remain the most controversial, and damaging, elements of HIPC). Third, the country must produce a Poverty-Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) working together with the World Bank – this document outlines policy for targeting government spending so that it reaches the poorest individuals. Under pressure from campaign groups, the G7 made a commitment in Cologne in 1999 to provide an extra $100 billion in debt relief to an 'enhanced' HIPC programme.

The 42 countries that were classified in 1999 as being HIPC held over $340 billion of debt in nominal terms. Taking into account all debt relief that has currently been received, or promised to countries that have met the HIPC conditions, these countries will still hold $264.6 billion after the HIPC debt relief has been received. Worse, at the start of 2005, only $46 billion of the $100 billion promised at Cologne has been delivered. Debt relief has failed to deliver its promised impact on poverty.

Gordon Brown has stopped short of meeting the calls of campaigners such as Jubilee, who are demanding 100 per cent cancellation of all debts to the 52 very poorest countries (at a nominal cost of $375 billion). The UK Government is instead proposing a 100 per cent cancellation of multilateral debt repayments until 'at least' 2015 for all countries that have completed the HIPC programme, as well as a number of the remaining poorest countries. It is not complete debt cancellation, but this programme goes much further than any previously promoted.

The most straightforward argument offered in support of debt relief is simply that debt repayment and the payment of interest absorbs a significant percentage of government revenue that could be spent elsewhere. For instance, Zambia, a country with over one million sufferers of HIV/AIDS, has spent an average of 30 per cent of government revenue over the last five years servicing its debt. Tanzania, meanwhile, spends twice as much on debt servicing as on providing clean water – even though 1.4 million people there are without it.

A second economic argument is the removal of 'debt overhang'. When debt reaches a certain size it begins to have certain

[Illustration Guy Shrubsole]

perverse effects on the incentives for governing a country. Fiscal reform is often painful for governments, and they are unlikely to undertake it if the only beneficiaries of reduced domestic spending are creditors.

The debt burden becomes so large that healthcare, education and investment in a country suffer, rendering it even less able to service its debt in the long term. Both government and creditors could benefit from debt reduction, as this puts the country in a better position to repay now and borrow more in the future. But when there are many creditors there is an incentive for each to 'free-ride' on the debt reduction process. There is a solution to this coordination problem – for creditor nations and institutions to lead the way in providing systematic debt relief.

Debt also brings with it uncertainty – it has played a role in many economic crises from Latin America in the 1980s to South East Asia in 1997. Unlike a consumer who borrows too much on their credit card, governments have the option of printing money to fill gaps in their budgets. This leads to inflation and has also been at the root of many of the currency collapses that have damaged developing economies.

All this uncertainty is damaging for the long-term growth of countries. Businesses, like individuals, are averse to uncertainty. They will tend to save more and invest less when they cannot predict the future. By reducing the levels of debt to a point where they are sustainable, and thus predictable, programmes of debt relief can have a long-term impact on the economic fortunes of countries.

Yet when we look at the history of debt creation, today's problems are hardly surprising. The Cambridge economist Noreena Hertz has documented the negligent lending of governments and banks to corrupt regimes in the developing world. The conditions attached to the HIPC programme and the new round of debt relief are aimed precisely at preventing such wasteful behaviour. Since 2000, HIPC countries in Africa have not increased spending on areas like the military – contrary to the warnings made by those opposed to debt relief.

Will debt relief really see an increase in money available for spending in developing countries? During the faltering debt relief process between 1988 and 1996, concerns grew that it really represented the substitution of money away from aid budgets and into debt reduction. What really matters is the net flow of resources into the country – we have to account for the impact of debt relief on both aid grants and foreign direct investment (FDI) by the private sector. But since 1996, debt relief programmes have acknowledged this – introducing the notion of 'additionality'. That money used for writing down debt must not be transferred from other sources is now accepted practice.

Sceptics are also concerned about the unintended incentives that programmes create for leaders to act less cautiously. If debt relief acts as a form of limited liability that protects developing countries from the consequences of their behaviour then they may be less careful in the future. If debt relief is seen as a reward for government reform then this may also create incentives to delay such changes in the present, giving developing governments more to negotiate with in the future. HIPC attempts, through the monitoring of government reform policy, and the probation periods built into the process, to avoid these pitfalls. With careful programme design, debt relief will still be effective.

Many of the Indian Ocean countries are considering turning down the offer of debt suspension for fear of affecting their ability to borrow in the private markets, and this remains an issue in debt relief programmes. A consumer who fails to pay back a loan risks a bad credit rating in the future – so it is with countries. For the poorest countries however, with limited access to capital markets, such concerns are small when weighed against the need to redirect government spending towards severely under-funded, basic social services. In 1988 the US initiated the Brady plan of debt relief towards favoured Latin American Countries. The markets actually responded positively towards those nations that had signed up for debt reduction – although it is hard to predict whether the same will be true for HIPC countries.

Tanzania spends twice as much on debt servicing as clean water – even though 1.4 million are without

The most significant threat to the role of debt relief in poverty reduction is that the monies released to government are not spent effectively, and that the most in need do not benefit. Many in the development community have argued that the poorest countries will not benefit from money released by debt relief, as they do not have the infrastructure or institutions to make use of these new funds. Debt relief to middle income countries – it is argued – may be more effective since it would have a greater impact.

Such an argument misses two important features of the debt relief programme proposed for 2005 and beyond. First, the HIPC programme already requires a PRSP to be created that identifies how government can make extra spending 'pro-poor'. These documents are developed by governments with assistance from the World Bank and others, and so avoid many of the issues associated with imposing conditions on a country from outside.

Second, debt relief is being proposed as part of a wider package of changes in the international system designed to fight global poverty. Trade reforms are a vital component of this process – Christian Aid estimates that agricultural trade subsidies cost the developing world $100 billion annually, twice the existing aid budget.

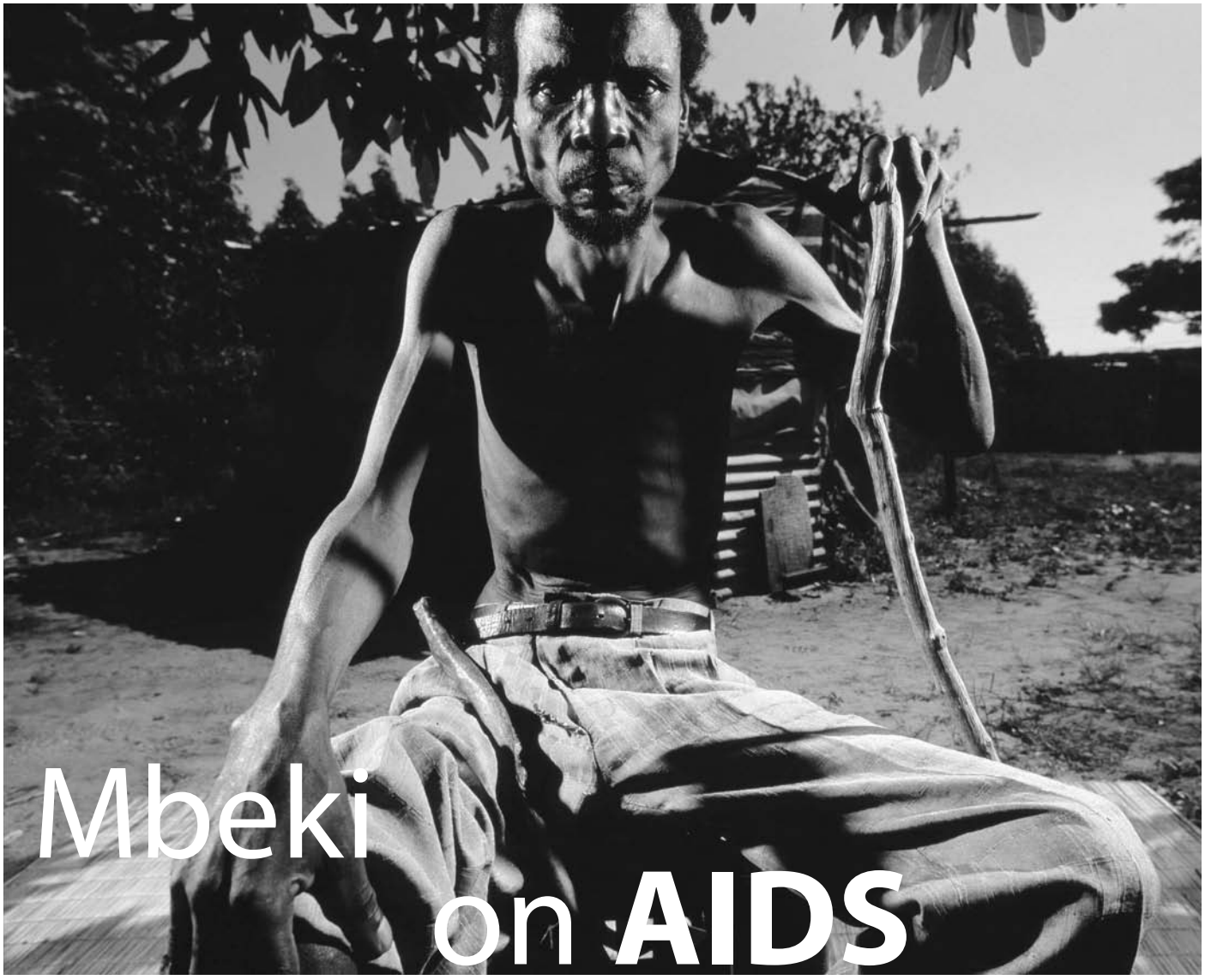
Alongside trade reform, Gordon Brown is proposing an International Finance Facility (IFF), designed to increase spending on development over the next ten years by borrowing against future aid budgets. Front-loading development spending in this way directly addresses the critics who claim that the poorest countries will not benefit from debt relief alone. Together with trade reform and IFF, debt relief will provide a much greater boost to the development process – one that will be able to break endemic cycles of poverty.

UN economist Jeff Sachs and others have highlighted further elements that are required for debt relief to have its full impact – including easing the conditions for HIPC eligibility and ensuring that money released by debt relief is spent in the most effective manner possible. Yet despite these remaining gaps, we are nearing a programme of relief that could have an enormous impact on global poverty. Finding the political will within the international community may be the greatest challenge facing Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. The US, like several other G8 countries, uses old accounting practices, which require debt cancellation to be approved as new government spending. In America, all spending requires Congressional approval, and this has been notoriously hard to come by.

In 2000 the Jubilee campaign created support for a budget approval by Congress totalling $545 million, which allowed the US to write off loans to the world's 33 poorest countries with a nominal value of $6 billion. But the new initiatives in 2005 will require yet more approval – and with Republicans in the ascendancy in both houses of Congress this is unlikely to be achieved.

So the real question that will be answered in 2005 is whether there is the political will to make debt relief happen, and thus unlock its potential to benefit the developing world. With the right combination of trade reforms, increased aid budgets and improved governance, debt relief can play a major role in the fight against the endemic poverty that kills 50,000 people each day. It will be worth the time and effort to achieve.

Michael Hugman is studying for an MPhil in Economics at Exeter College, Oxford



Mbeki on AIDS

JAMES MYBURGH unmasks the thinking behind Thabo Mbeki's response to HIV/AIDS

FROM OCTOBER 1998, when the first of such treatment became affordable, to March 2002 the Government of South Africa, under the direction of President Thabo Mbeki, refused to allow the provision of anti-retroviral drugs, used for the treatment of HIV/AIDS, through the public health care system. This opposition was only fully relaxed in August 2003, when the cabinet agreed to a roll-out of anti-retroviral drugs to all AIDS sufferers. Perhaps the main reason for this retreat was that South Africa was going to the polls in April 2004 and the government's refusal to provide such drugs had become extremely unpopular. As Manne Dipico, the African National Congress election manager noted, "people are burying every weekend and families are being affected and they are crying for the drug to save their lives" [sic].

This new policy has not been implemented with great enthusiasm by the Minister of Health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. She stated in February 2004 that it was her intention to "wean our people from antiretrovirals" and presented a diet of lemon, garlic, onion and olive oil as an alternative means of treatment.

Mbeki himself has not changed his mind about AIDS. In September 2003 he said that he personally did not "know anybody who has died of AIDS". Asked whether he knew anyone with HIV he added, "I really, honestly don't." As his muse on this issue, the journalist Anita Allen helpfully pointed out in a letter to a newspaper, when Mbeki said that he "knew no one in his circle who had died of AIDS or had HIV, he meant exactly that, according to the paradigm he holds."

> [I do not] "know anybody who has died of AIDS" Mbeki

This paradigm is based on the views of a tiny minority of scientists who question the mainstream scientific view of HIV and AIDS. With the backing of their slender authority Mbeki takes the view that while there is such a thing as 'acquired immune deficiency', it is caused by a whole number of factors, including "malnutrition" and "diseases of poverty". The HIV virus "may be one of the causes of this immune deficiency, but cannot be the only cause". The anti-retroviral drugs used to treat the disease are toxic and damaging to health, peddled to poor Africans by greedy Western pharmaceutical firms – who have a vested interest in promoting the "thesis" that HIV causes AIDS.

To understand how Mbeki came to reject the medical science of HIV/AIDS, it is useful to begin with the ANC's embrace of the miracle AIDS cure called Virodene.

This drug came to public attention on the January 22, 1997 when a group of researchers made a presentation to cabinet where they claimed that they had discovered a possible cure for HIV/AIDS. Two AIDS patients testified of their remarkable recovery with the drug. As then deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, commented afterwards, "It was a worthy thing to see because the general assumption is that if you get to a particular point with AIDS it really is a matter of time before you die".

The driving force behind Virodene, and the majority owners of rights to the substance, were Ziggi and Olga Visser – a young Afrikaans couple. Neither had any medical expertise. Olga Visser was a

[Photography Brent Stirton]

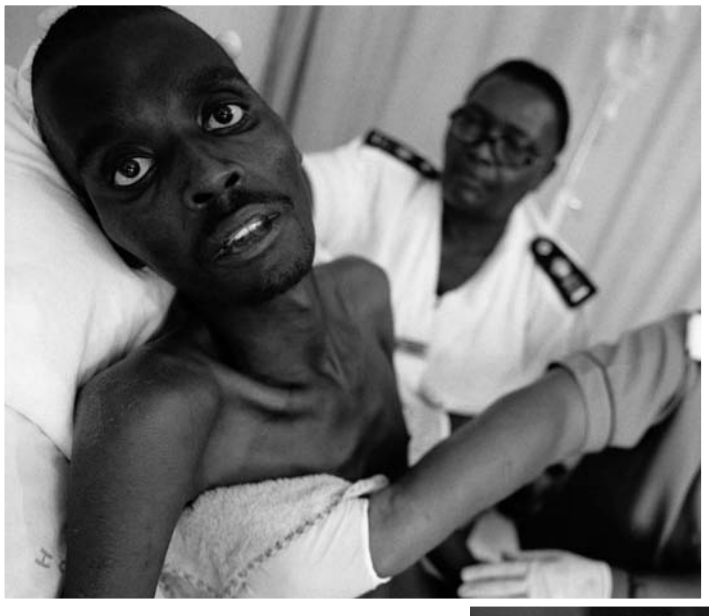
'freelance cryogenics researcher', who had discovered Virodene when she had tried to freeze a virus with the substance and its "protective capsule" had burst.

Sometime in 1996 the researchers had been introduced to the then Minister of Health, Dr. Nkosazana Zuma. They claimed that she had given them the go-ahead to test the drug, in secret, on AIDS patients, without obtaining permission from the Medicines Control Council (MCC). On hearing of Virodene, on the day of the presentation, the MCC immediately suspended testing of the substance on people. An investigation found that the formula for Virodene contained "a highly toxic industrial solvent", that there was no real evidence that it worked, and it was obvious that the researchers had no idea what they were doing. For instance, they miscalculated the dosage they were giving patients by ten to 100-fold.

Yet Mbeki and others in the ANC, remained convinced of the potential efficacy of the drug. Mbeki was proclaiming the dawn of an African renaissance. Virodene was, as Olga Visser put it, a "medicine developed in Africa for Africa." And if Africans could find a cure for this disease, where the finest Western minds had failed, it promised to finally "abolish the status of inferiority cast upon Africa as a people" by colonialism.

During the course of 1997 the Virodene researchers submitted one protocol after another to the MCC for permission to provide the drug to humans, with the MCC rejecting them on each occasion. Minister Zuma put great pressure on the chairman of the MCC, Professor Peter Folb, to allow for testing of the drug. She cajoled him, threatened him, and accused him of stopping a cure for Aids. Meanwhile, behind the scenes Mbeki continued to have contact with the researchers, at one point intervening to broker an agreement after they fell out with one another.

By December 1997 Dr. Zuma was publicly expressing her frustration at the recalcitrance of the MCC. "One day I will have the power to overrule the MCC" she said. "There should be no one on earth, not even ▸



Clockwise from above: "Hope is here and Hope is alive" – Six foot six tall, Hope, who at one stage weighed as little as 48 kilos, is back on the road to health after a six-month supervised programme of treatment; a young HIV-positive woman conducts her yoga routine outside a township home in Soweto. Four months earlier she was unable to walk, but a sponsored course of medication has enabled her to recover; children who are either HIV-positive or have been orphaned by the epidemic – all have connections to care centres that are assisted by corporate sponsors.

the president of the country, with powers to refuse patients the right to use drugs of their choice if it will make a difference to their lives."

When, in March 1998, the opposition Democratic Party released court papers suggesting that Olga Visser had promised the ANC a share in the Virodene company, Dr. Zuma famously responded: "The DP hates ANC supporters. If they had it their way we would all die of AIDS."

While vehemently denying the accusations, the ANC leadership now went on the offensive, accusing the MCC of "playing god" and of denying dying AIDS sufferers "mercy treatment". Thabo Mbeki warned that "the cruel games of those who do not care should not be allowed to set the national agenda."

A few weeks later Professor Folb and the two most senior civil servants were purged from the MCC, and the Ministry announced its intention to disestablish the body. Although it was not able to do so, the MCC hobbled along as a diminished institution, although it did turn down a final application from the Virodene researchers in December that year.

In 2001 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that clinical trials of Virodene were being conducted in Tanzania. It was revealed the following year that the $3.5 million these trials had cost had been sourced by the ANC, with the money being channelled by a close confidant of President Mbeki. The funds appeared to have finally run dry sometime in late 2001.

The first anti-retroviral treatment first became affordable to the South African government in March 1998, when Glaxo-Wellcome cut the price of AZT by three-quarters, after a clinical trial showed that a short course of the drug in the final weeks of

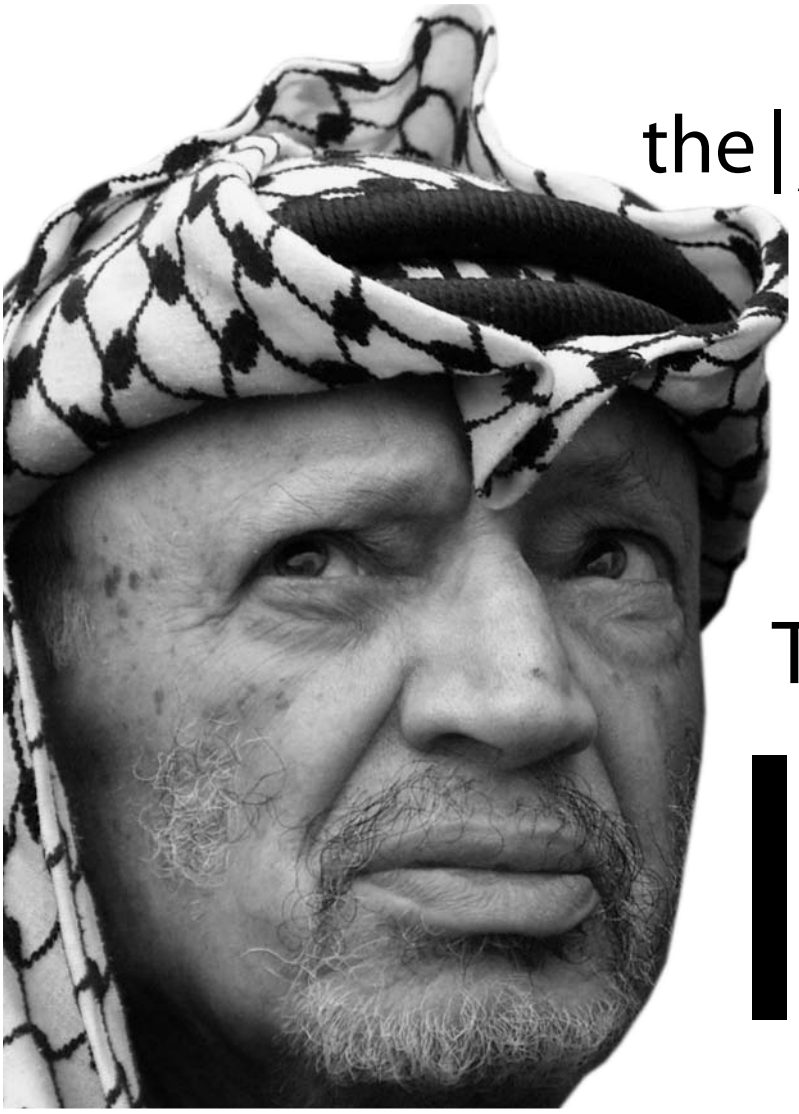
[Photography Brent Stirton]

pregnancy, and during labour, could reduce the risk of transmission of HIV from mother to child by half. At this time 22.8 per cent of pregnant women attending public health clinics in South Africa were HIV-positive. In July the health department launched pilot projects in a number of provinces. But in October, on the day Mbeki launched a national AIDS awareness campaign, Dr. Zuma announced that these pilot projects had been put on hold. Such treatment, she said, did not provide good value for money, which was better spent on prevention. In his speech, launching that campaign, Mbeki clearly accepted that the disease was sexually transmitted, and caused by a single virus.

It was in only in mid-1999 that Mbeki was first introduced to the dissident view of AIDS by two local believers, Anthony Brink, a lawyer, and Anita Allen, a journalist. Like the Vissers, neither had any scientific or medical expertise. In October Mbeki first expressed a dissident critique of AZT, stating that "the toxicity of this drug is such that it is in fact a danger to health." Mbeki's initial sympathy for the dissident viewpoint rested upon their shared hostility to anti-retrovirals, but it soon deepened into a more profound rejection of medical science. In February 2000 the government announced the establishment of a panel to examine whether HIV caused AIDS. In September [2000] Mbeki was asked by *Time Magazine* whether he acknowledged that there is a link between HIV and AIDS. Mbeki replied, "This is precisely where the problem starts. No, I am saying that you cannot attribute immune deficiency solely and exclusively to a virus."

Mbeki's euphoric declaration of an African renaissance had, by 2000, descended into an obsession with the "demon" of white racism, with "the insulting and criminal prejudice which has described the black human complexion as the very representation of everything that is sub-human within the human race." Virodene had once held out the promise of racial vindication but with this hope dashed, Mbeki now argued that the Western science of HIV/AIDS was an expression of "deeply entrenched and centuries-old white racist beliefs and concepts about Africans and black people".

James Myburgh is studying for a DPhil in Politics at St Antony's, Oxford, on the ANC under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki



the Israel Palestine debate

The Fallen Icon

To start our Israel Palestine debate, MICHAEL OREN speculates on how Yasser Arafat's death will change the face of Middle Eastern politics

YASSER ARAFAT'S last days on earth, a subject of intense interest throughout much of the world, have evoked mixed emotions in the country that was his life's obsession: Israel. There is concern that demonstrations by Palestinian mourners could turn violent, that fights over Palestinian succession might spill over and claim Israeli casualties, or that Palestinians might accuse Israel of murdering Arafat. Apart from that, however, Israelis' reaction to Arafat's demise has been singularly subdued, if not indifferent.

This response – or rather the absence of one – is curious. For nearly 40 years, Arafat has been a major focal point for Israelis, alternately as the embodiment of our worst fears and the object of our fervent hopes. It was Arafat whose terrorist strikes against Israel in the mid-1960s helped trigger the Six Day War; Arafat who turned first Jordan and then Lebanon into bases for launching murderous strikes into Israel; Arafat who masterminded the Munich massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes in 1972 and then, two years later, appeared before the United Nations General Assembly with a pistol on his hip, galvanizing that body and initiating a process that culminated with the U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism. Yet it was also Arafat who, starting in the late 1980s, recognized U.N. Resolution 242 (which called for an end of hostilities and recognition of secure borders for Israel as well as other states) and who in 1993 shook the hand of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the White House ceremony that many Israelis believed would herald an end to our century-long conflict with the Palestinians.

At the height of what was known as the Oslo peace process in the 1990s, Arafat's image in Israel underwent a profound transformation. From the arch terrorist with the sinister five o'clock shadow – Israel's darkest nightmare – he was now depicted in much of the Israeli media as a shrewd and avuncular statesman, admired as much for his bonhomie as for his uncanny ability to outwit successive Israeli prime ministers. Following her husband's assassination in 1995, Leah Rabin made a point of inviting "Uncle Yasser", as she called him, to her home while refusing to receive Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

Arafat's seeming rehabilitation served to divert Israel's attention from his increasingly calamitous policies in the territories. In addition to pocketing the hundreds of millions of dollars contributed by Israel and the world community for the social and economic development of his people, Arafat openly encouraged Palestinians to reject a Jewish state within any borders and to actively seek its destruction. While Israeli textbooks were being rewritten to educate future generations for peace, stressing the plight of the Palestinian refugees, Palestinian schoolbooks were extolling the glories of martyrdom and the valor of suicide bombers.

It wasn't until the summer of 2000 that most Israelis were forced to admit that Arafat was not the peacemaker they thought and that their original impression of him was correct. At the Camp David summit, he rejected an Israeli-American proposal for creating a Palestinian state in Gaza and almost all of the West Bank, with its capital in Jerusalem – precisely the two-state solution for which the Palestinians had avowedly been struggling. The stumbling block was not settlements, which Israel had offered to concentrate along the 1967 border, but rather Arafat's demand for the right of millions of Palestinian refugees to return to their pre-1948 homes – a right that, if implemented, would have transformed Israel

[Photography (right) Rebecca Tyrer]

The helicopter bearing Arafat's body arrives at the compound in Ramallah, as onlookers gather to witness the event

into a Palestinian state in all but name. Arafat's only response to the unprecedented offer was to permit, and at times abet, a terrorist war against Israel that has claimed thousands of casualties on both sides and left his own Palestinian Authority in ruins.

With that, the arc of Arafat's image – from terrorist to Nobel Prize-winning peacemaker and back to terrorist – had been inscribed in the Israeli public's consciousness. Much of that public is now convinced that Arafat never intended to make peace, but merely used Oslo as a means of implementing the Palestinian Liberation Organization's 1974 'Phased Plan', which called for Israel's gradual destruction through combined violence and diplomacy. Indeed, a solid majority of Israelis have come to believe that Arafat so poisoned his own people that, with or without him, there is little chance to renew negotiations, and that Israel's only option was to hunker down behind a fence separating Israelis from Palestinians until such time as the Palestinians produce a legitimate leadership capable of making peace.

This is why news of Arafat's death has stirred up so few emotions in Israel. The hopes for peace he once kindled died long before him. At most, there has been a muted sadness here, reminiscent of the Israeli reaction to the passing of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. Then, as now, rather than celebrate the demise of a man who had repeatedly threatened Israel's existence, we Israelis regretted the loss of the only Arab leader who seemed strong enough to end the conflict. Arafat also, like Nasser, had the political power and moral authority to conclude an agreement with Israel. But, unlike Nasser, he had once posed as a serious partner for peace.

This is not to say that Israeli Jews in any way mourn Arafat's departure. The fact that he died in Paris and not in his homeland, or that his heirs have been battling over control of his ill-gotten bank accounts, seems to many of us Israelis a fitting end to a life that might have achieved lasting esteem for its contributions to peace but will probably be remembered for its fostering of corruption and war. Had he chosen a different path, Arafat could well have been buried in Jerusalem in an august ceremony respectfully viewed by many thousands of Israelis and attended by the country's leaders. Instead, he was buried in his half-demolished Ramallah headquarters, the symbol of his failure as a statesman, and the funeral service, held in Cairo, was boycotted by even the most left-wing Israelis.

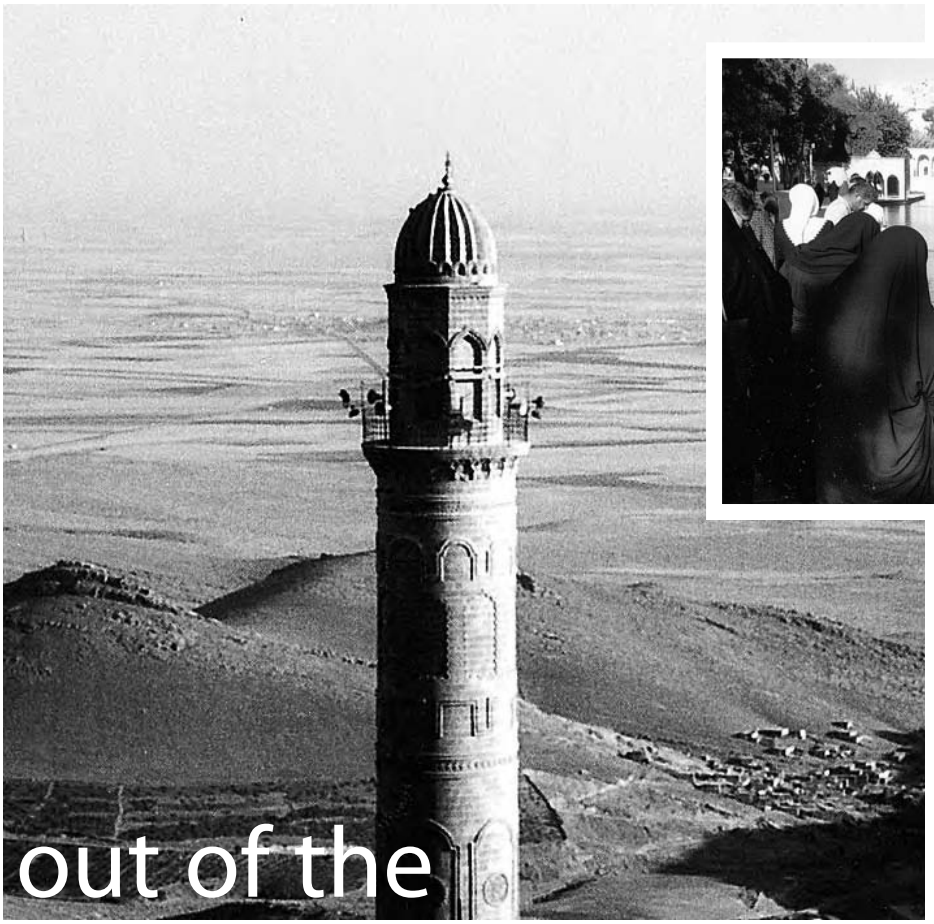
Ironically, the only Israelis who regret Arafat's passing are those from the radical right who believe that in fact he was Israel's greatest asset – the man whose intransigence relieved the Jewish state of the necessity of making any painful sacrifices. Yet the far right need not worry. It seems highly unlikely that any Palestinian figure will be capable in the foreseeable future of marshalling the legitimacy needed to make peace with Israel or the military power to impose that peace on the Palestinian terrorist groups that will certainly oppose it. No Palestinian leader is capable today of reversing the war-like brainwashing of children and of reeducating them for coexistence. Fatah leaders such as Mahmoud Abbas and current Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia – known as Abu Mazen and Abu Ala – may be perfectly acceptable to both Israel and the United States, but it is far from certain that they will ever be acceptable to the Palestinians.

There is much talk now among European leaders and in the Western media about the so-called window of opportunity opened by Arafat's death. Certainly Arafat's exit might open doors to new and more moderate leaders. But it might also usher in an era of even more radical Islamic extremists. At this stage, it would be premature, if not counter-productive, for the United States and the other members of the Quartet (the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, which are seeking to restart peace talks) to designate some Palestinian as Arafat's successor and railroad him into signing a treaty that he might be either powerless or unwilling to fulfill. Furthermore, any Israeli attempt to embrace one of the Palestinian contenders will immediately delegitimize him in Palestinian eyes.

While steps could be taken to alleviate the suffering of Palestinian civilians and to increase pressure on the Palestinian Authority to crack down on terrorism, the international community would be wise to follow Israel's example and simply wait and see. They, like Israelis, should neither rejoice at nor lament Arafat's passing, but only reflect sadly on the peace that he should have achieved and look hopefully to the peace that, with his passing, may yet be possible.

Michael Oren is a Senior Fellow at the Shalem Centre in Jerusalem
This piece first appeared in The Washington Post

If you would like an opportunity to write a response to this piece, please email editor@oxfordforum.com



out of the East

HUGO ROBINSON examines the twin prospects for Turkey and the European Union

THE PUNDITS WERE unanimous in their verdict that for good or ill, the decision by the EU to begin membership talks with Turkey was a momentous one. In this instance, the hyperbole was justified; besides Turkey's huge economic potential (or liability, as some see it), geo-strategic significance and sheer size, the most important implication of this decision lies in the elusive concept of 'the idea of Europe'. It pushes the question into ever sharper relief: what exactly does it mean to be European?

Those who supported a greater degree of European integration in the aftermath of World War II would have confidently cited similarities in language, ethnicity and, above all, a shared history of Christian values. However, these qualifications to 'Europeanness' are now challenged by the twin forces of secularism and immigration – a modern, increasingly multicultural Europe is encountering difficulty in subscribing to traditional parameters of identity. Turkey's entry into the picture accentuates this trend still further – as the continent becomes increasingly unified in a political sense, Europeans are searching for a new language of nationhood.

There certainly are those who would like to see a return to the more traditional 'fundamentals' of European identity. Holland was highly sceptical at the prospect of a large Muslim member joining the EU. The murder of Theo Van Gogh, the director of a critical film on Islam, at the hands of an Islamic extremist has asked difficult questions of Dutch proponents of multiculturalism. Across the border in Germany, this scepticism was shared by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, whilst the opposition Christian Democrat Party has taken a more strongly anti-Turkish line, exhuming the rhetoric of Europe's shared Christian heritage – this clearly promotes the notion of a more mono-cultural European ideal.

However, the rejection of the Vatican's proposal for a clause in the new EU constitution stating Christianity's historical significance for European identity means that supporters of a more broad-based Europe have the upper hand, for the time being. Political secularism is to be the religion of this new church: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan stressed in a speech last year his conviction that "religion does not belong to nations but to individuals". He has repeatedly asserted the Turkish Republic's success in reconciling an Islamic culture with democratic structures. In turn, an uncompromising approach to state secularism on the Turkish model is the best guarantee of personal religious freedom and tolerance.

Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple. Turkey's secularism and pseudo-democracy have come at the price of half a century of cyclical military coups. As recently as 1997, the Turkish army, as the self appointed vanguard of the secular state, felt compelled to oust the Islamic Refah (Welfare) party from power, on grounds of religious interference in government. The role of the Turkish army in politics is a problem, although not an insoluble one – the real issue at stake here is the army's reasons for interfering. It is symptomatic of a society still at odds with itself, afflicted by a fundamental tension between a secular state and an Islamic nation. Prime Minister Erdogan is himself a case in point: he carries the baggage of his past as an avowed Islamicist, and was even jailed for four months in 1998 following a public recital of martial Islamic poetry. He reformed the outlawed Refah party as the AKP (Justice and Development Party) and brought it to a landslide victory in 2002. Even if Erdogan and his party claim to have changed their colours and their rhetoric, this merely brushes over the difficulties inherent in dividing public from private religion.

However, Erdogan's ambition to make "European values Ankara values" is not overly optimistic, given the effects potential EU membership has so far brought to bear on Turkey. The crucial issue of ethnicity has been addressed with some success, bringing peace to the once war-ravaged south-east. Until recently, Ankara described the Kurds as 'mountain Turks'; their language was outlawed and overwhelming military force was brought to bear against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who sought to differ

[Photography Hugo Robinson]

from the official line. The situation is now radically reversed, and many Kurds openly acclaim the prospect of EU membership as the prime motivator for the relaxation in the stance of Ankara towards the one time 'Kurdish problem'. In tandem, the past few years have seen important constitutional and penal reforms pushed through, whilst a surprisingly free and liberal press has been increasingly active in holding Turkey's leaders to account. Martin Harvey, leader of the Turkey team at the Directorate for EU enlargement, views the achievements of these reforms, largely undertaken over the past two years, as "remarkable". The common feature to all these changes is the undeniable growth of a more tolerant, pluralist society: gone are the days in which Kurdish identity was denied and forcibly repressed, and in which torture was practically a state-sponsored activity. The once monolithic conception of Turkish nationhood, the strong arm of state power, and the semi-constitutional role of the military are in full retreat. Of course, there is still much work to be done, but the prospect of EU membership in itself has nonetheless been an immensely important catalyst in effecting change in Turkey. The idea of Europe as an entity based on shared moral and political values has certainly been potent enough to effect a profound transformation in a nation with a dubious record in many areas.

But change in itself never comes without problems, and pluralism is throwing down challenges of its own. On the evidence of recent events, the traditional secularism of the Republic is finding it difficult to adjust to new conditions. The long-standing ban on headscarves in state schools and the bar to graduates of religious schools entering secular universities are two contentious issues that have already exposed the dilemma of accommodating tolerance with a strict policy of religious exclusion from the state. It has also proved challenging to keep politics religion-free, despite the strident claims of Erdogan. Although nominally a secular body, Erdogan's AK Party is still affected by the religious conservatism within its ranks, last year introducing a bill proposing to criminalise adultery. The furore aroused in Brussels played a part in a conservative climb-down, but only after the community responded in a highly negative way to the prospect of a rejection of Turkey's membership bid. The defeat of this bill, as with the controversy over headscarves and universities, should not distract us from the fact that secularism and inclusive, representative pluralism can in practice make difficult bedfellows.

We therefore see a situation in which consent exists between many at a political level to recognise Turkish rights to inclusion within a specific European ideal based on tolerance and secularism. The problem comes in attempting to apply such an idealistic vision at a practical, social level. The universalist, egalitarian ethic of secularism is difficult to compromise with the recognition of community-specific demands within a diverse society. Turkey feels this pressure from Islamic conservatives; France has experienced its own headscarf controversy; Britain is divided over the abandonment of the purportedly anti-Sikh play 'Behzti'. So what happens when these issues are projected onto a pan-European stage?

Turkey pushes the question into ever sharper relief: what exactly does it mean to be European?

In attempting to create a unified civil society, mono-culturalism is clearly an outdated approach to take – the implied exclusion of cultural non-conformity is out of the question given the realities of modern Europe, with or without Turkey as a member. However, secularism is indispensable to multiculturalism, as there can be few things more disruptive to social harmony than a state which provides differential treatment to citizens on grounds of their religious adherence. The requirements of an emerging Europe point towards an acceptance of tolerance and diversity within a pluralist society, but the ultimate, unquestioned submission to the law of the secular state. The inclusion of Turkey within a community of nations founded upon such an ideal would give a strong mandate to this vision of European identity. In equal measure, should it fulfil established economic and constitutional criteria, Turkey could not be excluded from this vision of Europe. This potentially could have profoundly negative implications for the creation of workable European multiculturalism.

"Those who support the exclusion of Turkey on religious, cultural or some superficial border definitions do not realise that they are in fact hindering the integration of Muslims who already live in the EU", claims Prime Minister Erdogan.

The development of a civil society capable of accommodating difference whilst rejecting differentialism is a problem faced by all Europe – it needs to be resolved both within the current EU member states and Turkey itself before such a large Islamic nation can be incorporated. What Erdogan calls a "union of political values" may prove the only answer practical to the thorny question of what it means to be European in the 21st century.

HUMAN RIGHTS in Turkey

JONATHAN SUGDEN is Turkey Researcher for Human Rights Watch

THE EU, TURKEY AND human rights: will the story have a happy ending? Recent advances in human rights in Turkey tell a heartening story so far. Comparing the situation in 2005 with that a decade ago reveals just how far we have come. Violations reached their miserable peak in 1994, with more than 40 people tortured to death in police custody, over 50 well-documented 'disappearances', hundreds on death row, and a thousand people gunned down in the streets of the south-east, while in the countryside lay the smoking ruins of thousands of Kurdish villages burned by the security forces.

The view in 2005 offers a striking contrast. The death penalty has been completely abolished. Disappearances and deaths under torture have apparently been halted. Ill-treatment and torture in police stations, while still quite common, have diminished considerably. Village destruction is no longer a tool of intimidation. Broadcasting and publishing in minority languages such as Kurdish is now permitted by law.

It has been remarkable to watch how aspiration for integration with the EU has acted as a galvanising force for a country that still retains a fierce nationalist ideology. But progress was not a result of the EU process alone. It was the growth and increasing confidence of civil society that brought Turkey back from the gross violations of the early 1990s. As political violence retreated, local human rights organisations and the press were able to launch an effective fightback against the lawless forces within the state.

The European Council's December 2004 decision to proceed with Turkey's candidacy will reinforce those positive elements in the country. The Council's decision included a 'brake clause' that will bite very sharply if there is any return to old practices. More importantly, the rewards of integration in terms of stability and confidence are likely to combine with the increased respect for democracy and human rights to produce a mutually-reinforcing benevolent cycle.

The story is far from over, however, and difficult tasks remain. Voicing radical opinions still presents a risk of prosecution. The struggle against torture must be reinforced with better supervision of the police. Official treatment of minorities still falls far short of international standards. And there remain a quarter million displaced villagers living in harsh conditions in the cities, victims of a decade-long policy of neglect and suspicion.

After the revolution

MARK ALMOND argues that past trends do not promise much for the future of Ukraine

'PEOPLE POWER' is the political fairy tale of our times. Like timeless children's stories, political myths are powerful not because they are factually true but because they appeal to deep well-springs in our common psyche. The desire for a revolutionary upheaval which will sweep away corrupt tyrants and time-servers and make way for the dawn of a happy and permanent age of freedom and prosperity is one of the most powerful and recurring dreams in human history.

The fact that revolutions have a very bad track record in history does little to dampen the common belief that this time everything will turn out for the best. In many ways the classic crowds scenes of revolutions which seem to ordinary people to be the climax of the process are in fact only the beginning. Political fairy tales have their happy ending at the start. Things usually go downhill after that but human psychology and the powerful propaganda of the promoters of the next revolutionary wave silence scepticism.

Last year's 'Orange Revolution' in Kiev was only the latest in what is confidently predicted to be an ongoing wave of 'people power' revolutions across the old Soviet Union. It took place almost a year exactly after the so-called 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia. The two freshly installed popularly chosen presidents of Ukraine and Georgia, Viktor Yushchenko and Mikheil Saakashvili, have a lot in common. Both were catapulted by the collapse of the Soviet Union into previously unimagined careers. Each was promoted by post-Communist presidents who had been high-ranking Soviet figures but were regarded in the West as 'changed' men who had undergone a democratic version of the religious rebirth so popular in the United States. But a decade later, both Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma and Georgia's Eduard Shevardnadze were denounced as false converts to the true democratic faith.

Their previous allies and boosters in the West turned on them. The paraphernalia of democracy promotion created in the Reagan years to undermine Communist regimes now goes into action to undermine the successors once endorsed by Washington and Brussels. A network of tax-payer funded so-called non-governmental organisations (NGOs) plus a few genuinely private donors pour funds and expertise into the targeted society.

Discontent is a natural part of the human condition but it is most pronounced in the economic and democratic basket cases which grew out of collapsed Communism. Yet unhappiness with corruption and fraud needs to be focussed and given a voice.

In his assault on socialism, Milton Friedman taught us, "There is no such thing as a free lunch", but today's Western apostles of people power and the free market never stop to ask themselves who pays for all the round-the-clock rock concerts and free food and warm clothing available in Kiev's Independence Square throughout November and December last year.

Demonstrators may want People Power but in practice only some people can rule at any time. The Georgian precedent for what People Power changes and does not change is sadly depressingly apposite for what is likely to happen in Ukraine.

If you look at the current top three power-holders in Georgia, what you see is three people promoted by the ousted Shevardnadze. The new president was his Justice Minister, but even more striking is the fact that the prime minister, Zurab Zhvania had the same function under Shevardnazde – as did the Speaker of Parliament, who is in effect vice-president.

What the Rose Revolution changed was personnel at the top. Ukraine's Yushchenko was a protégé of his predecessor Kuchma. Many of his backers were so-called oligarchs under the old regime who got rich in dubious privatisation schemes which offended ordinary people sporting orange logos in the bitter cold!

If post-Soviet politics is cynical, what about the West's movers-and shakers? Surely our democracies must promote popular principles abroad?

The track record of institutions like America's National Democratic Institute on backing sincere democrats is poor. For instance in 1995, the NDI awarded Eduard Shevardnadze its Harriman Medal of Freedom before going on to sponsor his opponents less than a decade later, needless to say without ever apologising to ordinary Georgians for its eulogy of the kleptocrat.

The billionaire philanthropist George Soros, too, is better at stock picking than candidate selection. In 1994, he threw the financial muscle and prestige of his Open Society foundation's off-shoot in Ukraine behind Leonid Kuchma for president in the first post-Communist elections, as the best way to promote genuine democracy there. Yet less than a decade later Mr Soros was decrying the corruption and veiled despotism of the very same Kuchma. Did that give Oxford University's richest honorary doctorand pause for thought about picking winners in the future? If it did, the pause didn't last long. Mr Soros was one of the most influential backers for the network of opposition groups which organised the street-theatre and tent-city in Kiev during the 'Orange Revolution.'

Back in Georgia after the upheaval in November 2003, the generous Mr Soros

[Photography Katharine Wagner]

stepped in to help fight the rampant corruption that had tainted Shevardnadze's regime, paying supplements to the salaries of ministers and other officials. This was meant to wean them from the bribes taken to supplement their meagre salaries. Given the chorus of continuing allegations about officials involving themselves in pay-offs to protect 'businessmen' from back-tax demands and so on, these supplements may just be add-ons to the bribe-taking of many Georgian officials rather than a substitute for it.

One new Georgian minister who needed no bonus to his salary from Mr Soros or anyone else is the new Economy Minister, Kaka Bendukidze. In fact, Mr Soros is a shareholder in his Russian-based energy and engineering concern, OMZ. A typical product of the post-Soviet business class Mr Bendukidze was an ethnic Georgian based in Moscow at the collapse of Communism. He teemed up with the future oligarch Boris Berezovsky to make a vast fortune out of the questionable privatisations of the Yeltsin era. Since Vladimir Putin became president of Russia, many of the oligarchs have gone West – like Mr Berezovsky, who lives in Britain. Mr Bendukidze went south back home to Georgia. Academic commentators and newspapers like *The Financial Times* like to portray him as a true path free market reformer – just what the doctor ordered for Georgia – but Mr Soros himself, in a rare act of self-criticism, scolded himself for getting involved in business dealings with Bendukidze's partner Berezovsky, whose business operations in the mid-1990s hardly conformed to the principles of the Soros-backed NGO 'Transparency International'.

The track record of Western governments, Western academics and Western NGOs in picking true democrats – politicians with genuine principles and clean hands – is so bad that the best they could do is not to poke their well-funded noses into other people's business. Indeed one source of the frequently frenzied bouts of corruption that follow 'People Power' revolutions is the West's very fickleness. If someone as lauded as Eduard Shevardnadze can be tossed to the wolves, who is safe? Far from promoting stable constitutional regimes the West's pick 'em up and throw 'em down approach to the leaders of 'new democracies' means that the lesson taught by our democracy promotion to so many of the new democrats is that they are living on borrowed time when it comes to Western approval, so should feather their nests as soon as possible before Washington and Brussels withdraw their mandate.

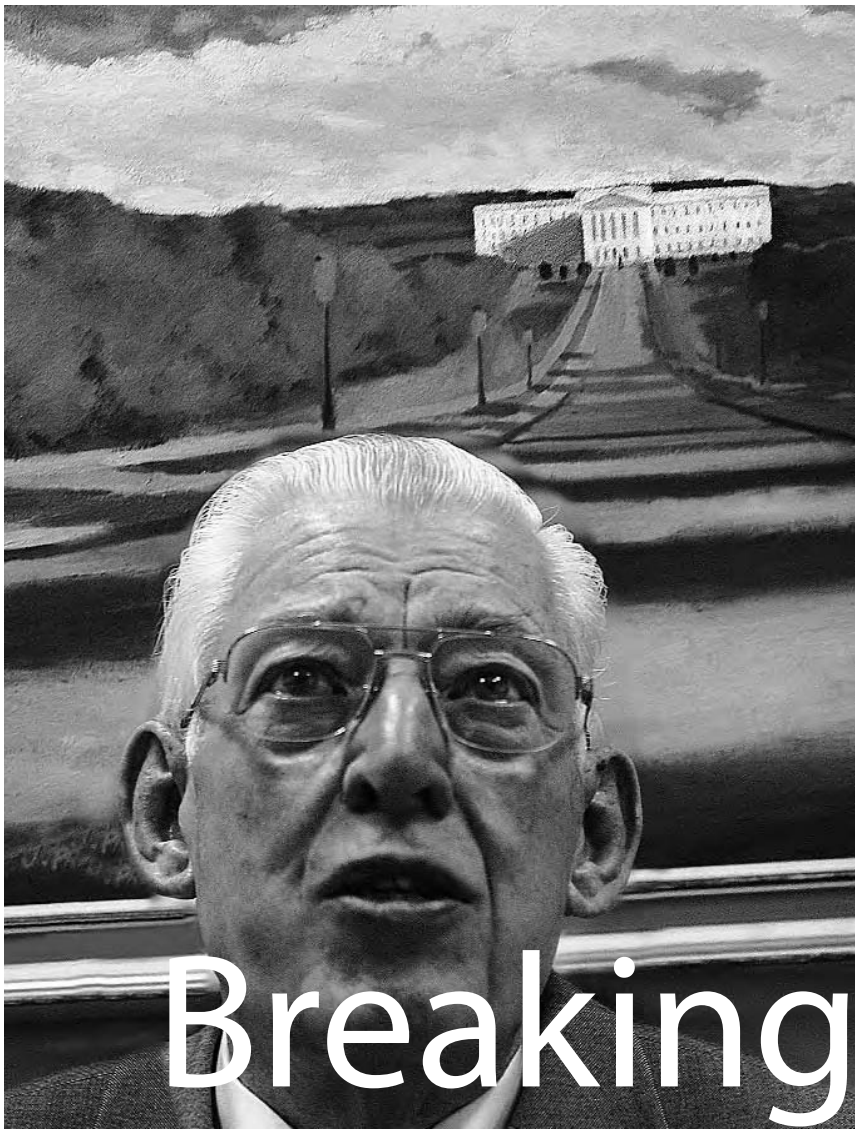
This very capacity of the West's democracy promoters to forget their enthusiasm for yesterday's great reformer overnight when interests demand is one reason why we can be sure that the wave of 'People Power' revolution will continue.

Already demonstrators sporting yellow bands and setting up tents have been reported from Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. The country's president, Askar Akaev, was once lauded by Bill Clinton's deputy secretary of state (and old St. Antony's man) Strobe Talbott as a "true Jeffersonian democrat," so he must be for the high jump.

Whatever People Power does or does not do for the people, it serves the interests of the People in power in the West. What democracy is is decided by them. The people in post-Soviet states are like the chorus in a Mussorgsky opera: power is brokered behind the scenes, the people are there just to cheer on cue or to boo the villain like in a pantomime. Odd that so many Western scholars and analysts go along with this script time and again and never get bored, but then pantomime is more popular than Mussorgsky ever was.

If someone as lauded as Eduard Shevarnadze can be tossed to the wolves, who is safe?

Mark Almond is Lecturer in Modern History at Oriel College and a regular election observer in the former Soviet bloc. Along with other Oxfordians he also smuggled money, equipment and books to dissidents in the past.



Breaking the peace

PAUL BEW sees a bleak future ahead for the troubled counties of Ulster

AT THE BEGINNING of December 2004 large sections of the media predicted the deal of all deals in Northern Ireland: the bringing together of Sinn Fein and the DUP in the joint leadership of the devolved administration. A month later everything has changed; there is now an equally widespread consensus that such a deal is at least a year away and there is serious speculation that it is impossible even then. What went wrong?

On December 8 2004 the two governments published their amusingly-titled 'Comprehensive Agreement' in Belfast. They claimed that a political agreement had been achieved, but only the matter of a photograph or photographs to verify IRA decommissioning stood in the way.

But this was, at best, a partial truth. Sinn Fein was never likely to accept the photograph idea, which had been revealed to them and the DUP on Wednesday November 17 when the governments handed over a document that represented their best guess as to where agreement lay. The Paisley camp, the dominant wing in the Democratic Unionist Party, gambled correctly that the Provos would say "no", but knew that, equipped with London's, Dublin's and Washington's support for photographic evidence, they could not lose any blame game.

So transfixed were commentators by the Big Man's apparent novel reasonableness that they appeared to think he had lost the power of political calculation. In fact, Dr Paisley always retained a strong preference for putting off a deal until at least the other side of the UK general election.

He also knew that any deal had to be sold to a reluctant Protestant electorate, and all the available polling evidence suggested that Paisley's own people did not want a deal with Sinn Fein. The only solution was to present it as a huge humiliation for the IRA; hence Paisley's speech at Ballymena on Saturday November 27 2004.

If his insistence on 'humiliation' increased IRA difficulties in carrying out decommissioning it also increased the chances of success for his preferred tactic:

[Photography *Irish News*]

delay. All manner of flattery did not deflect Ian Paisley from trumpeting decommissioning as a humiliation for the IRA in the days following his speech. Government strategy had provided Paisley with an each-way bet which he could not lose.

So the deal floundered on December 8 2004. But it soon became clear that it was not just the photograph/humiliation issue which was crucial; the next day the *Irish Independent* carried an authoritative story, well briefed from Irish government sources, to the effect that the IRA was not willing to break its mafia-like stronghold on the areas it controls or end its criminality.

On the same day an IRA statement confirmed the story by clearly refusing to respect the 'personal safety' of others as part of the deal and contradicting the putative IRA statement provided by the governments in the Comprehensive Agreement. Thus the fears expressed from within the Irish government were amply justified. Here was positive proof that failure was not just a matter of photographs.

The reaction of the 'modernising' minority (Robinson/Donaldson) wing of the Democratic Unionist Party was striking. They did not take up the issue of criminality as raised by the Irish Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister of Justice. Perhaps the 'modernisers' still hoped, as they had hoped earlier, that the dominant Paisley faction of the party was wrong and there was some way to finesse the photographs issue. Meanwhile, the Paisley faction had completely shut up shop: there was simply no question of a deal.

Even Sinn Fein had noticed the silence of the DUP 'modernisers' on the crime issue. The following week, on Irish television's *Questions and Answers*, Mitchel McLaughlin openly mocked Jeffrey Donaldson on this score. Viewers might have wondered what had happened to Mr Donaldson's argument that IRA disbandment was the only way to achieve a deal with Sinn Fein – a position he put forward in his *Sunday Tribune* interview of 25 May 2003.

And this was surely the real question — not the issue of photographs which was secondary. What was the IRA's 'new mode' to be? The IRA's statement of December 9th talked of continuing 'activities'. What exactly were these to be? What was the status of the IRA's training manual, the *Green Book*? Why in neither this document nor any other document bearing on the Comprehensive Agreement is mention not made of criminal activities like money laundering and cross-border smuggling? Why did the governments not explicitly ask the IRA to respect property rights?

In the wake of the Belfast robbery, republican sources made it clear that banks, in effect, had no rights. The same sources added that no-one was even 'slapped round the face', suggesting that there had been no breach of the governments' proposed formula respecting the personal safety of others. These comments given to the press were very revealing; the IRA perceived it had a green light for its massive bank heist and, thus far, that has proven to be correct.

But the Comprehensive Agreement gave promise of the rapid devolution of either the policing or justice ministry to this same movement, which the government now accepts carried out the greatest bank raid of this century or last. And it is the juxtaposition of these two novel realities which is the decisive feature of this current crisis.

Whilst there may be a solution, it is foolish to deny that this is new territory: there are, after all, other unanswered questions. Was there really any agreement on the total amount of IRA weaponry to be decommissioned? Was the IRA offer to decommission more akin to a dumping of arms operation than a permanent destruction of weapons? If so, the whole package would have fallen apart anyway, bank raid or no bank raid.

Yet cynics will still say that we have been here before. The IRA imploded David Trimble many times with illegal escapades (Florida, Columbia and so on), but the governments continued to woo the IRA. Many read Messrs Blair and Ahern to have declared that, after a period of mild chastisement, there will once again be business as usual.

So it might well be, but some suspect that the paradigm may be altering. For the first time, there is a sense that the successors to Blair and Ahern will not approach matters in the same way. For example, the Chancellor's camp has never publicly endorsed the idea that it would fund £1 billion to subsidise the DUP/Sinn Fein deal, and both within his government and the Irish opposition, Bertie Ahern's soft line on Sinn Fein has provoked growing unease.

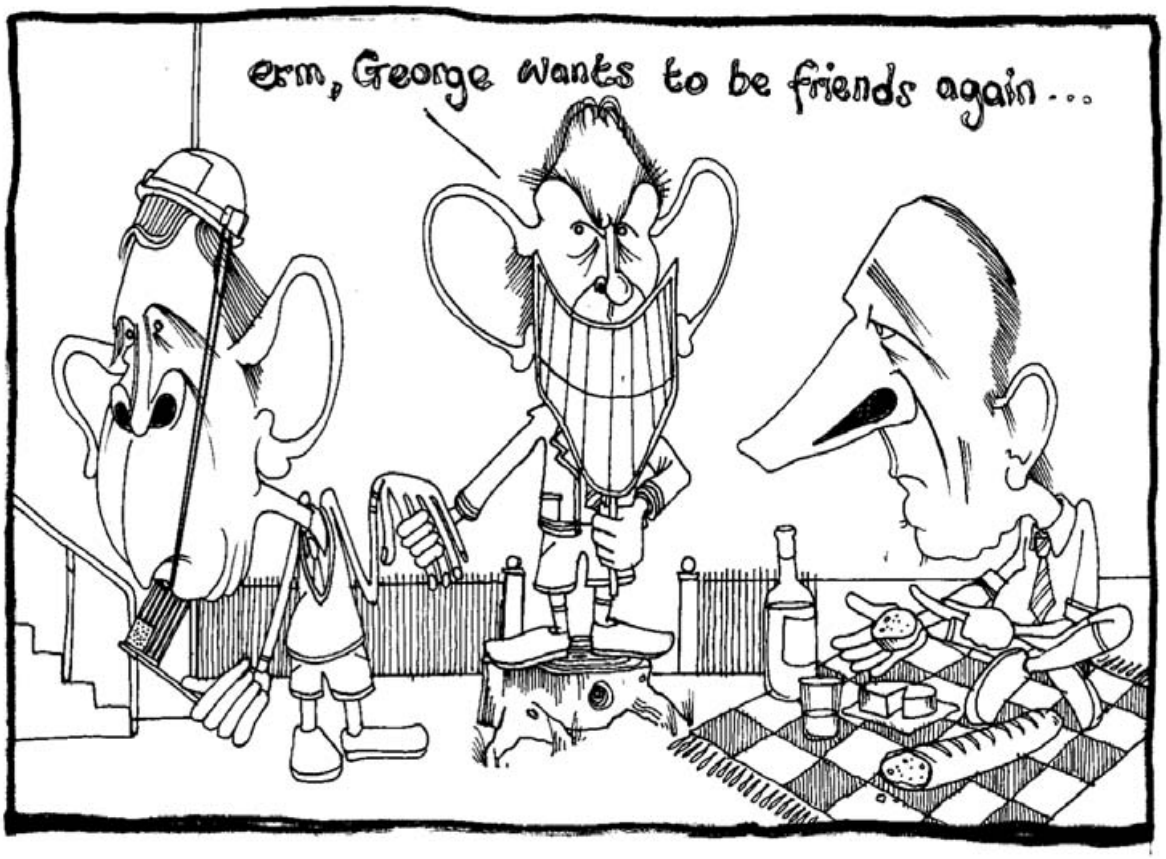
Devolution in Northern Ireland on the basis of an all-party inclusive government is impossible without Sinn Fein, but the people of Northern Ireland are increasingly uninterested in that form of devolution. None of the likely developments within the DUP will strengthen the hand of those who want to bring Sinn Fein back into an executive. The more hard-line faction of the DUP, in the ascendant now, are heaving a sigh of relief: "like men off Death Row," as one close observer put it.

Paul Murphy has said that there cannot be devolution of policing and justice while the IRA retains "the capacity" for bank raids. Sinn Fein on the other hand was only prepared to talk about moving the IRA into a "new mode" in exchange for substantial control in the policing/justice area. Bertie and Tony may yet put Humpty Dumpty back together, but the nature of the failure this time is a radical one. It is, unquestionably, a bitter moment for those who, like the two Prime Ministers, worked so hard and so well to bring the Good Friday Agreement into being.

That project has taken a very big hit, following on from other very big hits in 2003, and there is no getting away from that grim reality. Northern Ireland faces a political Dark Age. There is but one slim hope of avoiding a dangerous polarisation of the two communities: a new coalition of the decent, based on the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP in the North and mainstream unionist and nationalist opinion on an all-Ireland basis.

The elements of agreement are clear: the principle of consent, exclusion of Sinn Fein from government while the IRA retains its 'capacity' to rob banks, the need for power-sharing and north-south cooperation. The SDLP has already advanced interesting if imperfect ideas in this area. It is a pivotal moment but it won't come to anything unless the Irish government throws its weight behind constitutional nationalism in the North in a way that it has not been doing for at least two years.

***Paul Bew is Professor of Politics at Queen's University, Belfast, and the Northern Ireland political editor of* Parliamentary Brief.** ***This article was first published in the February 2005 edition of* Parliamentary Brief.**



a difficult affair

THE OXFORD FORUM asks whether Jacques Chirac's Iraq gamble paid off

ONCE MORE, the teeth were bared for the 'right' reason. Having been dismissed, but two years previously, as "very rude" by the French president, a grinning Tony Blair proudly displayed a beaming Jacques Chirac by his side last November – the two eager to highlight that 'lines' have well and truly been 'drawn'. Yet with the Iraq (diplomatic) feud seemingly retreating into history, a question remains for M. Chirac – a leader whose foreign policy brought about a historic low-point in Franco-American relations: has it all been worth it?

In retrospect, France always had less to lose than most western nations from taking an anti-war stance. As a country, it relies on America for no direct economic assistance (as Russia, with its IMF loans, and Germany, with countless US military bases, arguably both do). Moreover, the US market accounted for below eight per cent of French trade even before the era of 'freedom fries' – in contrast to roughly 15 per cent of British exports. No matter how rabid the White House's desire to punish 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys', the truth is that nationalist (or 'patriotic', if one prefers) economic boycotts could only ever be sustained for so long, and with minimal impact. Indeed, those simian slurs could readily be cast as indicative of frustration – on behalf of an American administration that used to believe US might to be unchallengeable. Chirac was never playing that dangerous a game.

Yet relations between Washington and Paris remain unambiguously frosty – hardly aided by President Bush's choice of Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State (a woman who once claimed America's reaction to the Iraq feuding should be to "Forgive Russia, forget Germany and punish France."). Indeed, Washington insiders have reportedly briefed a senior French military official that "the relationship between your president and ours is irreparable on the personal level". Whether this represents anything but an asset for Chirac, though, is certainly debatable. Granted, daily 'chats' between the Oval Office and the Elysee Palace are unlikely to provide solace to the domestically-isolated Gaullist any time soon – but then again, such a friendship has hardly worked wonders for our own Prime Minister of late. Politically, a more popular policy than putting distance between oneself and the Bush regime remains elusive, throughout the nations of Europe.

Indeed, the irony of the French stance over Iraq is that it could well have made the US more in need of healthy ties with Paris. International relations scholar Joseph Nye has written recently of "the decline of America's soft power" – its once effortless ability to be a beacon, attracting nations from Eastern Europe to South America towards liberal democratic ideology. The ideology remains preponderant (as events in Ukraine recently demonstrate) – but ever more it is to European states that ideological revolutionaries look for inspiration, and a glimpse of what 'freedom' means (notably it was Javier Solana, rather than any US official, who assumed the role of 'impartial arbiter' in the Ukrainian crisis). To too many that Washington would seek to influence – from Iraq to Venezuela – the 'American dream'

[Illustration Nick Hayes]

has become inextricably linked to the politics of religious bigotry, and to the unsettling uncertainties of Fallujah. The unlikely figure of M. Chirac has emerged from the past two years' backbiting with something the US desperately needs: moral clout. Dominique Moisi, from the French Institute of International Relations, puts it simply: "The Americans need France in Iraq."

So when it comes to the simple Franco-US relationship, Chirac seems to have done little long-term damage. Indeed, by the retention of 'soft power' his is arguably a stronger diplomatic hand than Tony Blair's, as things stand. Yet the greatest benefits of his Gallic stubbornness are far more subtle.

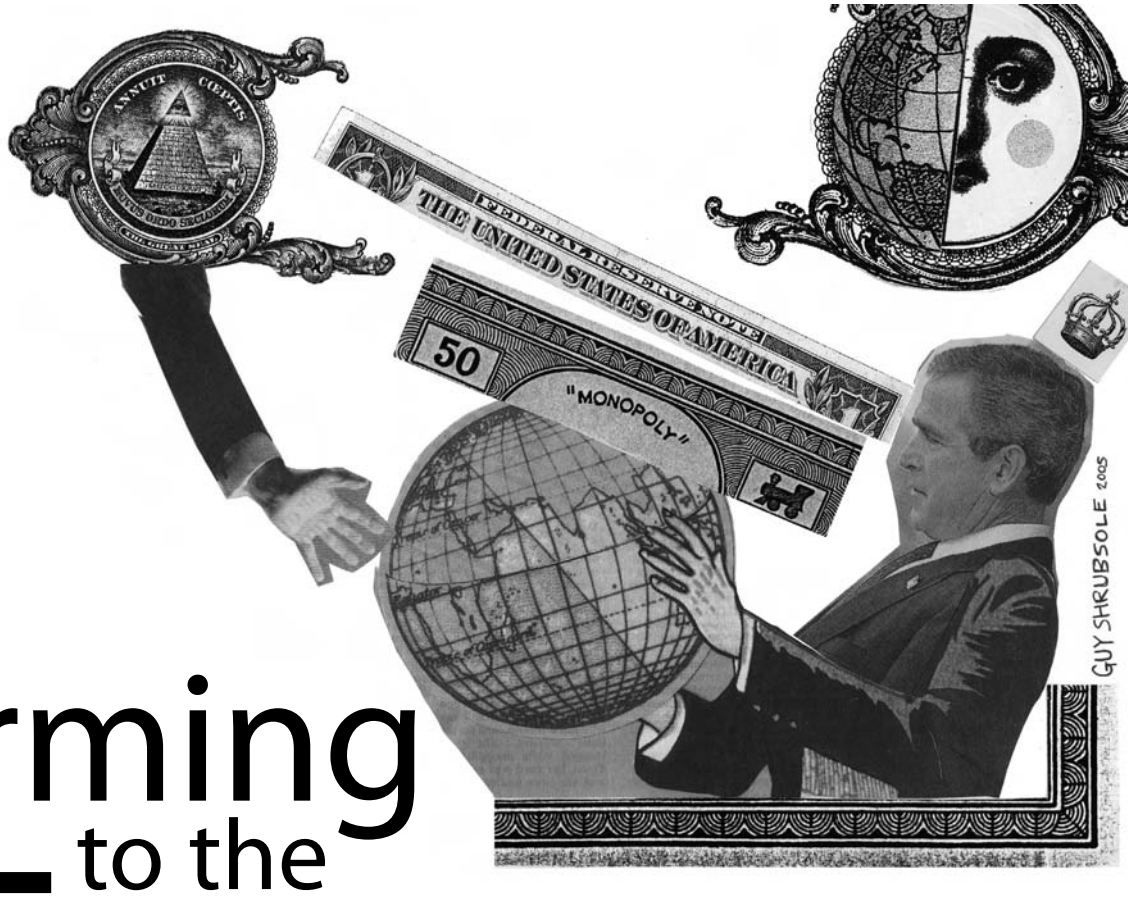
Speaking in Oxford during his November visit, the French president told members of this university that "Like it or not, the world is moving today towards a multi-polar situation." This 'new order' – a pet topic of Chirac's, on past form – will apparently feature China and India as major world players, along with Latin America "soon", and Africa "perhaps". Importantly, North America and Europe were perceived likely to be distinct poles – areas that are "predestined to act together as a deterrent, to deal with crises", but are separate powers nonetheless.

Contrast this with the Blairite (or even 'Rumsfeldian') view of a US and Europe ('New', if necessary) inextricably joined, and it becomes clearer just what the French position over Iraq has achieved: it has provided a definition. It is naturally far easier for 'Europe' to be conceived of as distinct from the US than as a power united with it. Provided at least one member of the continent's central axis – i.e., France or Germany – is opposed to Washington on a certain issue, theirs is likely to be described as the 'European stance', no matter how many other European nations actually side with the alternate ('American') stance. So when numerous EU candidate states (now full members) openly backed the war on Iraq, major news agencies referred to them simply as "pro-US" states. Opponents, meanwhile, were "European".

by the retention of 'soft power' his is arguably a stronger diplomatic hand than Tony Blair's

What this means in practice is that the European statesman able to put as much distance as possible between his or her own stance, and that of the United States – whilst still retaining backing from some other EU nations (a crucial qualification) – is able to become the continent's effective ideological leader. This is precisely what the French president has succeeded in doing. Witness, for instance, Chirac's 'ideological' reluctance to admit Turkey into the EU ("it must embrace our values," he told the Oxford audience): hardly an issue of greater relevance to France than, say, to Greece – yet the French are the only nation currently committed to a domestic referendum on it. Prior to the Iraq conflict, Gallic attitudes towards the Union were characterised by self-interested opposition to CAP reform and a stubborn refusal to consume British beef. All of a sudden, their president is "convinced" that the EU is "the only way to establish peace and democracy" across the continent. By defining what Europe stands for, he has become able to set its agenda – a position from which France can only benefit.

So all in all, not exactly a bad outcome – if evaluated purely in terms of French diplomatic power. Just how this particular man, whose past could hardly be considered 'whiter than white', came to become the moral face of a continent finally defining itself as an aspirant 'pole' in the post-Cold War world is one of our era's imponderables. Undeniable, though, is that taking on the US was one of the most successful tactics this French President has ever adopted.



warming to the Enemy

When CLAUDE WILLAN first heard of the Project for the New American Century, he wanted to assault its values as any decent leftie would. Then he gave them a ring

I'LL BE HONEST with you. When I sat down to write about the Project for the New American Century, I didn't want to write a by-numbers hatchet job, but I couldn't deny that it was definitely on the cards. I did what I thought was a lot of research, of poking around the darker corners of the internet, of informing myself about this baroquely Reaganite think tank. Since then, I've had to completely rewrite this article, and I've had to completely rethink my ethics of foreign policy. So what did I do? What happened, to make me turn around so completely? I did something that almost no one, judging by the punditry I've found, seems to have done: I gave them a phone call. Let me explain.

When I first heard about The Project for the New American Century I was horrified. It's a think tank that was founded in 1997 by William Kristol and Robert Kagan to promote 'Reaganite' policies at home and abroad. This quotation comes from the organisation's front page at *www.newamericancentury.org*:

"The Project for the New American Century is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership."

I read that, and then I knew I had to find out more. You couldn't, I thought, make it up. So I read around to get a better idea of what PNAC were about. I had a look at their Statement of Principles dating from the project's inception, and the equally dramatic list of signatories underneath it. Central to the document is this four point section:

"We need to increase defense spending significantly if we are to carry out our global responsibilities today and modernize our armed forces for the future;
We need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values;
We need to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad;
We need to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles."

Amongst the most prominent men putting their names to this list were Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Jeb Bush (the President's brother, and Governor of Florida) and Elliot Abrams (a senior member of the National Security Council).

It was at this point that I got excited about spreading the word: that here before my eyes was evidence of every left-wing fantasist's dream (or nightmare, depending on how you want to look at it) – that there was a sinister cabal of powerful individuals influencing US foreign policy in an unconstitutional, almost Bilderberg-like way. I found pieces like William Rivers Pitt's 'New York, You've Been Used', delivered on the second

[Illustration Guy Shrubsole]

anniversary of 9/11, which was one of the most compelling assemblies of information and rhetoric I'd ever read. Mr. Rivers writes: "Here we stand today, with the chief men from the Project now controlling every single nook and cranny of America's foreign policy, defense strategy, military, and budget…The Project for a New American Century is, in point of fact, the Government of the United States of America."

And so I wrote my article, cobbling together information I found in similar pieces from all over. I was, apart from anything else, warmed by the thrill of having secret, valuable knowledge – that PNAC was running the world.

"Well," said the editor, "interesting. Unfortunately, any interested party could pull all that off the net. Give them a call. Come back when you have something interesting to say."

So I did. I spoke to Dr. G. Schmitt, Executive Director of PNAC. Unsure of myself, and so happy to let the political science major have his say and to try to make sense of it afterward, I asked him why his think tank's agenda had come to be seen as relevant.

Really, he explained, progress until 2001 was just the rationalisation of a position already held by the United States, and a pushing commitment to the allocation of diplomatic and military resources entailed as provision for the future. PNAC wanted to avoid a Pat Buchanan-like neo-isolationism that would have seen a post-Cold War withdrawal of American influence. America, Schmitt said, has a responsibility to others and by extension to itself to uphold whatever stability has come to rest on it, and equally not to shirk other opportunities to bring greater stability. "Post '01, we really didn't have any personal influence – Bush came to his own conclusions."

Really? But what about all those signatories, I asked. Surely if you've got people like that on your team, it is little surprise that Bush will come to your conclusions? Is there really room in a sophisticated democracy for cabalism like this?

Dr. Schmitt sighed. "The signatories to our statement are not necessarily affiliated to us – they're just people we circulated the document to who thought it was a good idea." Quite unlike the British idea of a policy arm of government, PNAC's status is truly non-governmental. "We're a completely discrete body – purely a supplement to governance. Really, we're very happy if even ten per cent of our work sees the Capitol," says Schmitt modestly.

What about the problems of democratisation, I wondered, as shown by insurgent resistance to the elections in Iraq? "Don't worry about the Iraq elections being definitive," Schmitt replied. "Democracy in Iraq is not necessarily ever going to be Jeffersonian, [but] the political process is mature and self-correcting." Doesn't he see democratisation as a necessarily self-limiting goal? "It doesn't necessarily mean imposing ideologies," he replies. "It's not typically going to work to unilaterally enforce democracy and it's always going to be a mixed bag."

I enquired whether PNAC saw itself as morally or pragmatically driven. "Well," says Schmitt, "we said Iraq wouldn't be easy. Ultimately, we're more strategically concerned. We have to be, but a bit of both is involved." There is a coincidence of responsibility and national interest.

"We're not confident that the admin has the tools necessary to carry out its projected foreign policy," he continues – before explaining that there's a gap between theory and what Israel might call the 'fact on the ground', which makes it impossible to execute carefully drawn-up policy: "The principles of the Bush admin have been inconsistently applied, and policy initiatives have dropped elsewhere at the expense of Iraq." Commenting on regions like South America and the acute need for militancy, Schmitt remarks, "There may be no fire burning, but there's a lot of timber laid up."

If you do a Google search on 'PNAC', the first hit that comes up is the official site: *www.newamericancentury.org*. The second link, though, is just as informative in its own way. What comes up is *pnac.info*, a site depressingly illustrative of criticism levelled at PNAC. Why is it that paranoia is so pervasive in all aspects of political discourse? It seeps into everything, until there's no rigour left. Reaction and not evaluation. No debate, only posture and reaction. The 'Statement of Principles' and its 'Signatories' make for intimidating reading because they're bold documents. They're practically tailor-made for fear-mongering and polarisation, until there's no moderation left. *Pnac.info* is a perfectly well-informed website, just desperately unsophisticated in its approach.

There is sure to be a lot of confusion over whether PNAC advocates an American assumption of global leadership or a continuation of it. It comes down to whether you see America as holding any dominance post-Cold War, discrete from its following manoeuvres – whether, in short, you believe that it is still a Superpower. It's chicken-egg inextricable to determine whether America has a responsibility to uphold those situations upon which it is already a stabilising influence, or whether it has unjustly created those situations. It's even more useless to generalise across the board. But this is for me the crux of the problem with PNAC. The reviews you'll find of PNAC won't be constructively critical; they won't offer any alternatives by engaging with the problems PNAC perceives and seeks to deal with. PNAC simply isn't addressed by its critics on the level on which it operates – the pragmatic.

It's so saddening, though – do none of these apparently intelligent people, with whom I feel such instinctive political empathy, see that they're not saying anything substantial? Critics engage hysterically with the superficial: signatories and one or two documents, or one or two phrases from those documents (like the one in Rebuilding America's Defences that conspiracy theorists say show US collaboration in 9/11 in the discussion of "a catalysing event, like a second Pearl Harbour").

Yes, this is scary stuff. Apart from anything else, what PNAC stands for is definitive, which always sets alarm bells off. But the alternatives – an isolationist United States, which could, perhaps, lurch into protectionism or just a gaping power vacuum in areas to which resources have been under-allocated – are scarier. But is this an adoption of their methodology? Is delineating into 'us' and 'them' just another indulgence in paranoid, unproductive political thinking?

Yes, this is scary stuff. Apart from anything else, what PNAC stands for is definitive, which always sets alarm bells off. But the alternatives are scarier

It is telling that Colin Powell justified the US's efforts toward tsunami relief on the grounds that providing aid was a security necessity. That is how the administration thinks it should be sold to its electorate. It's amazing, really, that such a thing needs to be sold, or justified. What this justification indicates is the supremacy of pragmatic concerns over moral, even when a happy chiming occurs in the Bush administration. Yes, this is ugly; yes, this is unfashionable. I'm sorry. But what's the alternative? Not what I'd fantasise, surely – a ready-made, stable multi-polar international community. Can you really see that?

So, have I been played? Dr. Schmitt's asked to see this article when it's published. Half of me thinks it's because he wants to see how much of what he fed me I swallowed, and half thinks he might just be interested. In a sense, all this is heartbreaking for me. I don't want to have to abandon the attractive moral high ground. Ultimately, though, the ideal must surrender to the real.

brent stirton in Iraq

BRENT STIRTON works as a freelance photographer, travelling all over the world. He is the recipient of numerous accolades, including a World Press Photo Award

[Photography Brent Stirton]

IRAQ: OBSERVATIONS

Any attempt to encapsulate Iraq in a few brief paragraphs is nothing less than laughable. Over the summer, I spent two months there on various assignments and almost feel I now know less about the place than I did when I started. All in all I liked the Iraqis – they're brave, solid people; their capacity for suffering, hospitality and revenge astonished me. I guess 30 years of Saddam will do that for you.

The day I left, the trial of Saddam had just started and there were growing number of Iraqis showing active, passionate support for the dictator. I guess that we are talking about the process of conditioning: nearly four generations under Saddam with little access to the outside world may limit your ability to differentiate. Mass graves aside, Saddam remains a potent symbol of Arab pride and Iraq is a proud country which responds to what many in the West would view as overt machismo.

Yet beyond all the violence, Iraq is still a fascinating culture. I have tried to photograph it in a way that dignifies these people. There were no religious rituals whilst I was there, no major parades and demonstrations. Baghdad was on fire in a different way to the way it lit up during the war. Sport is one of the areas where the spirit of the Iraqi people is well represented. I tried to look at women's issues but to say that is a closed issue for a western man may be understating it. All in all these pictures are a work in progress. I hope they are informative in conveying the ongoing tragedy that is Iraq, and the numbness that pervades it all. It is a humbling place to work.

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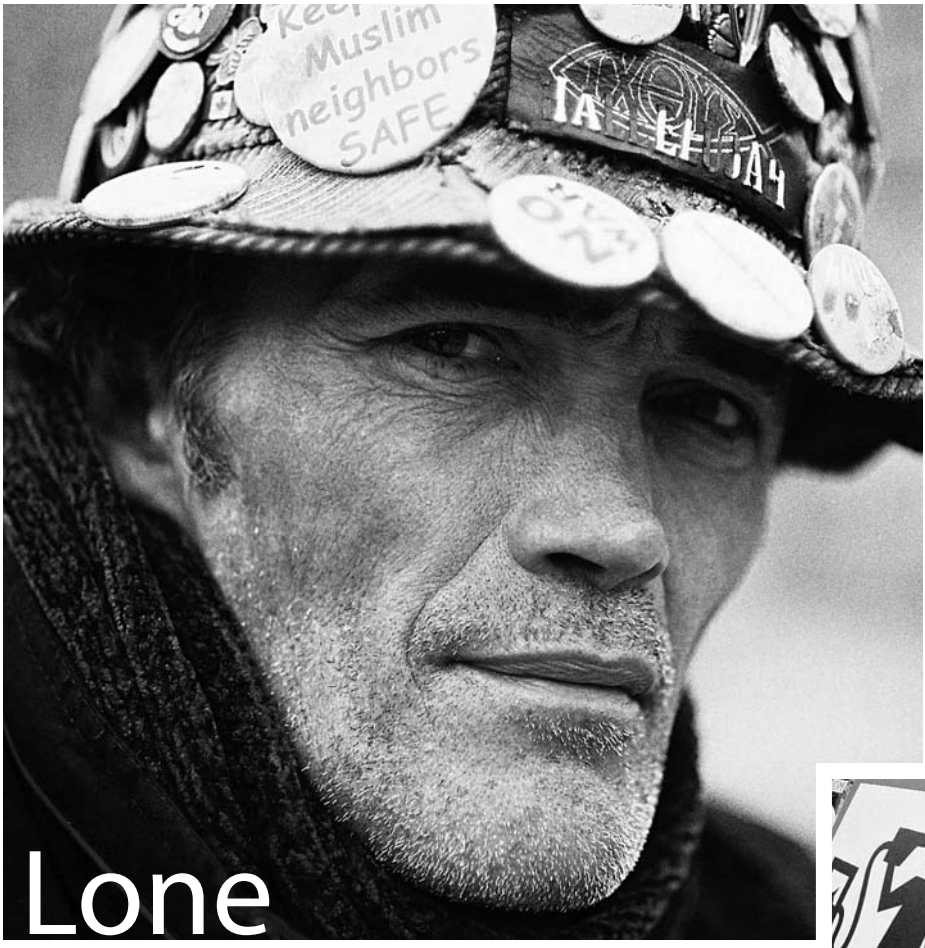


Lone Believer

THE OXFORD FORUM talks to BRIAN HAW – Britain's most committed man

BRIAN HAW has spent over 1300 days and nights on the same spot of pavement. He leaves it only when he has to – hospitalised by drunken, off-duty soldiers, or forced to Bow Street Magistrates' Court to defend himself (successfully) against charges of assault. It is an existence that he fears will ultimately cost him his life; yet he believes he has no choice in pursuing it.

Haw is Britain's most resolved protestor. Along with his many posters and displays, the 55-year-old has been a permanent fixture in Parliament Square since June 1, 2001 – initially to campaign against sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein's Iraq, more recently as part of the unprecedented anti-war movement that took hold in the months prior to, and since, the invasion in 2003. He is well-known to all those who live and work nearby – from the road-workers who pay him a cheery greeting as they pass, to the Cabinet ministers seeking specific parliamentary legislation to evict him from his conspicuous pitch. He is less well-known to his ex-wife and seven children. They live in Worcestershire, and visited London for the third anniversary of Haw's vigil, but have severed day-to-day ties with him.

It seems natural to ask just what it is that keeps him going. Huddled against the biting January wind, Haw gestures behind himself, towards the array of weathered displays that lines the pavement. One shows pictures of hideously deformed children. "We've poisoned these people until the end of time. Just as in Serbia, Kosovo and Afghanistan: we've used depleted uranium munitions. Four-point-five billion years, the Royal Society tells us is the half-life of depleted uranium. They said we're helping these people. Well, it's a bit hard to see how poisoning their water, and their land, and the air they breathe is going to help them."

> "I have no choice. I'm living out the last days of my life on this pavement"

Such words have been uttered, in a similar if not exact-same format, on innumerable occasions since the prospect of war first became real. Yet from Haw they sound different: absent is the bluster, vitriol and point-scoring of standard anti-war polemicists; instead, a quiet, bitter anger pervades every sentence. This is a man who has devoted his life, not just a weekly column, to another people's cause. Asked if he receives assistance in his vigil from such 'like-minded' individuals, his reply is resentful.

"Don't make me laugh. This sunshine warrior strolled up one day and told me my display looked shabby from the back – that if I contacted some of the organisations, they'd help me tidy it up. You tosser. I've been here over three years day and night putting this up – I'm having to pick it up all the time, with the storms." Cruelly, as he says this a gust of wind knocks over the display furthest from him.

"No, I don't get anybody helping me. So it really upsets me when somebody with all his

[Photography Frederic Aranda]

strength wants to give me his advice – wants to be my supervisor. Is he going to lift a finger? Of course not. I clean up here; I keep the place spotless."

So Haw is forced to stay awake at night, alone to guard against vandals. He described the most depressing night he has spent facing Big Ben: "It was New Year's Eve. Five so-called men stood up against that board there, with the [pictures of] children, using it as a urinal; pissing on it. Police were everywhere you looked. Does one of them stop them? Does one of them arrest them? 'Course not."

Speaking to him for a while, one realises that Haw differs from other anti-war protestors not just in his degree of dedication, but in his motives. He does not think in terms of winning people over to his point of view; he doesn't see it as a point of view. Instead, he is doing what he believes every single person in the country ought to be doing. He is incredulous that some do not agree with his stance.

"We're living in the Beavis and Butthead age, aren't we? We're all stupid. These Americans came up to me just the other day – barged in when I was talking to some other, friendly people. It's always the same question: 'Yeah, how many did Saddam Hussein kill?' What a stupid question. People say to me 'Well, Saddam killed people as well.' As well. As well – we're supposed to be the good guys."

There is not a scintilla of doubt in his mind.

Moreover, it is clear that this is no mere exercise in attention-seeking. One would be hard-pushed to find a person more distraught at his or her plight than Brian Haw; there certainly can be none other that has brought on such distress 'voluntarily'.

"I don't know how many more days I have left in me. I don't know. Sometimes it seems there isn't another one. How do I keep going? I don't want to bloody be here. I'm angry at being here. I'm so resentful. I have no choice. I'm living out the last days of my life on this pavement. I resent it. I had a home. I had a wife. I had seven wonderful children. I've lost all of that. I hate it. It makes me so angry. Why have I lost them? Because my neighbour's kid is as precious as mine. Look what we're doing to my neighbour's kid." Once more, he gestures at the display behind.

It is one of life's more puzzling ironies that Haw shares Evangelical Christian beliefs with the current president of America – a man whom, one suspects, the peace protestor would deem close to personifying evil. Nor does the similarity completely end there. Both practise oversimplification. Explaining his pacifist beliefs, for instance, Haw claims, "If you really look into every war, there is never a justification. People try to use the Second World War, but that in itself is a nonsense. If you care about people then you have to stop war." This last sentence barely differs from "you're either for us or against us", in style.

Indeed, one begins to wonder what might explain the disparity between Brian Haw's beliefs and those of George W Bush – given an apparently common mindset. The answer almost certainly lies in experience. Through clenched teeth, Haw tells of his father.

"He was a sniper in the British Army during the Second World War. He went into Bergen-Belsen – the death camp. He was one of the very first to go in to be the saviour of those poor people – one of the very first. Twenty years after that, he gasses himself. Yeah, my father shot people. The idea that you get rid of evil by shooting people…it doesn't work."

Few need reminding of George W Bush's parentage.

One question remains. If Brian Haw's protest is ever to be considered a 'success', it would have to dissuade international leaders from launching another such conflict. Does Haw believe this is likely to happen?

"God alone knows. But one thing gives me hope. Before the war, soldiers called me filthy, vile things; they used to attack me. Then one night, at two o'clock in the morning, one of them came up to me to apologise: in tears on this pavement. He can't sleep at night. He's come back from Iraq: 'They gave me a medal, Brian. I went to Buckingham Palace; they called me a hero. I'm a hero: for killing kids.' The tears of this young man – they gave me hope."

What is it, though, that he is hoping for? Unlike any other person living in Britain over the past three years, Brian Haw's life is fully entwined with the Iraq conflict: it is that that determines the nature and tone of his every interaction with passers-by.

"The story is we're going to kill enough of them until they give in. But they're not going to. They have nowhere else to go. And I'm in the same position as they are – I've nowhere else to go."

News under fire

ONE OF THE MOST frequently recurring controversies regarding media coverage of the Iraq conflict has centred upon the use of journalists 'embedded' with Anglo-American forces. To some, "brave men and women…risking death and meeting deadlines", to others mere "cheerleaders", correspondents dependent for their survival upon those providing them with a story certainly face a different set of priorities to the classic war reporter. The ability to roam freely, seeking personal, anecdotal snippets of information from civilians on both sides of the firing lines is precluded from embeds; the methodology that made the likes of Martha Gelhorn and John Pilger so revered is thus not an option. For defenders of embedding, though, the form of reporting practised by these great war correspondents has ceased to be a viable option, particularly in Iraq. Even *The Independent's* Robert Fisk – for so many years a model of the investigative foreign correspondent – has been forced to limit himself to the briefest of forays outside a well-guarded Baghdad hotel whilst 'covering' the Iraq situation. In that nation – the argument goes – westerners simply cannot find stories for themselves without kidnap becoming a virtual certainty; embedding provides a second-best alternative. The debate thus becomes, 'Is it better to have just one side to a story, or to have neither?' Both Kim Sengupta and Lindsey Hilsum decided upon the former; in the following articles they give their contrasting experiences.

[Photography Tim Lambon]

the truth untold

LINDSEY HILSUM, of Channel 4 News, was embedded with US marines in Fallujah during the American assault on the city last November.

I LIKE TO BE ON THE losing side. In 1999, when NATO bombed Kosovo and Serbia, I was based in Belgrade, chronicling the fear and anger of the Serbs. In 2003, I reported from Baghdad as US troops forged their way north to the Iraqi capital. From the relative safety of the Palestine Hotel, I watched bombs fall on palaces and ministries across the River Tigris, a mile away. It was hard not to sympathise with the Iraqis, the victims of three wars in 23 years, torn between fear of Saddam Hussein and a sense of humiliation as their national army was trounced. When the embedded journalists arrived with the American troops, I felt invaded too. They seemed so big, so confident and healthy. They took over our hotel as if we who had lived there for months did not exist at all.

So it was with reluctance that I applied to be embedded in Fallujah last November, as US marines prepared to attack the town. I knew it was too dangerous to do it any other way - journalists have been kidnapped and killed in Iraq. It doesn't matter how fair your reporting, nor how liberal your views – as far as the insurgents are concerned, you're just another infidel. But I feared that, as an embed, if I witnessed anything newsworthy I would be censored, or alternatively I would be kept back from the frontline and would get no story at all. Rarely have my prejudices been so rapidly overturned.

We flew by military transport plane from Kuwait to Baghdad. After midnight, we were lifted by helicopter from the Green Zone, which houses Iraqi ministries and foreign embassies. Thirty journalists in two choppers through the darkness, gunners with nightsights positioned at each side, to join 40 others already on the base at Fallujah.

"We can't tell you what's going to happen, but we haven't brought you here for no reason," said a senior officer, as he assigned us to different units.

We signed up to ground rules to protect "operational security", preventing us from revealing our position, the battle plan or precise numbers of US forces. Nor could we give the name or show the face of any American casualty until his or her family had been notified - usually 72 hours. Beyond that, we would be largely free to report as we wished. Using the "store forward" technology we carried, we would send our TV stories by satellite link, without any intervening censor.

The Channel 4 News team – myself and cameraman/producer Tim Lambon – accompanied a unit of Amphibious Assault Vehicles or Amtracks carrying infantry from India Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. (The foot soldiers were the "grunts", the guys in vehicles the "amgrunts".) After a night sleeping in the desert, the marines roared into Fallujah, blowing two breaches in the railway track which marked the town boundary before the massive vehicles lumbered through like armoured behemoths. We filmed as the marines kicked down doors and blasted gates before searching buildings.

we worked in the 27 ton armoured vehicle...editing on a laptop computer at an angle of 30 degrees

On several occasions, we accompanied small teams assaulting positions where they believed insurgents were hiding. We filmed everything - the mortar teams setting up and firing into the target zone. The helicopters coming in. The bombs and missiles. The raids on buildings. The arrest of suspects. We did not see hand-to-hand combat, but other reporters did, hence the controversial footage shot by Kevin Sites of NBC showing a marine killing an apparently wounded insurgent in a mosque.

Alongside four marines, we worked in the 27 ton armoured vehicle, Tim sometimes editing on his laptop computer at an angle of 30 degrees, as the beast ploughed down walls. He transmitted our stories daily from a mini-satellite dish erected on top of the Amtrack when it finally stood still. We ate our "meals ready to eat" and slept in its belly, as the engine roared night and day. I didn't wash my hair or take off my boots for week. In the three weeks of our embed, I learnt more about how the Americans wage war than I have in the rest of my career.

The captain of India Company, Brian Chontosh, had a sound-bite for every occasion. "We told them to surrender but they said they'd rather die. So they're gonna die," he said, after a clash which lasted six hours and ended with two marines and 21 insurgents dead. We were, on occasion, prevented from filming US casualties but otherwise our access was almost total.

The contrast with our colleagues embedded with the British Black Watch could not have been greater. While I was chatting to marines freely, hearing every opinion imaginable about the war in Iraq, they were prevented from talking to British squaddies unless there was a press officer present. While we were filming frontline action and satelliting it straight back to London every day, they were only allowed out on occasional missions. The British, it seems, fear that everything they do will somehow be distorted by the media – Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir Michael Walker recently even blamed the deaths of Black Watch soldiers on the media. But the Americans are so confident of their mission, they welcome journalists as witnesses. Channel 4 News viewers may have been appalled to see US marines are blowing up houses and killing people, but as long as we obeyed the ground rules, the Americans never interfered with our reporting.

Of course, American openness could not make up for the essential limitation of being embedded. We never found out what the people of Fallujah thought, because most civilians had fled and we had little opportunity to speak to the few who remained. That's the issue we face as we struggle to represent what is really going on in Iraq. We get only the briefest glimpse of what Iraqis think about the chaos engulfing their country. We can glean the motives of the insurgents only from their websites and occasional interviews by Arab journalists who are risking their lives to bring stories from beyond the frontline.

Reporting Iraq solely as an embed gives a one-sided picture but as long as any journalist is a potential hostage who may face torture and beheading, the alternative is not to report at all.

Lindsey Hilsum is International Editor of Channel 4 News

Pictured on facing page reporting from Fallujah last year

the Fog of War

KIM SENGUPTA of *The Independent* was based in Baghdad in Autumn last year, and embedded with the Black Watch during their deployment to Camp Dogwood in central Iraq.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH British forces has been more good than bad. There were not that many problems in Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan - although things did get pretty fractious there when we were stuck for weeks in the desolation of Bagram airbase. In the murderous mayhem of Darfur, one of the saner voices was that of the splendid Col Rob Symonds, a British observer with the African Union monitoring force.

However, relations between journalists and the Ministry of Defence had taken a turn for the worse from the time when Alastair Campbell, complaining that there were too many negative stories about Afghanistan and Iraq, decided that Downing Street should take control of news about the military. The death of David Kelly and the Hutton inquiry further fuelled this mutual distrust between the media and the MoD. And although there was hope of a 'Prague Spring' after Campbell's departure, there has been little sign of that blossoming.

With the exception of Bagram, none of my stints with the British military has actually involved embedding - the process of journalists living with the forces while, theoretically, getting access to the troops in return for accepting restrictions on how one works. I was not with either the British or American forces during the Iraq war. Instead I was in Baghdad, which was tantamount to embedding with the Iraqi regime and the draconian conditions they imposed. The problem we faced with the Black Watch stemmed, to a large extent, from the lack of British knowledge about the Sunni triangle which is by far the most violent location in the conflict. This lack of knowledge is not just confined to the military, the media too suffer from it. *The Times*, *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Telegraph* staff Baghdad, but none of the other newspapers do. Among TV and radio only the BBC is present, and their staff are not allowed to leave the BBC house, surrounded by armed guards in a heavily barricaded compound. All their broadcasts take place from the roof of the building.

The reason for the absence of much of the media is the sheer danger of being in Baghdad. On the military side it is the American forces who have to cope with that danger on a daily basis. The British forces in the south face far lesser risks. There, the Shias are happy to watch and wait as the Sunnis batter themselves against the Americans. It was this lack of understanding of how things were in Baghdad which explains some of the attitude of the British military in Basra. Here is an example - British journalists in Baghdad were invited to fly down to meet the Black Watch before they moved to central Iraq. This meant going on the airport road, the most hazardous road in Iraq, one on which the insurgents carry out bombings and kidnappings on a daily basis. The British military sensibly prefer not to use it when they come to Baghdad, flying to the heavily fortified 'Green Zone' by helicopter instead. Richard Lloyd-Parry from *The Times*, Toby Harnden from the *Telegraph* and I took this road to catch the flight. It was, thankfully, a relatively quiet day, just two bombs en route with four people killed. We arrived in Basra to find that this 'facility' consisted of Lt Col James Cowan, of the Black Watch, reading out a statement. No questions of any description, we were told, would be allowed.

> It was, thankfully, a relatively quiet day, two bombs en route with four people killed

This changed only when we forcefully pointed out that we had not made the journey from Baghdad, at some risk, for just a press statement. A limited question and answer session then took place with Col Cowan, and we met with some soldiers, who had been coached to say the right thing - how they apparently could not wait to go off to the Triangle of Death. A few days later, as they set off for Camp Dogwood, some of the squaddies were far more off message. "Tony Blair is a liar", was one comment to camera. Around the same time a private memo from Col Cowan, showing his deep misgivings about the mission, was leaked to the newspapers in London. This, inevitably, led to Government consternation and resulted in the reporters embedded at Camp Dogwood finding ourselves corralled into a working and sleeping area, with no access to the rest of the camp. Interviewees were brought over by arrangement, and press officers sat in on interviews. As the numbers of casualties mounted, the more sensitive the military became. They had been surprised by suicide bombers, they said, something they had not experienced in the south. We found this incredible. This, we pointed out, was the Sunni triangle where suicide bombings are an everyday fact of life. Didn't they even read the newspapers before they came up? We asked. This was not a popular question.

Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence's attempts to manage the news led to other problems. Details of the casualties being suffered by the Black Watch were being released to journalists at Dogwood - but with an embargo until the next of kin had been informed. While this was being adhered to Iraq, the same details were being leaked to reporters, mainly lobby correspondents, in London. The problems, it should be stressed, were not due to the army press officers at Camp Dogwood, despite their best efforts to help. They were due, rather, to interference from officials in London. The situation markedly improved after we pointed out that there was no reason why we should bother staying at Dogwood coming under daily attack, while colleagues in London were the ones writing the stories. From then on we accompanied the troops on operations and there was noticeably more openness.

On my way back to Baghdad I was invited to spend sometime with the Marine Expeditionary Unit hunting Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and engaging in some heavy fighting near Iskandariyah. Col Ron Johnson, the commander at the marines' Camp Kalsu, a big, cigar chomping man with a resemblance to Robert De Niro, declared " You can go and talk to anyone in this base." They may say to you they hate Iraqis, they may say to you this is an unjust war. I'll accept that. But if anyone says ' no comment' let me have his name. Iraq is too important for people to come and serve and not have any views". Major General Bill Rollo, the British commander in Basra, came in for a flying visit, and Col Johnson invited me to sit in at their meeting to organise an attack for the following week. I pointed out it was highly unlikely the British military would agree to this. That, of course, is what happened. The embarrassed Americans said the British party had a collective heart attack at the suggestion of a journalist's presence at an operational planning meeting.

There is now and there will continue to be independent reporting from Iraq, albeit by a small number of reporters. But it is also a fact that we have to rely on the forces for some of the most important aspects of our news gathering. Later this month some of us will be back in Iraq for the elections, depending hugely on the military for our safety and movement. It will be interesting then to see what lessons have been learnt by each side.

***Kim Sengupta is the defence correspondent for* The Independent**

What the Media do to our Politics

JOHN LLOYD starts the Oxford Forum's media debate, with a look at the power play between the media and politicians

THE POWER OF THE media is now very large. In the past half century, nearly all of the institutions in which people believed or placed their faith – organised religion, political parties, patriotic pride, society's elders, the monarchy, the military, trade unions – have declined. The media have become much stronger. Where these institutions had various takes on society, how it should be run and its moral condition, now there is only the media – and the state. The general collapse of faith – in a divine being, in country right or wrong, in political ideology – has left a vacant space. As the media have become more powerful, so – at least in Britain – they have become more opinionated. In part this is a reaction to the immediacy of radio and TV: why produce a detailed report for reading twelve hours or more after the details have been broadcast? In part, though, it reflects a retreat from reportage into the easier and cheaper habits of pronouncement. As comment has become more uninhibited, so it must shout louder to be heard. A high proportion of those pontificating in the British press know little, at first hand, of what they are writing about: the proliferation of comment columns has put a high premium on a tone of aggrieved exasperation, especially with politics.

Those commentators worth reading are those who know whereof they speak or write. It also helps to have some sense that the writer has thought through the difficulties of doing what he or she advocates: otherwise, it's advice in a void. But most comment isn't so rooted: it rails against the cowardice, or inefficiency, or bloody-mindedness, or idiocy of public people without reflecting on – or even knowing of, their constraints.

We don't know what this has done to politics, or to people's view of the political scene. A common sense view would lead one to believe that it has besmirched politics, and the public sphere in general: it also seems to have decreased trust in the media themselves. The media have shown little interest in discovering what effect they have (as against what circulation and viewership they have among which segments of the population). Common sense also seems to show that people regard the media with great scepticism, and thus don't believe a lot of what they see or read. But that's very bad news for the news media: it greatly deflates their role as an indispensable pillar of a democratic state. They are: but pillars can crumble.

the proliferation of comment columns has put a high premium on a tone of aggrieved exasperation, especially with politics

The great argument against change in the media in the direction of making it more 'civic' – that is, providing more of the information, analysis and debate which citizens need to be fully citizens – is that it's boring. Much in political, or corporate, or international affairs is complex: all need keys to their understanding, Newspapers – and news programmes – are full of narratives which it takes effort and some imagination to grasp. But then, so does public life. If we impoverish information about it, we impoverish the life itself.

Does this power, and what the media are doing with it, mean that they are now in charge of politics? Not wholly: but they have changed and are changing politics very much. Much of what we apprehend in politics is done through the media: the opinions we form on politicians whom we don't know in person take shape through the media. The more the pressure within the media grows to make them more partisan – on the model of the US Fox TV Channel – the more the media will become political actors in their own right. One could make the argument that plurality of media produces a debate with many voices, and thus democracy is served. But democracy is not merely a plurality of voices: it is a system of representation, in which conflicts are mediated within and between political forces. Media which, consciously or unconsciously, downgrade or degrade that would seem likely to do harm to the fabric of society in the long term.

***John Lloyd is Editor of the* FT magazine**

[Illustration Maya Evans]

From biography to obituary

THE OXFORD FORUM talks to STEPHEN POLLARD, author of the biography that played such a significant role in David Blunkett's political downfall

IT IS A GREAT IRONY that Stephen Pollard's biography of David Blunkett has had a greater impact upon the life of its subject than most of the incidents described within it. Published last December, when revelations regarding the former Home Secretary's private life were emerging near daily, the book famously contains cutting criticism levelled by Blunkett at former cabinet colleagues – criticism that ultimately rendered his resignation a certainty. Yet more ironic, given its association with his downfall, is the fact that the bulk of Pollard's study portrays Blunkett in a broadly favourable light – as the dedicated, principled Socialist, far more subtle a man than 'simple-minded authoritarian' caricatures would have it.

Pollard's is the latest in a long line of biographies to have unsettled the political establishment – Cherie Blair, for instance, recently took pains to refer to Anthony Seldon's portrayal of her husband as "that work of fiction". Discussing the genre with *The Oxford Forum*, he acknowledged that the biographer's concerns are somewhat different when a subject is still in the limelight.

"I wouldn't classify it as a problem, but it's certainly different – you have different concerns. For instance, this whole business with [Blunkett's] quotes about fellow cabinet ministers: off the record, you talk to any cabinet minister and they will tell you exactly the same kind of thing; when their careers are gone, they'll tell you exactly the same sort of thing. The difference is that Blunkett was a serving Home Secretary, so it was explosive. Indeed, one of my 'political expert' colleagues claims that it's unprecedented – that he cannot think of any serving cabinet minister who has said in black and white just what he thinks of his colleagues. So the fact that he was in office allowed a different… emphasis, perhaps."

Did Pollard ever have any doubts about including those "explosive" quotes, particularly given his clear sympathy towards Blunkett as a man (to the extent that a *Sunday Times* reviewer, albeit somewhat unfairly, referred to him as Blunkett's "wet-nosed helpmate")?

"No, no doubts at all. I mean, I was amazed, as you can imagine, when he said what he did. But I was so keen not to stitch him up that as he was speaking to me I said to him, 'You do know the tape recorder's on, David, don't you?' – because, you know, he's blind and may have assumed, wrongly, that I'd turned it off or something. But if you're interviewing someone and you really do go out of your way to say, almost, 'Watch your words, you know this is on the record, don't you?', and they nonetheless carry on giving you quotes that are, to put it mildly, 'interesting', I think you'd be doing yourself, at the very least, a disservice not to use them."

He is, though, understandably ambivalent about the fact that these more 'newsworthy' elements of his work seem likely to overshadow the whole: "In the context, I can't for a second pretend that the publicity [the quotes] got was not wholly to my benefit – people would kill for that sort of publicity. Though ultimately they made up about ten lines in a 350-page book – which is a very sympathetic portrait of him, really – but if the book's remembered for anything it'll be remembered for those quotes, I think. As an author, you have split views on it."

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Pollard does not believe it is always necessary for biographers to secure direct interviews with their subjects.

"It depends. Just to talk specifically about my book, I was one in a long line of people

[Illustration Nick Hayes]

who tried to get David's co-operation, and in the past – he's a man who inspires tremendous loyalty amongst his colleagues and friends – in the past he's always said 'no', because he was, until recently, a very private man. People had tried to carry on nonetheless, but had found a total 'brick wall' of silence, so they'd basically given up. That said, sometimes you can find a 'happy medium', as it were – it can be that you actually do interview the person and you can be compromised. I mean, for instance, I've been criticised in a couple of the book reviews I've had for effectively writing a hagiography. Fine; fair criticism, perhaps, that it's too sympathetic to him."

It must be something of a worry, as a biographer, that one might be putting too much trust in material 'fed' by the subject?

"No, I don't think it should be. I mean, there are some things which are impossible to corroborate, and that's the reason why I took a particular stylistic decision: I've not sourced any interviews, quotations or quotes apart from those from David Blunkett – all of which are in 'direct quote'. I partly did that for a slightly boring reason – that some people wanted to be 'off the record' and some 'on', and I just thought it would have been a bit odd to have a mix of both. But it's also partly because I think that if it's in his own words then people can judge for themselves whether they think something's a bit rich."

Pollard is conscious that this policy of direct quotation, as opposed to assertive narrative regarding the subject's beliefs and desires, is by no means the standard approach taken by biographers. Nonetheless, he is adamant that it successfully enabled Blunkett's professed thoughts to be qualified.

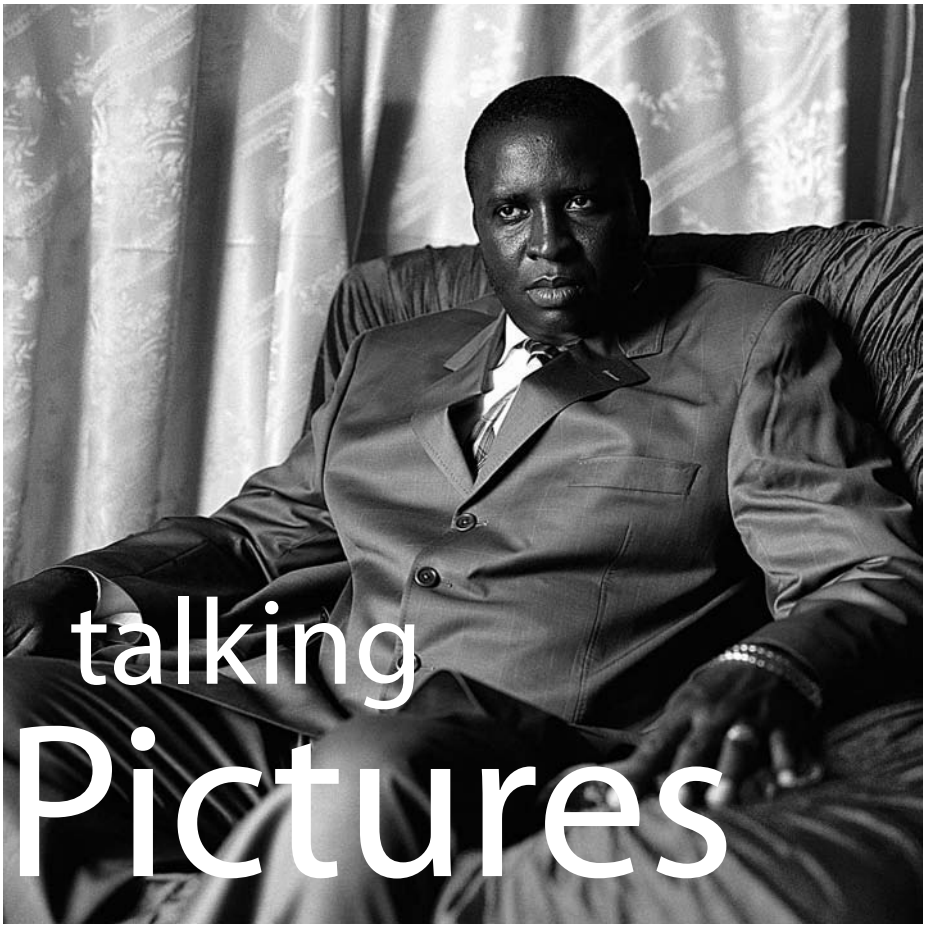
"It hadn't really crossed my mind, but Peter Riddell, in his review in *The Times*, said I'd come up with a new genre of political biography, which is like the 'footballer'-style biography: 'As told to…' – in that there was a spine running through the book of David Blunkett's own words, with the rest my additions to that. I think there's something in that; I think it's true. And, you know, it may be that it's a very bad way of going about things; I happen to think it's a very good way – I said in my introduction that if Norman Gash had had tape-recorded interviews with Peel when he wrote his biography then I'd have thought he definitely would have cited those interviews and quoted from them."

This is not the only stylistic issue on which Pollard has faced a dilemma: it is an inevitable consequence of charting one individual's life that political debates and events become a backdrop to the study, rather than the central focus of it. At one point, for instance, he is forced to switch from analysing Blunkett's role in opposing the Poll Tax to a description of events surrounding guide dog Teddy's retirement. Is it frustrating to have to adhere so rigidly to the subject's career?

"It's interesting, yes: I was originally going to have a separate chapter on 'the dogs' [to date, there have been five], and was going to deal with it very much as a separate thing. I started writing it like that, but I realised pretty soon on that it didn't work – that you had to try at least just to write it as one general 'life story'. But yes, when I went back and read the first draft – well, in fact even when I read it back in proof form – my overwhelming feeling was 'God, this is superficial.' – skating over everything. Then I realised it was actually 140,000 words – I've never written anything as long as that before – and [that feeling] is just unavoidable. You just have to prioritise."

Nonetheless, Pollard is realistic about the difficulties faced by any biographer writing so soon after the events charted, accepting that his can only be considered a 'first draft' of the life of David Blunkett. Yet he believes this is a more general problem: "I think any biography is a first draft. One of my political heroes – obsessions, perhaps – is [19th-century Liberal Unionist] Joe Chamberlain. Well, I've read three or four biographies, or mini-biographies, of him and none of them is satisfactory. That's not because some of them aren't wonderful books – it's just that you can't get the complete essence of a man in a book, and I think that's even more true for somebody who is in office, of whom you can't have any genuine perspective."

It can be of little comfort to David Blunkett, though: with a biographer whose feet are placed so reassuringly on the ground, one wonders what it was that drove him to reveal so much of his 'essence'.



talking Pictures

THE OXFORD FORUM talks to award-winning photojournalist TIM HETHERINGTON about our need to develop a visual language

'IN THE BEGINNING there was the word but I think and believe that in the beginning was seeing and that in seeing you can get to ideas that have not been labelled yet, pure ideas that precede the word, and ideas that have the possibility of escaping propaganda and predictability." *Gilles Perres*

Although by trade a photographer, Tim Hetherington prefers to term his work 'visual communication', reflecting his core belief that visual language is far more complex and more important than generally accepted, "With the onset of the digital revolution, the barriers between disciplines – from photography to design, from filmmaking to new media – are dissolving and cross-fertilisation is more fluent."

From his early work on the digital technology revolution in India to his time spent in Liberia with the LURD rebel army filming for the documentary *Liberia: An Uncivil War*, recently awarded a Special Jury Prize at the International Documentary Film Festival, Hetherington is driven by a desire to "communicate ideas to people".

"I'm not a war junkie – I don't go to places like Liberia because I get off on it. Whilst war photography is the most extreme in terms of it being pure photojournalism taking place right on the edge, what I am interested is how people are touched by the story, and if they are, that they become aware of something they hadn't previously known about."

The fact that "image-making has been democratized", with increasingly accessible equipment (even the most basic mobile phones are now fitted with cameras), is to Hetherington further evidence of a universal need for the development of an awareness of the image. In some ways, the growth of photography and image-making is undoubtedly a positive advance. Webblogs with photos have gone some way in undercutting the monopoly of the media-baron and other self-interested parties. The shocking photos exposing the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib have become an iconic part of our perception of the war in Iraq. These were taken by ordinary soldiers, yet generated public outcry sufficient to hold those in power to account.

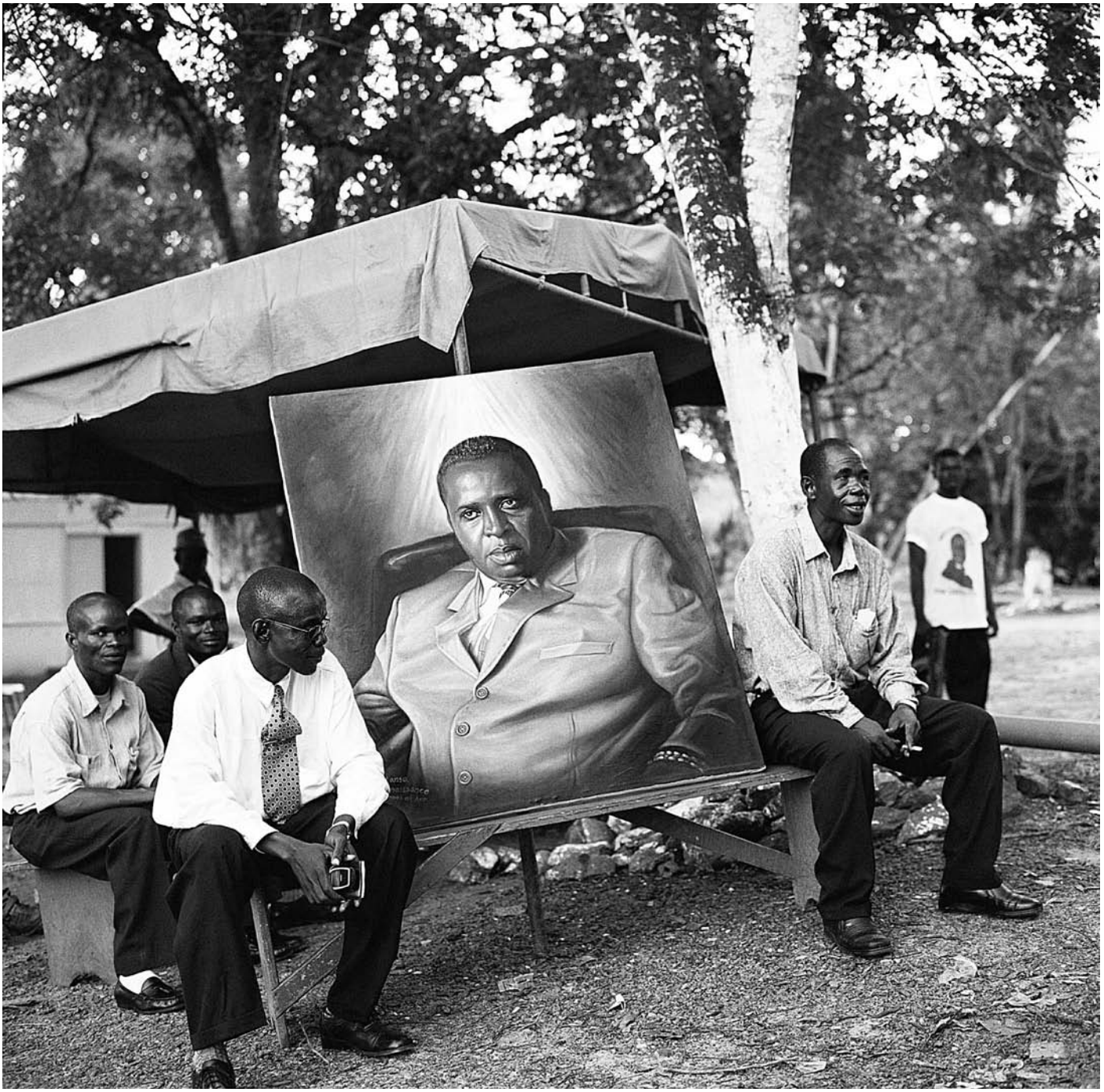
'As images proliferate the challenge is not so much understanding the subject, but rather the context'

Yet equally the image can also take an insidious, potentially dangerous guise. "The world is putting out stuff by which we are being judged. The majority of those in the Arab world, for example, don't read English, so what it sees that comes from the West is all-important. We need to start controlling what we produce visually, or at least be more aware of its effect."

Having worked extensively in Africa, Hetherington feels that the continent is a further case in point – put simply, it has "become stereotyped…our primary means of receiving information about Africa has been through the news". With news invariably focussed on the bad, all those who consume it "have become unwitting partners in manufacturing a consensus about Africa being irreversibly backward and beyond hope – this is a very negative and dangerous attitude to take towards the continent".

The visual image not only shapes our perception of other societies, but also dictates the way we see ourselves within our own. Herein lies the power of advertising for Hetherington: it is "in many ways a very

[Photography Tim Hetherington]



Sekou Conneh, leader of the Liberian rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. Left, taken at his headquarters in Conakry, Guinea, and, above, a portrait based upon the image

destructive medium – an unchecked form of propaganda for consumerism". Mass marketing is a "very effective basis for building up consent for a capitalist society – but this does not equate to a balanced, self-fulfilled society". However, with the huge material volume of photography currently being produced and the fact, readily accepted by Hetherington, that any visual communication will be propaganda of one form or another, it is difficult to imagine how such a powerful medium can be controlled responsibly.

The solution, emphatically proposed by Hetherington, lies in education. At present, although media courses are attracting ever-larger numbers of students, the analysis and study of the image takes place at a rather removed, academic level, and rarely in the day-to-day educational arena. Too often is visual communication marginalized by the study of text, but this is to deny the innate and inherent significance of the image to the human psyche. "The sense of the visual is embedded in children before the word, yet it needs to be more institutionalised in the curriculum."

Visual literacy is certainly underdeveloped in our culture, and Hetherington sees education as going hand in hand in hand with his work and his desire to "share [his] experiments with people". He perceives the need to generate the consensus that "if anything, we live in a visual world".

"Understanding images is much like understanding one's emotions. One has to be able to channel information in a different way, in order to allow your understanding of that information to be purer.

"As images proliferate in an ever-increasing quantity in the world, the challenge is not so much understanding the subject of the image, but rather the context.

"An apple may just be an apple, but on the side of a computer it is no longer a piece of fruit. And if it is part of an image of Adam and Eve, it is something entirely different altogether."

***Tim Hetherington will address the Media Society in February (date to be confirmed, check www.oxfordmediasociety.com for details) – there will also be a screening of* Liberia: An Uncivil War**

primal thrills

WILL BROWN explores the way we watch films and the effect they have upon us...

OKAY. TIME TO GET **crazy** with a left-field argument for why we find moving images so arresting.

Traditionally, cinema has been understood to be a language: a system of signs that we can understand because these signs, especially when in combination with each other, have meaning. When we see the Bride in the Pussy Wagon in Kill Bill Vol 1 trying to wiggle her toe, we see a shot of her face in concentration. We then see a shot of her toe. By cutting between these two images, we understand that she is trying to control her toe. We are helped by the fact that the Bride says as much and that the music over the images evokes triumph over adversity through steely determination – but the images alone would suffice. So clear is the meaning that I find myself wiggling my toe when watching this scene.

Of course, the above is an extremely simple example. The language of cinema can be and is much more complex. Similarly, there are more complex theories that endeavour to explain how we understand film. Psychoanalytic theories work along the lines that we have strong drives to see and to hear, both of which are predicated upon the notion of lack. That is, what we see and hear is by definition distant from us and this distance (this absence, this lack) is what drives our desire. This is heightened in cinema, because what we see is not actually there (unlike in the theatre and in real life).

When what we perceive and lack is a screen goddess, and therefore what we desire is a screen goddess, then we can understand how cinema is thought to be based upon and even to reinforce dominant Western ideology: cinema's language is that of the strong straight white male, who desires the weak woman, who is the passive object of the camera's – and therefore our – gaze.

According to feminist approaches to cinema, the woman should not be the passive object of the male gaze; she should be active and strong. A queer interpretation of cinema says that we can perceive, lack and therefore desire members of the same sex. Race-based approaches to cinema call for films in which members of different racial groups are portrayed as strong and positive rather than weak or negative.

There is a lot of mileage in the above approaches to cinema. Cinema is a language and individual films deserve to be analysed in such a manner that we understand their meaning. Furthermore, the meaning of particular films according to different spectators (be it a woman, a homosexual, a black male, etc) is also important in getting to grips with exposing the underlying ideology of a movie – to discover what language it is speaking.

when we go to the cinema, we flinch, look away, scream and wiggle our toes

However, whilst there is much of interest to discuss with regard to such theories of cinema, perhaps they do not get to grips with the real reason why we watch films.

Several recent neurophysiological studies suggest that our eyes work like a spotlight: we concentrate on only a small area of our field of vision and almost entirely neglect the rest of the information that is present before our eyes. Others suggest that our eyes function like a highlighter: we pick out similar colours and match them. Both, however, suggest that our attention (whether focussed like a spotlight, or sifting like a highlighter) is drawn towards stimuli. Changes of colour and movement stimulate our attention.

If, in the tradition of Richard Dawkins and John Gray, we consider ourselves mere animals, it makes sense that our attention is drawn to change: change could mean approaching danger and we need to analyse the threat posed. It would also hold that the faster and louder the change, the more attention we will pay to it: we need to respond faster to a possible emergency situation.

Contemporary mainstream cinema and contemporary television, particularly music videos, involve fast cuts, fast movement of the camera, fast cars, loud music and deafening explosions.

When we are sat in a pub, the television in the corner is always catching our eye: it changes fastest and thus seems the source of danger. When we go to the cinema, we flinch, look away, scream and wiggle our toes: sometimes the 'danger' (which we accept with more complicity than we do a television in a pub) is such that we respond physically.

Is it possible that our attraction and responses to cinema and other visual media are based not upon the conscious cognition of signs and meanings? Signs and meanings may exist, but prior to recognising them, are we drawn to these media/stimuli because they are some sort of primal return to the thrill of danger and our survival of it?

Hollywood is preoccupied with action, speed and disasters: survival is core to the films that are most popular throughout the (Western) world. Could this popularity be based not on a dominant (Western) ideology/language, but rather upon our (willing) entry into a virtual space (the cinema) where we exercise our primal instincts?

Films (and other phenomena - including driving?) arrest and excite us more than real life because they move much faster than pedestrian reality. Although illusory, they take us back to a time before ideology and language, when we were just trying to survive.

COMPETITION

We have two pairs of tickets for a late-night showing at the Phoenix Picturehouse to give away. Email your answers to editor@oxfordforum.com

1. How many Oscars did *CITIZEN KANE* win?

2. What is the name of the actor who plays child murderer Hans Beckert in Fritz Lang's *M?*

3. What is the name of Jean-Luc Godard's latest film?

the camera always lies

TIM GARDAM argues that critics of 'reality television' are missing the point

WHEN GERMAINE GREER stalked out of *Celebrity Big Brother* in January, it was as if *Big Brother* had reached some sort of apotheosis. A programme invented to create celebrities from the clay of mere mortals had itself transformed into one where those who, in their different ways, regarded themselves as celebrities, submitted voluntarily to the same indignities without even the promise of fame.

Yet Germaine was different; she was one of a number of cultural icons who had, in the past, condemned the programme (whilst affecting not to watch it). But she had had the guts to enter the arena and to take it on. Rather as Maximus in *Gladiator*, she no doubt thought she could turn the tables on the invisible emperor who waited off screen to turn his thumb up or down. In the event, it seems that Germaine felt that by her presence she was authenticating the very culture that she wished to defeat. So she walked.

Big Brother has become the by-word for reality television. It is a remarkable creation, as it is a remarkable genre. No other genre of programme is susceptible to wholesale condemnation. It is normally accepted that there are good dramas and bad dramas, funny comedies and dire ones; documentary is allowed a variety of purposes and achievements. Television programmes are normally allowed to succeed or fail on their individual merits. But reality television is different. Those who condemn such programmes curse it for what it is. It is worth

considering why.

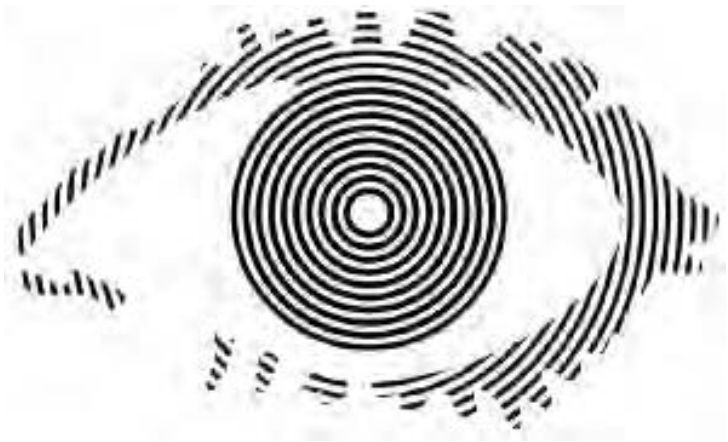
When Germaine Greer condemned *Big Brother* as a bully, she put her finger on a fundamental change in the programme since it started. At its inception, *Big Brother* was interesting because it made overt what television had previously left covert: the manipulative power of the producer in the shaping of documentary experience.

Indeed, in all sorts of ways, Big Brother was far more honest and less manipulative. By showing every moment and every conversation, it took away the producer's power. In the first series, the risk lay in allowing the programme to take on a life of its own as the participants were left to create their own narratives, structured only by the evictions and weekly tasks. Its first two series were marked by their emotional generosity; they had a pantomime morality; the villains (Nasty Nick etc.) were outed, the romantic leads lived happily ever after. On the final evening of the first series when more people had voted for the final three contestants than had voted in that year's Scottish, Welsh and London Mayoral elections combined, the three finalists, a black father, a working class white guy from Liverpool, and an educated, gay former nun, took the applause. A generation had turned them into heroes not for what they represented, but because it liked them. The programme had allowed viewers not just to watch but to take part – and they had done, with a generosity and friendliness that was extremely unusual. At the same time, the lack of self consciousness of the housemates was itself key to their popularity. Unaware of the effect they were having on the world outside, they had, in some fundamental way, been themselves.

Inevitably, as each series passed, so that lack of self consciousness turned into a conniving self awareness. The applicants became ever more caricatures of themselves, many seeking to be simply replicants of the previous year's successful stereotypes. As their spontaneity disappeared so the producers intervened more. The series became battleground of mutual manipulation. The producers divided the house into two; rich and poor. The contestants, knowing that television advertising regulations banned the overt use of brand names, dropped them randomly into their conversation, knowing that it could not be broadcast. A format that had been invented to cede control had become one that defined itself by a battle for control. In so doing it's became nasty; every bit as compulsive but coarser, more brutal.

Celebrity Big Brother was an inversion of the original concept, but it also reflected the format's evolution. The first series was compelling because the damaged and insecure egos of some of the celebrities could not cope with the fact of public accountability. Vanessa Feltz memorably went into meltdown in anticipation of the result of the people's vote. Jack Dee's humane common sense turned him into some Dumbledore figure before his time. The second series was simply boring.

This series, however, has followed the path of the format as a whole; the neurosis, hugely enjoyable as it has been to watch, has come not from the test of public accountability, but from the battle between the blatant manipulation of the producers and the preparedness of the contestants to accept it. As *Big Brother* has developed, it has moved from a soft-centred, exuberant innocence to inhabit a far darker, more self-destructive universe.



The charge against reality television is one that crystalises the charge against modern television as a whole. In the battle to replicate success, it has become increasingly extreme, absurd and unpleasant. If there were not some truth in the charge, it would not be so prevalent, but it is unfair to lay this moral condemnation at the door of one programme. Television has always been manipulative. In the most classic documentary, there has always been an uneasy and inherently unstable relationship between subject and producer. An honest producer should admit that, in the end, there will always be a breach of trust between the documentary maker and his or her subject.

At its inception, when the film depends on access, producers sell their personality – a dependability, a reassurance of trust. Maybe at this stage they mean it. Yet once the film is shot, and the physical proximity of camera to participant is no longer there, that relationship, laid out in the rushes in the cutting room like a cadaver on a slab, becomes cooler. Each cut, each elision of the interview, each necessary compression of alteration of chronology exploits in some way the trust the subject has put in the programme maker. The success and, in the viewer's eyes, the honesty of a documentary in the end is closely related to that distancing of the relationship between the two.

Technologically too, the process of filming has always involved an element of manipulative dishonesty. As the recording medium has shifted from celluloid to video, and now to digital, so the nature of that manipulation has become more obvious. In a world where film was expensive, and demanded a clapper board at the start or end of each shot, the nature of the transaction was clearer. Documentary films were seldom shot at ratios of more than 15:1 (15 minutes recorded for one minute transmitted). With the coming of video such disciplines broke down, and today the digital camera rolls perpetually. As a result, every nuance can be captured, and then shaped into the confection that is a modern documentary.

This does not mean that such programmes are bad, morally or aesthetically. Rather it forces us to admit that television is not in any way a literal medium, nor should it be; every programme is the version of the producer's truth; confrontation, moral judgement, narrative progression are in that sense distortions of experience. The modern formatted documentaries, such as *Faking It* and *Wife Swap*, are in some ways borrowing from *Big Brother* to adapt the documentary form to the notions of narrative that the reality show has pioneered. They are deeply manipulative; the characters of the participants, at the beginning of such programmes, are as schematised as in any medieval morality play. The narrative progression towards Pygmalion transformation (*Faking It*) or moral redemption (*Wife Swap*) is carefully contrived. Even in more educational subject areas, such as *That'll Teach 'em*, or *1900 House*, what 'happened' to the people filmed was the result of the deliberate puppetry of the production team.

For those who lump all these programmes together as 'reality', they are artificial, and in some ways degrading or dishonest. However, it might be more true to see them as the more honest genre. They lay bare, to a generation for whom television has lost its mystery, the nature of the transaction between maker and subject, problematic, morally ambiguous, and in many senses untrustworthy. But arguably television programmes have always been such. Yet out of this unstable relationship comes the test of a good programme; whatever the level of artifice, the viewer trusts something fundamentally true has been captured and revealed.

Tim Gardam was Director of Programming at Channel 4 and commissioned the first series of* Big Brother. *He is now Principal of St Anne's College, Oxford

art for our times

CLEM HITCHCOCK explores the relevance of retrospectives with Jannis Kounellis at Modern Art Oxford's latest exhibition

JANNIS KOUNELLIS will be known by many through his association to the 'Arte Povera' (literally 'poor art') movement after an exhibition of a group of artists in Genoa in 1967. With this in mind, when this artist's first one-man show in the UK for ten years was announced, one might have expected a display of his famous 1960s works with some token information about why they were so important at a particular moment, and examples of how his work has evolved since then.

Yet the exhibition at Modern Art Oxford is not a conventional retrospective. True, a wide range of Kounellis' works are here from when he first started working in the 1950's to the present day with many examples of use of what might be called his trademark materials, coal, iron beams, cotton, burlap sacks and living creatures. However, no story of art is told here. We have instead a series of innovative installations where Kounellis's works are integrated within the five exhibition spaces of Modern Art Oxford including an entirely new work created especially for the upper gallery.

This approach has been employed by Kounellis in the majority of his one-man shows since the 1980s (which he describes himself as "hypothetical retrospectives") where a selection of his works are installed in often very unusual sites and spaces. In the entrance halls of The Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna (Rome 2002) Kounellis constructed a giant labyrinth out of vertical sheets of steel with recessed spaces containing different artworks. Most recently, Kounellis exhibited walls of books in the damaged Byzantine structure of Sarajevo's National Library; bombed during the war period in Yugoslavia. For Kounellis, "An exhibition is a unique act…developed and

[Photography Matt Bryant]

focused as a meaningful vision."

What is avoided is the tendency of some retrospective exhibitions of artists or groups of artists (such as Tate Modern's large scale Arte Povera exhibition in 2001) to use artworks to convey a set of key meanings about that artist or group, usually by relating them to a particular historical moment. The gallery simply becomes an arbitrary backdrop, its only role to divide up the artworks into easily definable, often chronological stages. In Kounellis's exhibitions the gallery spaces are actively engaged with the works themselves. Furthermore the space is not an ideal one (like the now iconic 'white cube' notion of a gallery space) but a specific site allowed to bring its own meaning to the works on display.

No limits were placed upon the artist during the ten-day installation period preceding the opening of the Oxford show. According to Suzanne Cotter, chief curator, it was "most important to ensure that all materials and staff were readily available to enable the artist to work in his own way as freely as possible."

In one upper gallery works are integrated with the pillars that support the gallery roof. Visualise lead wrapped around one, and a sewing machine hanging from a meat hook on another. The closest you get to a demarcated area for artworks is an impromptu platform made from uneven trestle tables in the main upper gallery. Yet even here the works are hardly cordoned off from the viewer. Smatterings of coal dust dirty the white walls and floor, and the smell of coffee hanging on scales is so strong, and the work so close, that it is tempting to lean over and take a little.

This is rather ironic, as one of the most frequently discussed issues in relation to Arte Povera is how the use of common organic and inorganic materials helped to break down the separation between art and an individual's life and experience. If this is the case what is refreshing about Kounellis' exhibition is that it demonstrates how his art can relate to life and personal experience now, rather than just life at the time when the work was first produced. Kounellis implies how the same work can take on new meanings as time passes and it is put into new contexts. Perhaps this is why the majority of Kounellis' works are 'Untitled', defying opportunity to fix a meaning.

This is especially the case with raw materials which we are all familiar with, yet our response to them is largely dependent on our social background and experience at a given time. Within the first gallery are evenly spaced lumps of coal individually attached (by means of thin wire) to large steel panels resting on old wooden chairs. It is jarring to see a substance we are so used in this country to seeing in plentiful heaps (which incidentally is another way in which coal is exhibited in the upper gallery). It is tempting to try and count them and I found myself remembering that coal is a finite resource which we will eventually run out of. Indeed there are places where this fuel is valued piece by piece. Equally, the seven burlap sacks filled with various foodstuffs from red and white beans to corn, potatoes and coffee exhibited in the large upper gallery seem to offer a further reminder that such provisions that we take for granted and are entirely dependent on for survival are in desperately short supply elsewhere.

Of course it would be easy too go far, and I do not mean to imply that the relevance of these works to the present in anyway cuts them off from the past. To do so would be to miss the most important point, that it is precisely because these works engage with past and present, while at the same time being informed by the specific site in which they are displayed and the experience of the viewer who confronts them, that they are so interesting to look at.

'An exhibition is a unique act, developed and focused as a meaningful vision'

Indeed, those who have knowledge of different periods of art will find numerous symbolic references in Kounellis' work to a wide range of sources. The scales holding coffee recall motifs in Vermeer's genre painting, the electric train which appears in various guises (not least protruding from the artist's mouth on the photograph of the exhibition programme) evokes a popular surrealist emblem. Kounellis has on more than one occasion called himself a painter (his early works were predominantly painting), and in his own writings he has praised Jackson Pollock highly, in particular for his mobility which Kounellis conceded he only came close to emulating when he installed twelve live horses in an underground garage in Rome in 1969. Alas, no horses here, although live fish make an appearance in an aquarium and in a chipped bowl of water with a knife.

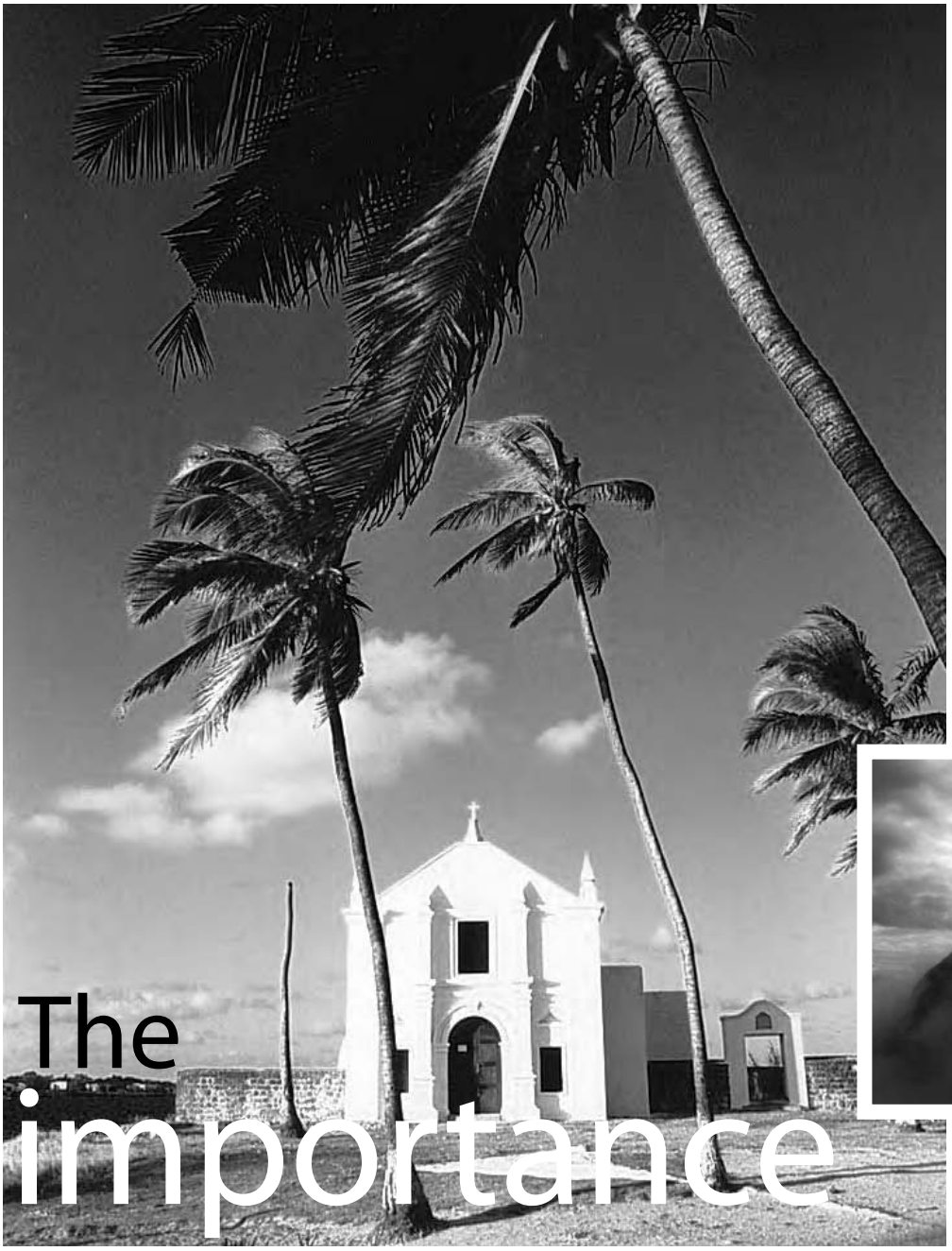
The most interest in Kounellis' hypothetical retrospective comes from the numerous relationships he seems to find between his artworks and this gallery. A particularly striking example is the work in the smaller upper gallery, a fragment of wooden slatted boat on a steel plate hanging by means of thick steel rope against the one wall in the gallery that has slatted wood panelling. Their juxtaposition here can hardly have been accidental. Kounellis was born in Piraeus in Greece and it is difficult not to see the boat fragment as a memory of his early life in that port. However, the slats of the boat are echoed in the slats of the wall behind. The material of the work reverberates in the material of the gallery wall it rests on. Both gallery and work are entirely different as functional entities and built in different countries, yet when seen together, they are related through having their origin in a similar material.

Similarly, echoes might be heard between the industrial materials employed by Kounellis and the building of Modern art Oxford as a whole, which was a brewery from the 1880's, before being converted into an art gallery. Its thick walls, iron ledges and chunky pillars might now be painted in white but they remain living history of the industrial age in Britain. Attached to one of these pillars is a train track around which a miniature electric train continually runs. This has been taken as a metaphor for the continual movement of time. Its display here might evoke our continual reliance on industries and economies no matter how hard we try to emphasise our refined existences. It is interesting to note that this same work was exhibited on one of the piers in Santa Maria Novella in 1977 and in this context may have triggered different responses. Now this forms part of the history of the object that is incorporated into this new space.

Finally, the work installed for this particular exhibition is a culmination of Kounellis's awareness of how materials he uses can be deployed in a specific place and moment in time with maximum relevance and impact. Almost the entire length of the upper gallery (and half the width) is occupied with massive iron beams bolted together in a criss-crossed network, resting on a floor covered with dusty Turkish carpets. At the exhibition opening, responses to this work were diverse, many likening the iron structure to a military defence or tank trap, others surprised that such a massive heavy structure could still appear quite weightless in such a high room. It's not difficult to see why Kounellis described this as "a clash of civilisations". One is struck by the contrast in materials, the crudeness of the iron so removed from the refined weaving of the carpets. However despite these differences, the patterns of both entities seem to imply a relationship between them, regardless of their initial contrast. Such an interpretation could lead into endless discussion of the differences and similarities between East and West, yet it seems that a problem is posed rather than answered. The hanging coat and hat from one of the iron girders at the end of the gallery may stand not only for the presence of Kounellis himself, but perhaps offer an invitation to the question raised by the work itself.

On my visit, I remember thinking I would leave this question for another day. Yet as I turned to descend the stairs to leave, I could just glimpse the train continuing its endless journey in the distance and as the whirring sound reached my ears, felt sure that the question would come around again.

Jannis Kounellis at Modern Art Oxford, until March 20, 2005



The importance of elsewhere

Why do we travel? ANDY MACDOWALL explains the traveller's search for the perfect place on earth

'BUT WHAT DO YOU do all day? What do you do in each place?" So asks an obnoxious journalist of a backpacker in William Sutcliffe's *Are You Experienced?* The latter finds it a surprisingly hard question to answer. No-one expects you to explain a holiday – it's a well-earned break from routine. Spend more than two weeks away, organise your own trip and, apparently, one is dealing with a different concept altogether.

Stumbling off a grimy train into the cold at four in the morning in provincial Romania, for the first time I asked myself: 'Why?' At that moment, had you offered me a place on a beach in the sun, I would certainly have taken it. Two hours later, when I was being sick in a bin, 'why?' had changed to 'never again'. All the effort had led only to discomfort and frustration. From now on, only normal holidays like a normal person. All that was wrong with travelling had become so starkly clear. Not for me the snook-cocking and patronising tones of

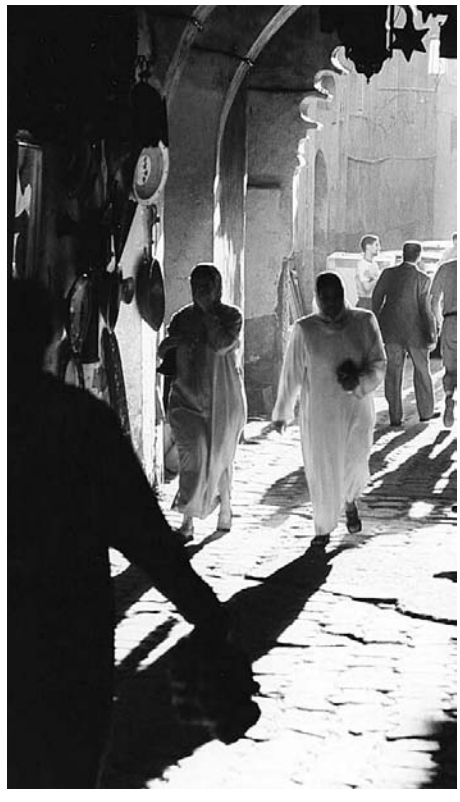
[Photography Jon Harle]

those who look down on people who take their holidays in the same place every year. Not being desperately adventurous is preferable to being boastfully so and how much better to know you love a place than the ghastly pretension of pretending you prefer not having running water, love sleeping in filthy beds…and oh, look, gristly goat broth, my favourite. One of Sutcliffe's many perceptive observations in his aforementioned novel is that the groups of young travellers in India seem to be trying so hard to look like they are enjoying themselves, when in reality they are miserable, scared and have the shits. I remember with horror the grim one-horse towns around which I have traipsed with forced enthusiasm and pseudo-anthropological interest. If I saw a foreign tourist doing the same in Lydney, I'd have them sectioned.

And what do we do all day? Again, shaming personal recollection is a guide; some of my happiest memories of India are of lying in bed reading and listening to music – had it not been for the mice and mosquito-graveyard walls, well, I could have been anywhere. And even outside, it's not much better. "Europe: great continent, but if I see another fucking church I'll scream" one Australian said to me, testament to an almost short sightseeing concentration span – "I guess these colleges are all the same" said my Canadian cousin on a tour around Oxford. One suspects that even Magdalen or Trinity would fail to arouse more than a raised eyebrow and a sigh. Jaded by the incredible sights around us, we push for more and more exotic destinations, only to fall into the same traps; either recreating home luxuries or living in field-hospital conditions. There is a middle option, I know – but who wants to stay in a hotel peopled by balding local insurance salesmen?

As you may have guessed, this is the point that I tell you I did have another trip after the Romanian misadventure, though oddly not one that repeated my brief encounter with the local polenta. And it wasn't a famous sight or perverse pride in discomfort and warped belief that I was Doing It The Local Way that converted me after my brief spell in the wilderness. It was a swim in a lake and a stroll down a street weeks later in Macedonia. Diving into Lake Ohrid and treading water, the muezzin's wail competed with evensong bells echoing around the beautiful mountains, and again when watching young and old taking the daily promenade along the town's main street I had what I hope is familiar to all regular travellers; the dromomanic epiphany. Like all good faith experiences it is wonderfully simple and direct; it goes, bloody hell, I'm Somewhere Else. Somewhere special. You know you are somewhere unique, not easily distilled to guidebook or holiday photo form – and no photo and little writing can express that place or experience quite as you felt it. Like a weight of past sins, the discomfort and jaded semi-interest are lifted miraculously from the mind. It's a wonderful feeling. I think it is one of the major disadvantages of such quick transport in our era that for the first few days we experience a dislocation and a hollowness at our destination, not having experienced all the nuances in change of culture and landscape between A and B – how different from the great travellers of the middle ages, pilgrims, who would watch their environment change so gradually, their epiphany developing towards the heavenly goal. This is perhaps one reason why our epiphanies take a while to emerge and do so suddenly, whereas out medieval forebears would feel theirs develop slowly but steadily from first step to the final heavenly goal. For me at least, the frisson of travelling is pulling into a new station, knowing this could be one of those special places. You are freed from guidebook and photographs and able to discover at last if this will be one of your places. To quote Stewart Ferris, "this, fundamentally, is why looking at other people's travel photos is so boring."

you know you are somewhere unique, not easily distilled to guidebook



This is what we have in common with the pilgrims - different places, and try as we might to tame and homogenise the world, these will remain incredibly varied. I would like to suggest this as the difference between travelling and tourism; every day of the former, one lifts a lid that could be that of Priam's Treasure or Pandora's Box. More often than not, it will be rather less interesting than either of those. But all travellers know that, eventually, they will experience the epiphany; it will no longer be a version of home with better weather or different big buildings, but an indefinable magic. We have all seen the same Eiffel Tower, many of us have spent a lot of time in the road either irritated or dully frustrated; everyone has a different epiphany. Few deny the grandeur of the Taj Mahal; you might find Ohrid pleasant but not special, or even boring. Similarly, I might find the places where you have your epiphanies similarly nondescript. I suppose this is what people mean by finding themselves.

Therein lies the truth in the cliché that travelling is all about the planning and the memories. The wonderful anticipation of the liberating feeling of really being somewhere special, and afterwards the memory of a place that does not linger but burns bright. Dismiss this as hyperbole if you must; if you do, I suspect you haven't travelled enough.

So, to all the smug journalists out there, I'll tell you what we're doing. We're waiting, clocking up the experiences like a pilgrim trudging the miles, sure in the knowledge that sooner or later we will find Our Place. To the rest of you, I'll say: visit Ohrid. Oh, and avoid Romanian polenta.

***Andy MacDowall was travel editor of* Varsity**

CROSSWORD

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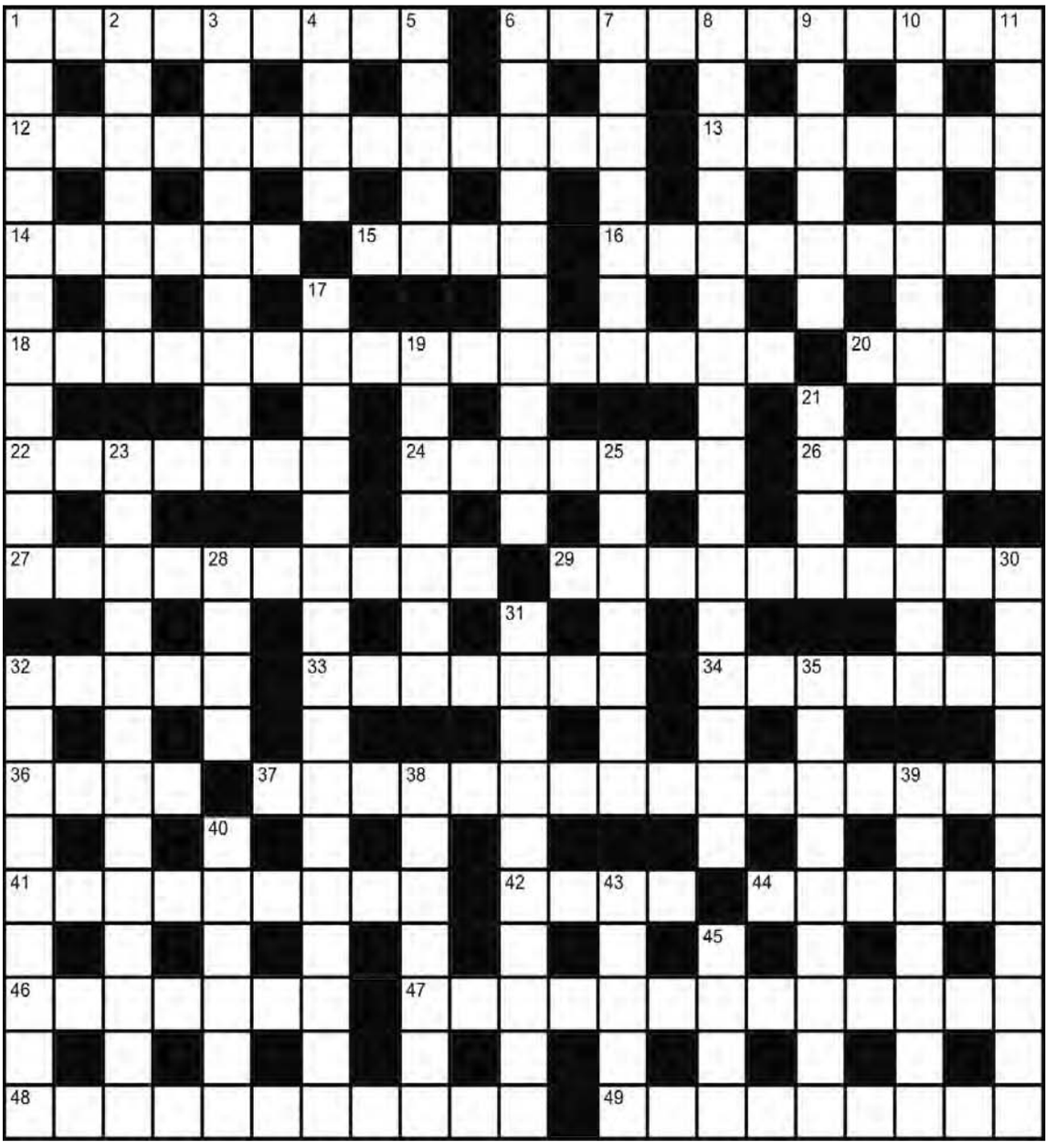

ACROSS

1 Laze around with aristocratic fellow, fan of aristocratic malaise (9)
6 Dung-eating poet returns, almost cheerful, with ordinary American exterior (11)
12 Disrobe and flash, lacking new illumination (5,8)
13 Cheers very loudly for terrorists' material (7)
14 You are a university employee (6)
15 Growth of non-extremist way (4)
16 Explosions give clue to IRA (9)
18 Questioning model abandoning arsonist with income tax fraud (5-11)
20 Alumnus gets Old English instrument (4)
22 He has an advantage when revolutionary 11 keeps quarters back (7)
24 Close union (7)
26 Surpass 40, say (5)
27 Tense and ill, having eaten a little after onset of nausea (4-6)
29 Label given to depression after institute provided one hospital department (10)
32 36 changed hands, keeping zone at the 45 (5)
33 Caviare reportedly 49 by this beast (3-4)
34 Obtains information about rejection of what is saved (4-3)
36 Pillowcase right behind buzzer (4)
37 Firm positions in The Go-Between when an honest fellow gets around compiler (6,10)
41 Operation is burning and boiling? Good God! (9)
42 God! Politician with loose woman (4)
44 Data is processed by measuring rod (6)
46 Man with gun heard in the bath (7)
47 Abstainer in the grip of sloth studied in chaos and posed (13)
48 Fitted in perfectly with girl delighted about length (11)
49 Valued safe money behind exchange rate (9)

DOWN

1 Graduate drawing conclusion to advanced theory (11)
2 Game of chance features mock confusion (7)
3 Ironing needs doing, but there's no rush? (9)
4 Candide glad to change ends (4)
5 Loathe prostitute in drunken bar (5)
6 Doubly mean, brutally keeping Princess back with chaste designation? (6,4)
7 A no good rise in payment is prevalent (7)
8 Rebuild train line, content it's global (16)
9 Something left over from rotten meat (6)
10 Make excessive application? It's done by reserve writer (13)
11 Explosive suffering of celebrity (4,5)
17 One more soldier beyond the law (5-11)
19 Many EEC problems used to be in Greece (7)
21 The old appeal over monster (4)
23 Cheats given credit by stirrers (7-6)
25 A new road twisted round river in principality (7)
28 Hull is swell! (4)
30 Appropriate to give to journalist who's dextrous (5-6)
31 Swapped sides in distinguished thought (10)
32 Insubstantial gang-member with printer (6-3)
35 Gin's poured after dessert apples (9)
38 Cure for season without rain? (3-4)
39 Product's destination could be ensured (3,4)
40 Magic land in country leading the French by the nose (6)
43 Time to support Shakespearean composition (5)
45 Incisiveness essential to the well-bred gentleman (4)

editor@oxfordforum.com is where you should send your answers if you fancy the chance to win a meal for two with wine courtesy of the Vaults Café. Good luck!

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