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LM 117

ISSUE No

'DUMBING DOWN' SPECIAL

Are the Great and the Good committing cultural suicide?

A message from the millennium sponsor

Kick against the PRICKS*

Erin Pizzey:
Big Sister is watching you

Peter Tatchell:
stop crucifying queers

Simon Napier-Bell:
drugs and the new 'safe' music

*Jesus, as quoted in the King James Bible, Acts 26:14

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At a time when
CIVIL LIBERTIES ARE UNDER ATTACK
WE NEED MORE VOICES LIKE *LM*
that are prepared to speak out in defence of freedom.
Nadine Strossen, president, American Civil Liberties Union

Strangely enough,
***LM* IS ONE OF THE FEW JOURNALS TO STAND UP TO POLITICAL CORRECTNESS**
and speak out for our right to live our lives without being bossed about by non-smokers, animal rights enthusiasts and members of the unthinking majority.
LONG MAY IT LAST AND PROSPER.
John Mortimer

LM is the most
INTERESTING AND PROVOCATIVE
magazine I have read for many years. It has found a new centre ground where libertarian and anti-authoritarian ideas are given
COMPLETE FREEDOM.
JG Ballard

Someone has to be a
DISSENTING VOICE
in our brave new world—let it be *LM*.
Fay Weldon

Notorious
ICONOCLASTS...
LM magazine.
The Scotsman

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KICK AGAINST T

MICK HUME

Editor

'HOW CAN YOU SAY', THE OUTRAGED American journalist who was researching *LM* demanded down my telephone in December, 'that the new left is the biggest threat to freedom and justice in the world today?'. Let me, I said, ask you a question in return: who exactly do you think is bombing Iraq as we speak?

Perhaps he had inside information that some relic of America's Christian right had sneaked into the Pentagon to push the button which launched the air war on Baghdad, while the dregs of the Thatcherite right did the same in Whitehall. But so far as I could tell, it was actually the US right's *bête noire*, the Democrat president Bill Clinton, who had fired those 400-plus Cruise missiles into the heart of Iraq, with the public support of only two other major governments—New Labour in Britain and the Social Democrats in Germany, the powerhouses of contemporary left politics.

The radical activists of the 1960s and 70s used to like the slogan 'What if they gave a war and nobody came?'. Now many of those same people are in government in Britain and elsewhere, and 'they' have just answered their own rhetorical question. The erstwhile peaceniks have enthusiastically prosecuted a war that nobody came out to support anywhere outside of their own political cliques. So why should it be so outrageous for *LM* to suggest that this 'left' is the most dangerous threat to freedom on Earth?

These days, when I am asked to comment about current events on the radio or television, or by print journalists like my American interrogator, I often find that the interviewers appear slightly miffed by the answers I give them. 'What do you mean', they say, 'you don't support new laws against fox-hunting/grammar schools/genetically modified food/racist chanting at football? We thought *LM* was on the left!'.

Further confusion has been caused in some circles by *LM*'s decision to co-host the high-powered 'Culture Wars' conference about 'dumbing down', in London in March, where classical music is on the agenda but class struggle is not. Why, they ask, does a magazine formerly known as *Living Marxism* now seem to spend more time discussing cultural issues than poverty and homelessness?

As editor of this magazine, I am as committed to the cause of human emancipation as ever. But the circumstances in which *LM* is trying to promote that cause have changed beyond recognition, and our approach has had to evolve to stay in touch. Those who still try to understand today's events in terms of the old left v right conflicts miss the point. When the world has been turned upside down, as it has since the end of the Cold War 10 years ago, politics is no longer what it might appear to be.

People can still talk about left wing and right wing if they want. But what is really 'left' and what is 'right' in a situation where Tony Blair's New Labour government buys Britain's own Cruise missiles and threatens to sell off state schools (two things Margaret Thatcher never dared to do), while Tory leader William Hague claims to support legalising gay sex at 16 and replacing the House of Lords with an elected house of the hoi polloi (two measures the left has not got in to a Labour manifesto)?

Whenever we at *LM* sit down to consider a question today, we are forced to conclude that just about every issue means something different than it did in the recent past. Politics has passed through the looking glass, and it makes sense to question everything anew, rather than sticking to familiar arguments that may well have been left behind by the times.

For instance, it might seem at first glance that positive changes are afoot in British political life. After all, some of the traditional symbols of class privilege which the left has long criticised—the monarchy, the House of Lords, hunting, etc—are now coming under heavy fire. And at the same time, some of the left's most dearly held principles—such as education for all—are coming very much into vogue.

Look a little more closely, however, at the underlying message of these changes for today, and there is a lot less to cheer about.

In the new 'People's Britain', elitism is out and ordinariness is in. The prime minister describes himself as a 'bloke', liking football now appears obligatory within the establishment,

POLITICS HAS PASS AND IT MAKES SEN

the hereditary peers are for the chop, and even the royals are being pressed to act more like commoners, combining the compassion of Princess Diana and the suburban plainness of Sophie Rhys-Jones.

A welcome and overdue assault on privilege and deference? Not quite. In fact this 'Dianafication' process signals the dumbing down of society's expectations. Instead of setting public standards that others can aspire to, it seems the role of those at the top of society, from cabinet ministers to princesses, is now to lay bare their base private lives and so demonstrate that they are weak and vulnerable 'just like us'.

The message is that we are all in the gutter (or the docusoap) together, all emotionally damaged goods who should not expect too much of each other or of our leaders; citizens of a therapy nation whose role models are recovering alcoholic footballers who talk self-help psychobabble. The lowering of horizons which this levelling down implies is creating an insidious new form of deference—a worship of the banal and the everyday—

HE PRICKS

ED THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, SE TO QUESTION EVERYTHING ANEW

that can keep us in our place just as securely as the old-fashioned forelock-tugging.

LM has always been entirely opposed to the hereditary principle, the monarchy, and all of the other rubbish of the Middle Ages that clutters up the British constitution. But in today's circumstances it would be foolish to accept the new populist anti-elitism at face value, as some kind of fulfilment of radical ambitions. Take New Labour's proposals to reform the House of Lords.

Of course it would be easy to applaud the plan to get rid of the hereditary peers as a step in the right direction, one which meets a longstanding demand of democratic reformers. But then you put it in the context of politics today: of New Labour's disdain for parliamentary debate; of its love of committees and quangos; of Blair's high-handed presidential style of government; of his 'State of the nation' address, delivered to media friends in the back garden of 10 Downing Street rather than at the Commons despatch box. Why should we believe that anything this government does is really about extending democracy?

The real reason that New Labour wants to reform the Lords appears to be that the second chamber has been causing the government too much trouble. If the supine backbench Labour MPs ever proved as difficult as some of the Tory hereditary peers, it seems safe to assume that Blair's people would favour removing their voting rights as well, and substituting government by a nice little focus group. As Alan Hudson argues elsewhere in this month's *LM*, the New Labour reform proposals are every bit as undemocratic as the decrepit old institution itself—and all the more dangerous because they are packaged in the egalitarian language of our times.

Look again at the way in which the left's old totem of education for all has become government policy, and similar doubts arise. This is clearly not about spreading the benefits of an excellent education to the masses. It is about pulling down higher education to a kind of lowest common denominator, where nobody really fails—and so nobody excels. At a time when 'access' to education has been made into a sacred cow, as Frank Furedi points out, there is no serious debate about exactly what it is that all of these people are being given access to. At *LM* we see it as our job to start that debate.

On every front, the apparent fulfilment of radical promises today is far from what it seems. Measures which are widely accepted as steps forward for egalitarianism and openness are undermining some of the foundations of civilised society, from democracy and the legal system to objectivity and science. They are dumbing down public expectations of what it means to be human, denying the importance of the very qualities and aspirations which brought us from the caves to where we are now.

That is why *LM* attaches such importance to the forthcoming 'Culture Wars' conference, which will deal with all the issues surrounding the debate about 'dumbing down'. Our view is simple: while the culture of low expectations goes unchallenged, and society's horizons are not raised, it is a waste of time anybody banging on about 'real' social problems like poverty and unemployment. Chanting a left-sounding mantra about the bleak prospects supposedly facing us can only seal society's panicky and pessimistic mood as the end of the century approaches.

LM's mission is to go against the grain of these bland and consensual times, to ask the difficult questions and try to call out the embarrassing answers, without worrying too much that we might be offending public opinion or treading on anybody's feelings. In short, as that old-fashioned fictional hero Jesus has it in the King James Bible (a literary classic, since dumbed down in many more 'accessible' editions), our aim is 'to kick against the pricks'—a slogan all blasphemers and heretics might do well to adopt for the new millennium. ●

LM Online

TIME GENTLEMEN, POLICE

There is a certain insanity about pub closing time—and not just from the point of view of the frustrated drinker. By forcing people to do all their drinking in a few hours, before chucking them all into the street, the British licensing laws support a culture that is far from abstemious. It was only a matter of time before New Labour decided to do something about it. Given the puritan instincts of the government, the prospects for a freer drinking regime seemed bleak.

In December the Home Office accepted the recommendations of the Better Regulation Task Force, which the government set up in September 1997 to consider, among other things, the liquor licensing laws. The task force recommends greater flexibility in pub opening hours (with pubs being allowed to stay open until 3am) and suggests devolving control to local authorities. So the Home Office has accepted that the licensing laws must be liberalised and that we should all have more time to spend getting drunk. How can this be?

Before you get the celebratory drinks in, note the words of Better Regulation Task Force chairman, Lord Haskins: 'It is time for regulators to refocus on the reasons for regulating the sales of alcohol: to prevent nuisance and disorder, and to protect young and vulnerable members of society...There is ample evidence to demonstrate that a single closing time creates rather than controls nuisance and disorder. We therefore propose the introduction of more flexible opening hours based on the circumstances of the local community.' So longer opening hours are planned as a means of enhancing social control, not individual freedom. The new relaxed order is just as much about regulating people's behaviour as the old restrictive licensing laws, which were introduced to keep workers in check during the First World War.

It's liberalisation, Jim, but not as we know it. Even when New Labour does something liberal-looking it has to be justified in the name of preventing 'nuisance and disorder'. So we may well be able to stay out later, but only if we behave ourselves in the pub and on the way home. The no-smoking, non-sexist, child-friendly, sensible pub of the future might be enough to have us curled up with a good book by 10 o'clock anyway. ●

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NEVER MIND REFORMING THE LORDS, ABOLISH IT

During the controversy over reforming the House of Lords, one question has gone unasked: why do we need a second chamber anyway?

After all, it is no more than Common Sense, as Tom Paine succinctly put it in 1776, that 'the English constitution [is the] base remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new republican materials. First—the remains of monarchical tyranny in the person of the king. Secondly—the remains of aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the peers. Thirdly—the new republican materials, in the persons of the commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England... The two first, by being hereditary, are independent of the people; wherefore in a *constitutional sense* they contribute nothing towards the freedom of the state.' Just so.

Democratic government has no need of a second chamber. Arguments that such a mechanism provides expertise, continuity or the wisdom of the ages are so much hogwash. The true function of a second chamber is to limit the democratic effectiveness of the first chamber. There was a time when this was openly acknowledged, as when James Madison justified the setting up of the American second chamber, the Senate: 'A necessary fence against this danger [the tendency to err from fickleness and passion] would be to select a portion of enlightened citizens, whose limited number and firmness might seasonably interpose against impetuous counsels.' (*The Federalist Papers*, 1788)

Come to think of it, this is exactly what Tony Blair is proposing: to balance out the hereditary peers in the Lords with 'enlightened' New Labour worthies, like people from community politics and the voluntary sector. Blair's reforms are as profoundly undemocratic as the hereditary principle. There is not one jot of progress in replacing the fogies with his toadies. ●

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WE ARE ALL HOOLIGANS NOW

Why has New Labour published yet another raft of proposals aimed at combating football hooliganism? Even government ministers admit that hooliganism is 'largely a thing of the past'. The arrest figures for violence at domestic games have declined steadily over the past five years, and the kind of (overhyped) violence that took place in Marseilles during the World Cup makes headlines precisely because it is so rare.

New Labour's proposal to outlaw 'racist chanting by individuals' is an attempt to legislate against a problem which no longer exists. Racist chanting 'in concert with one or more others' is already an offence under the 1991 Football Offences Act. Now the government wants to punish lone individuals who shout racist abuse at football. The very fact that it is so difficult for all the CCTVs and stewards and security guards to find two or more racists chanting 'in concert' suggests that racist chanting has all but disappeared.

So given the absence of trouble at football matches, how can the government justify these latest anti-hooligan measures? Bryan Drew of the National Criminal Intelligence Service insists that a 'hard-core, hell-bent on causing mayhem, is using football matches as a cover for its criminal activities'. But apparently this violence no longer takes place at football matches. According to Drew, 'away from the ground, often under the cover of darkness, the hooligans are having a field day'. Hence New Labour's proposals to monitor and arrest football fans not only at the ground, but on public transport, public highways and in pubs. In other words, as soon as they leave their homes.

The government also proposes that the police be given powers to ban the sale of alcohol in certain areas before a game; that the courts be empowered to issue banning orders preventing 'non-convicted persons' (aka people who are presumed innocent) from attending matches; and that persons subject to banning orders be required to surrender their passports to prevent them travelling to international matches.

The stories about supposed trouble at football sound more and more like hooligan fairy tales. But the casual infringement of our freedoms that they justify are all too real. ●

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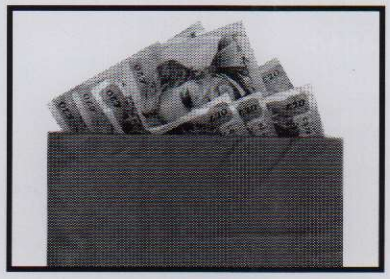
SLEAZE WHEEZE

How, many onlookers asked, could such an expert media fixer as Peter Mandelson himself so easily fall victim to press allegations of sleaze and be forced to resign? They should have kept up with *LM* and *LM Online*.

'The real problem with the sleaze bandwagon is that once it starts rolling it does not stop', observed an *LM Online* commentary in July 1997, when Sir Gordon Downey published his report into the 'cash for questions' scandal involving ex-Tory MP Neil Hamilton. A few weeks later, James Heartfield argued in *LM* that New Labour's obsession with using the 'sleaze' weapon against the Tories was likely to backfire on the Blair government itself: 'The current preoccupation with sleaze is not an interruption to the ordinary political process of left versus right. On the contrary, "sleaze" *is* the new political process.'



Instead of left v right, Heartfield noted, politics was now about 'correct behaviour v corruption, public service v private greed, or, as we used to call it, good v evil', concluding that 'the perception of sleaze could just as easily turn on New Labour' (see *LM*, September 1997).

Those who want to avoid being caught out next time should subscribe to *LM* (see page 29), and to the *LM Online* commentaries (see below). ●

>>>> Pagemaster: Brendan O'Neill (brendan@mail.informinc.co.uk) <<<<

The what's NOT on guide

GUNS, KNIVES AND NOW...SPOONED OUT: McDonald's has withdrawn plastic stirring spoons, after reports that drug dealers were using them for measuring out illicit powders. Since they reduced the temperature of their beverages in response to the 'hot-coffee-can-burn-shock' panic, you can stir the lukewarm stuff with your finger anyway. **BOOTED:** An advert for south London lawyers Fisher Meredith, urging victims of police violence to claim damages, has been banned from the London Underground. The text on the ad begins 'Dear suspect, your face hit my boot'. The authorities ruled that it might offend police officers. **BULLIED:** Kellogg's has been censured over an advert which suggested that its cereal could prevent bullying by helping fat kids lose weight. The ad depicted a plump lad with the caption 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names could really hurt me'. Mattie Alderson, director of the Advertising Standards Authority, claimed that it 'exploited children's and parents' insecurities'. Preying on the public's fears is obviously something that those in authority would have nothing to do with. **POLLOCKS:** The US postal service is issuing a special stamp in celebration of the late abstract expressionist 'action' painter Jackson Pollock. The image on the stamp will be taken from a famous portrait of Pollock published in *Life* magazine in 1949—except that the all-too-concrete cigarette he was smoking will be airbrushed out. **LOVE THY LABOUR:** A memo issued by senior New Labour officials urged staff at Millbank HQ to stop the feuding and backstabbing. The memo was leaked soon afterwards. **CHILD'S PLAY:** Retiring chief censor James Ferman seems to have come to the conclusion that adults need more nannying than children. 'Children have learnt more to look after themselves', he says. 'They are much better educated about films, and issues about drugs and things from schools.' Recalling his first days in the job in 1974, Ferman said he aimed then 'to look after children and give more freedom to adults. I saw myself then as a civil libertarian. Now I think there should be less freedom for adults, especially with a new wave of sexually violent films coming to Britain from abroad'. A senior member of the British Board of Film Classification described Ferman as an 'inspirational thinker'. **DUMBSTRUCK:** *Financial Times* TV correspondent Chris Dunkley has been sacked as presenter of the BBC Radio 4 listeners' complaints programme, *Feedback*, after 13 years in the chair. Dunkley's programme had won a reputation of late as a forum for the many listeners objecting to 'dumbing down' at the corporation. But those are not the kind of people they want to focus on at John Birt's focus-group obsessed 'People's BBC'.

Compiled by Andrew Calcutt

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BUGWATCH

In December Gwynneth Flower, the head of the government's Millennium Bug task force Action 2000, told consumers to have a 'judicious amount of surplus food' (enough for about two weeks) ready for Christmas next year, so as to 'avoid panic buying' you understand. 'Tins, dried foods and grains will be very useful', Flower said. 'Cans of soup, maybe half a dozen curries, tuna and packets of biscuits. Long-life milk would also be a good idea, although we wouldn't advise people to stockpile water.'

The cabinet office response was to announce that the government 'disagrees with [Action 2000's] analysis'. 'The food and electricity industries are among the most prepared sectors in the country.' Sainsbury's also dismissed fears of food shortages: 'much of our millennium preparation is going on alcohol because we think people will be drinking more.'

As army reservists are put on standby to deal with the civil unrest that some in authority claim will be caused by the bug, expect the voice of Whitehall to waver between those two Dad's Army stalwarts, 'We're doomed' Frazer and 'Don't panic' Jones, throughout 1999.

Also in December the UN started the first world Bug Summit. Addressing delegates from over 120 countries, under secretary-general for management Joseph E Connor helpfully explained the expected effect of the problem: 'All we know for sure is the timing. The scope...is simply daunting.' Despite his mediations on the uncertainty of life, Connor also managed to say that 'we should be able to limit the Millennium Bug to an inconvenience rather than a major disaster'.

Britain is joining the coordinated international panic. A senior government official overseeing Britain's year 2000 compliance programme complained that, 'In some third world countries, it is not even clear that they have heard of the millennium problem, let alone done anything about it'. And British Airways is flying the flag, announcing that it will not fly to any airport that fails a Y2K audit (though that could be for air traffic control or for baggage handling). If ever the UK authorities are forced to admit that they have their domestic year 2000 bug under control, Johnny Foreigner looks set to be wheeled on as the irresponsible host of the contagion. ●

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PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

Erin Pizzey, who opened the world's first refuge for battered women in 1971, has been to Canada to research its pathbreaking laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence. What she found confirmed her fears about today's authoritarian feminism

BIG SISTER IS

'Sexual harassment—the crime of the nineties—generates more controversy than almost every other working-place issue. And nowhere are complaints more prevalent than in British Columbia.' So says Marina Jimnez, writing for Canada's *National Post*.

British Columbia, I discovered during my 12 000-kilometre trip across Canada, has the dubious distinction of leading the country in complaints about lewd or unwelcome workplace behaviour. In 1997 and 1998 298 people filed complaints of sexual harassment to the British Columbia Human Rights Commission. Workplace and sexual harassment complaints include leering, practical jokes and comments such as 'fat cow'. Jokes and complaints that weren't intended to offend, but did, can also be considered sexual harassment.

Dr Donald Dutton is a renowned author. He is a psychologist at the University of British Columbia—and accused of kissing and fondling a former student. I had dinner with him in Vancouver. He is a warm and kindly man. He had two female students with him and during the evening we talked not about his own case but more generally about how sexual abuse allegations, the new crime of the 1990s, can destroy careers. They can create such fear and hostility that the workplace becomes unsafe and feelings of paranoia become rife.

The legal bills of the complainant, mostly women, are paid for by legal aid. Respondents, on the other hand, must go through a means test. Though the British Columbia Human Rights Commission may award costs to respondents, it has not done so as yet.

'Part of the problem has been a remarkable willingness to believe that if women come forward with allegations of harassment or sexism, they are to be believed', says Professor Boyd, a criminologist at Simon Fraser University. He was commenting on Dr Martha Piper, a president of the University of British Columbia. Dr Piper was forced to apologise for the university's handling of allegations of sexism and racism in its political science department in 1995. A sensational 177-page report uncovered complaints of pervasive sexism and racism from mostly unnamed sources, after which the university temporarily suspended admissions to the department. Dr Piper later had to acknowledge that the allegations were unfounded and the report was flawed. 'We have substituted ideology for careful analysis', was Professor Boyd's final conclusion.

In many of the workshops and forums that I attended during my time in Canada I heard serious talk of the need to have pre-dating agreements, similar to prenuptial agreements. Such a document sets out that the couple has agreed to enter into a relationship with one another that may, at some time, become sexual. Another clause is to ensure that one partner does not feel pressured into the relationship to preserve his or her job.

After one of the last workshops, I was descending in an empty lift when a man joined me on the fifth floor. Aware that he stood defensively in the corner of the big lift, I realised that he was wary in case I walked out of the lift and accused him of harassing me. This thought saddened me. The relationships between men and women have now become so laced with panic and fear that a pall of silence hung over offices I visited. Office parties are becoming a thing of the past in Canada, as the potential consequences are too frightening.

In Ontario a family was destroyed because their 13-year old daughter's creative essay was considered suspicious by Children's Aid social workers. They devined possible parental abuse and the child was snatched from her parents the same day. She still has not been returned. In another Orwellian case provincial exam-markers flagged 46 out of 140 000 junior-high essays for analysis at the Ministry of Children and Families. These too were suspected of revealing the possibility of parental sexual abuse.

Campaigns against domestic violence have also taken a sinister turn in Canada—more so than anywhere else I have travelled. I think it is because in the early years of the feminist movement most women and many men were happy to embrace the ideas of 'equity feminism'—that women had the right to be equal to men. However, before long 'gender feminists'—women who believed that men were the enemy—swamped the nascent equity feminists. Pierre Trudeau put $30 million into their fund and successive governments have granted them huge sums of money until this year. Much of this money has been misspent on dubious research into the prevalence of domestic violence. As a result, Canadian shelters for victims of domestic violence became bunkers from which the gender feminist movement could continue to wage its ideological war against men.

WATCHING YOU

Mandatory arrest laws in most states now mean that a phone call from a woman results in a man being dragged from his home and his children, without any evidence other than her claim that she has been threatened by him. Men grimly describe being 'hoovered'. This means that a man comes home to a house empty of his belongings, his partner and their children. If she has moved to a shelter he is not able to discover her whereabouts.

Fathers are also denied rights to their children through the 'silver bullet' method. The *National Post* ran a series of articles about shelters in Canada, written by Donna Laframboise. She describes how the women running the shelters coach the 'battered women' into writing accounts of physical and sexual abuse, which are used as a fast track to a divorce and rehousing. The 'silver bullet' refers to allegations of sexual abuse. Once the man is accused of sexually abusing his children, he is presumed guilty and is automatically barred from seeing his children until he can prove his innocence.

Of course there are many women who are genuine victims of their partner's violence and there is still a great need for properly funded shelters. But the feminisation of the domestic violence movement has worked against the needs of most women.

Originally family law in most countries was made by men for the protection of the family and also to protect women and children from male brutality. What the law has not recognised so far is that, in favouring women in cases of child custody and naively believing in the feminist mantra that 'all women are innocent victims of male violence', a great injustice has been done to men.

Domestic violence is not a gender issue. Violence is a problem for both men and women and is part of the human condition. If we continue to allow sexual harassment and domestic violence to remain weapons in the hands of gender feminists, then Big Sister will continue to play a creepingly insidious part in our personal lives. ●

Erin Pizzey is the author of many works of fiction and non-fiction, including *Scream Quietly Or The Neighbours Will Hear*, the first book about wife-battering. She also writes extensively as a journalist

STOP CRUCIFYING Q

Peter Tatchell defends his protest in Canterbury Cathedral against 'the Archbigot of Cant'

PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

On Easter Sunday 1998, myself and six other members of the London queer rights group OutRage! walked into the pulpit of Canterbury Cathedral as the leader of the Anglican Church, Dr George Carey, began his sermon. We held up placards and I addressed the congregation, condemning Dr Carey's opposition to an equal age of consent, homosexual partnership rights, gay fostering and protection against homophobic employment discrimination.

The OutRage! protest was denounced by some people as sacrilegious and blasphemous. I would suggest, however, that our minor disruption of the Easter service pales into insignificance when compared to Dr Carey's support for discrimination against gay people.

For 2000 years the churches have crucified queers. Until the early nineteenth century Christian leaders in Britain and most other European countries backed the death penalty for homosexuality. Over the centuries tens of thousands of 'abominable sodomites' were burned at the stake and hung from gallows with the blessing of bishops and archbishops. Even today the churches refuse to apologise for their involvement in the mass murder of queers.

Christian leaders now, of course, no longer advocate the killing of homosexuals. Instead they argue for the suppression of lesbian and gay human rights.

Under Britain's semi-feudal political system, unelected bishops sit in the House of Lords. They use their legislative power to oppose homosexual equality. During the vote on whether to equalise the gay age of consent in 1994 not a single bishop voted in favour of equal rights—thereby contributing to the maintenance of a discriminatory age of consent. In 1998 the bishops voted 2-1 against equality.

More recently, the bishops in the House of Lords, with the support of Dr Carey, succeeded in forcing through an amendment to the anti-discrimination clause of the Human Rights Bill. This amendment, partly accepted by the Labour government, will allow religious institutions to continue to deny equal treatment to homosexuals. It was this, and other blatant church endorsements of homophobic discrimination, that led us to protest in Canterbury Cathedral on Easter Sunday.

Our success in confronting Dr Carey and exposing his homophobia resulted in cries of condemnation from some people. But those who were angered by our brief peaceful protest in the cathedral never seem to get outraged by the Christian persecution of lesbians and gay men. Why do these people show more concern about maintaining the decorum of a church service than about the church-sanctioned violation of queer human rights?

'Leviticus not only condemns homosexuality as a sin, it demands that homosexuals be put to death. For over 1800 years the Christian churches organised the mass murder of queers, burning them alive at the stake in the medieval era. Right up until the mid-nineteenth century, church leaders in Britain gave their blessing to the state policy of executing homosexuals. The Bible is to lesbians and gay men what *Mein Kampf* is to Jews.'

Our Easter protest was necessary because Dr Carey has been unwilling to listen to the concerns of the homosexual community. In the eight years since he became archbishop he had always refused to meet gay organisations. He would not meet even fellow Anglicans in the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM). When Dr Carey slams the door on dialogue, confronting him is the only option. And confrontation works! Since our Easter protest the archbishop has

QUEERS

finally—for the first time—met with LGCM. Dr Carey's homophobia is, however, still deeply entrenched. On four major lesbian and gay civil rights issues the Anglican leader condones inequality.

By advocating a gay male age of consent of 18 (instead of 16, as for heterosexuals and lesbians) the archbishop endorses the criminalisation of 16 and 17-year old gay men who face up to two years' jail for consenting queer relationships. Indeed, on the eve of the June 1998 vote to equalise the age of consent Dr Carey urged MPs to vote for discrimination, and later incited the House of Lords to overturn MPs' 2-1 vote in favour of equality.

Dr Carey condemns gay marriage and refuses to support legal rights for homosexual couples, which deprives same-sex partners of recognition as next-of-kin in the event of illness or death.

The Church of England's Children's Society, with the approval of the archbishop, bans lesbian and gay foster parents; resulting in young people, who could be cared for by loving and responsible gay couples, being left to suffer in the emotional coldness of a children's home.

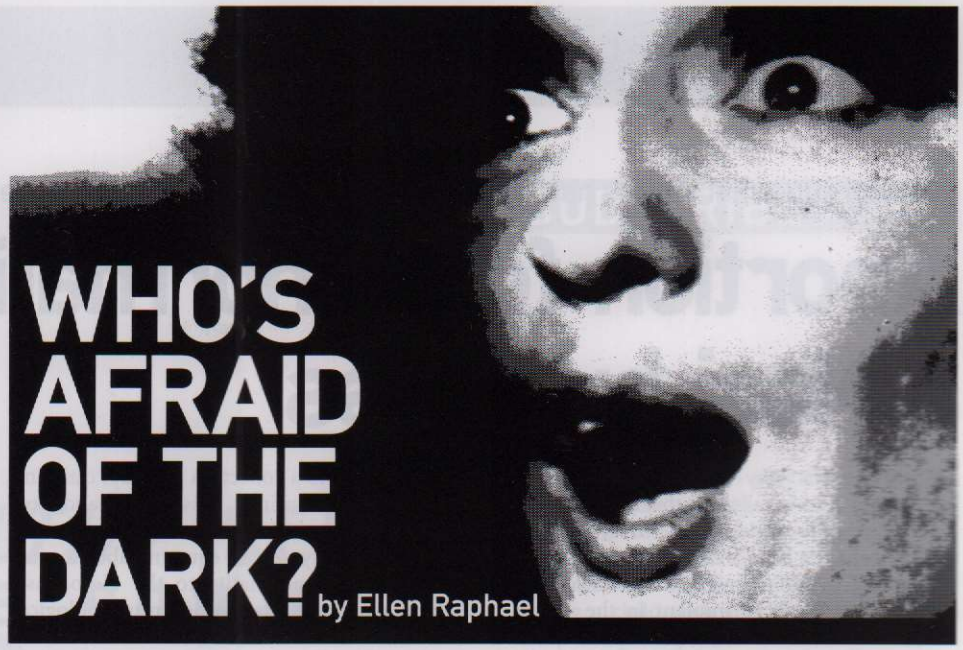
Ruling out any role in the church for clergy in homosexual relationships, Dr Carey gives a green light to the harassment and dismissal of lesbian and gay priests.

We therefore make no apology for challenging the archbishop over his abuse of queer human rights. The real disgrace is not OutRage!'s cathedral protest, but Dr Carey's advocacy of discrimination.

There is, of course, a personal price to be paid for exposing the Archbigot of Cant. I have been convicted of 'indecent behaviour' in a church, contrary to the 1860 Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act. Under this ancient law actions that disturb the sanctity of a church are deemed indecent and criminal. This means that any form of protest in a church is unlawful. Freedom of speech does not exist on ecclesiastical property. This gives the church privileged protection against protest. No other institution has such special, sweeping powers to suppress dissent.

The right to protest does not (or should not) stop at the door of a church. Why is it a crime for me to criticise the Archbishop of Canterbury in his cathedral? The 1860 act is an affront to democracy and should be repealed. ●

Donations to Peter Tatchell's legal defence fund should be made payable to OutRage! and sent to: OutRage!, PO Box 17816, London SW14 8WT. For further information visit the OutRage! website at www.OutRage.cygnet.co.uk



WHO'S AFRAID OF THE DARK?

by Ellen Raphael

On a cold and gloomy winter night in Canterbury, a group of 50 students from Christchurch College and the University of Kent marched for their right to 'reclaim the night'. The cause? To raise awareness about local safety issues and to campaign for better street lighting. The purpose of the lighting? To expose all the dark areas where the potential muggers and rapists like to hang out, and to allow us to reclaim 'our right to walk free from fear'.

Marching down the well-lit footpath of Eliot College, through Canterbury city centre and finishing at Christchurch College, the group carried candles and banners demanding 'our right to the night' and stating that without better lighting we are all at risk from attack.

As the group gathered, leaflets were handed to each participant. These included safety warnings: 'Please walk no more than three abreast', 'Remain on the pavement', and 'Caution!! Candles can be hot. Anyone carrying a candle does so at their own risk'. Stewards watched with despair as greedy, careless students took banners and candles. 'No!' they chastised. 'Can't you see how dangerous it is to carry the two things at once?'

Bearing in mind that the participants were all over the age of 18 and supposedly intelligent enough to be at university, you would think our treatment as four-year olds would rankle, but no. Now it seems that some students appreciate this kind of guidance; it stops us from having to think for ourselves, after all. And it's true that candles can be hot.

With police escort, stewards and those students who could nervously clutching their mobile phones, we left the university. Every few minutes the procession was stopped in order to allow the police to direct us across the road: even on a housing estate where the only thing moving was a startled cat.

Eventually the procession reached its destination: the further education college, Christchurch. Eddie from Christchurch Union welcomed us all and told us why reclaiming the night was so important. One third of the population of Canterbury consists of students; old people and young children make up another third. The march had been in aid of protecting the old, the very young and students from the dark.

To suggest that somehow students aged around 20 should be equated with children the age of four is disturbing enough. To say that they should also be identified with those aged around 70 portrays a picture of students as simultaneously too immature to handle their own affairs, and too frail to do so on their own.

Yet the students are doing little to dispel this image. The only campaigns that seem to exist on campus are negative ones for more safety and fewer freedoms, seeking to regulate personal behaviour from drinking and dancing to sex and smoking, demanding to be protected from the big scary real world outside. As one first year man said to me, 'The problem is students. There has to be some sort of open consensus that they will be more responsible and think more for their fellow students, that they will drink less and look after each other'.

Foolishly, it seems, I trust my fellow students and I don't consider them to be a problem. I have more of a problem with the presentation of students as weak and babyish, in need of protection from childhood fears.

If today's young adults are supposedly afraid of the dark, what does the future hold? Will we all be issued with night lights (no open flames of course) and babysitters, and made to stay in after dark, drinking cocoa and playing Scrabble? Roll on the real world, for this one scares me, and no, I don't want you to walk me home. ●

Ellen Raphael is a student at the University of Kent

TABOOS

Aborting abnormal fetuses has nothing in common with Nazi-style eugenics, argues Ann Furedi

Abortion for abnormality is not a Nazi business

One reason why fertility treatment so often ends in failure is that about half of all embryos used in *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) treatment have a chromosomal abnormality. An embryo with a chromosomal defect is less likely to implant in the womb and, if it does, is more likely to miscarry. So the research staff who have developed a highly sensitive DNA test to detect embryos with chromosomal abnormalities might justifiably have expected their work to be applauded. Instead it was condemned as 'appalling'. Josephine Quintavalle of the pressure group Comment on Reproductive Ethics labelled it 'pure eugenics', and several media commentators followed suit.

The new test will allow doctors to screen the embryos created during infertility treatment, to select only healthy ones for use, and to discard the abnormal specimens. Ian Findlay, the molecular biologist who developed the technique, claims that, 'By looking at 10 chromosomes, we can test for almost every genetic disorder and confirm diagnosis on the day of testing'. He believes that in future the test could be adapted to allow embryos to be screened through a blood sample taken from the pregnant woman, rather than the actual embryo. Any pregnant woman could then learn if her pregnancy was affected by Down's syndrome or another chromosomal abnormality in the earliest days of pregnancy.

There is no suggestion that any woman would be forced or even encouraged to submit to such tests. But despite Findlay's insistence that 'all we are doing is giving patients a choice', the 'eugenics' label has been publicly hung around his neck. Indeed, anybody who believes that it is legitimate for women to take measures to avoid bearing a child with a genetic abnormality now risks being branded a Nazi-style eugenicist.

The attempt to equate antenatal tests, embryo screening and abortion on grounds of fetal abnormality with the Nazi doctrine of 'racial purity' has become a central theme of anti-choice literature. *Sunday Telegraph* editor Dominic Lawson is only one prominent commentator to have argued that abortion on grounds of fetal handicap is 'nothing less than the state-sponsored annihilation of viable, sentient fetuses' on a par with Hitler's actions in Nazi Germany. Marie-Claire Darke's contribution to a collection of essays claiming to represent feminist dissent on abortion (Angela Kennedy (ed), *Swimming Against the Tide*, 1997) is typical in equating abortion on grounds of abnormality to the Holocaust. Darke concludes that, 'Modern technological advances used in the detection of abnormality are the full flowering of a fascist ideology against our bodies'.

It now seems that unease about 'eugenic abortions' carried out on the grounds of disability is no longer restricted to those, like Darke, who actually oppose all abortions on principle. Increasingly, those who do support a woman's general right to end an unwanted pregnancy will hesitate when asked if a woman should be able to terminate a pregnancy simply because she does not want a disabled child. In November, *Observer* gossip columnist Nick Cohen reported that there was concern about this issue even within the ranks of the pro-choice movement itself. He hinted at an ideological schism between hard-line 'eugenicists' (including me) who support antenatal screening and women's right to end pregnancies affected by abnormality, and those more in-tune with the times who are apparently worried about being tainted with the eugenic label.

Some disability rights campaigners argue that the legality of abortion for abnormality encourages discrimination against people with disabilities. Professor Tom Shakespeare, himself an achondraplasic dwarf, argues that aborting fetuses because they are affected by his condition is a comment on the value of his life. Other disability rights activists say they feel stigmatised and degraded that women can end pregnancies simply because the child would be like them. And, they ask, if society can condone the elimination of fetuses affected by Down's syndrome, how long will it be before it accepts the elimination of babies with Down's syndrome?

Such arguments spectacularly miss the point. In Britain today, embryo screening, antenatal testing and the provision of abortion on grounds of fetal abnormality have nothing in common with the eugenic tradition.

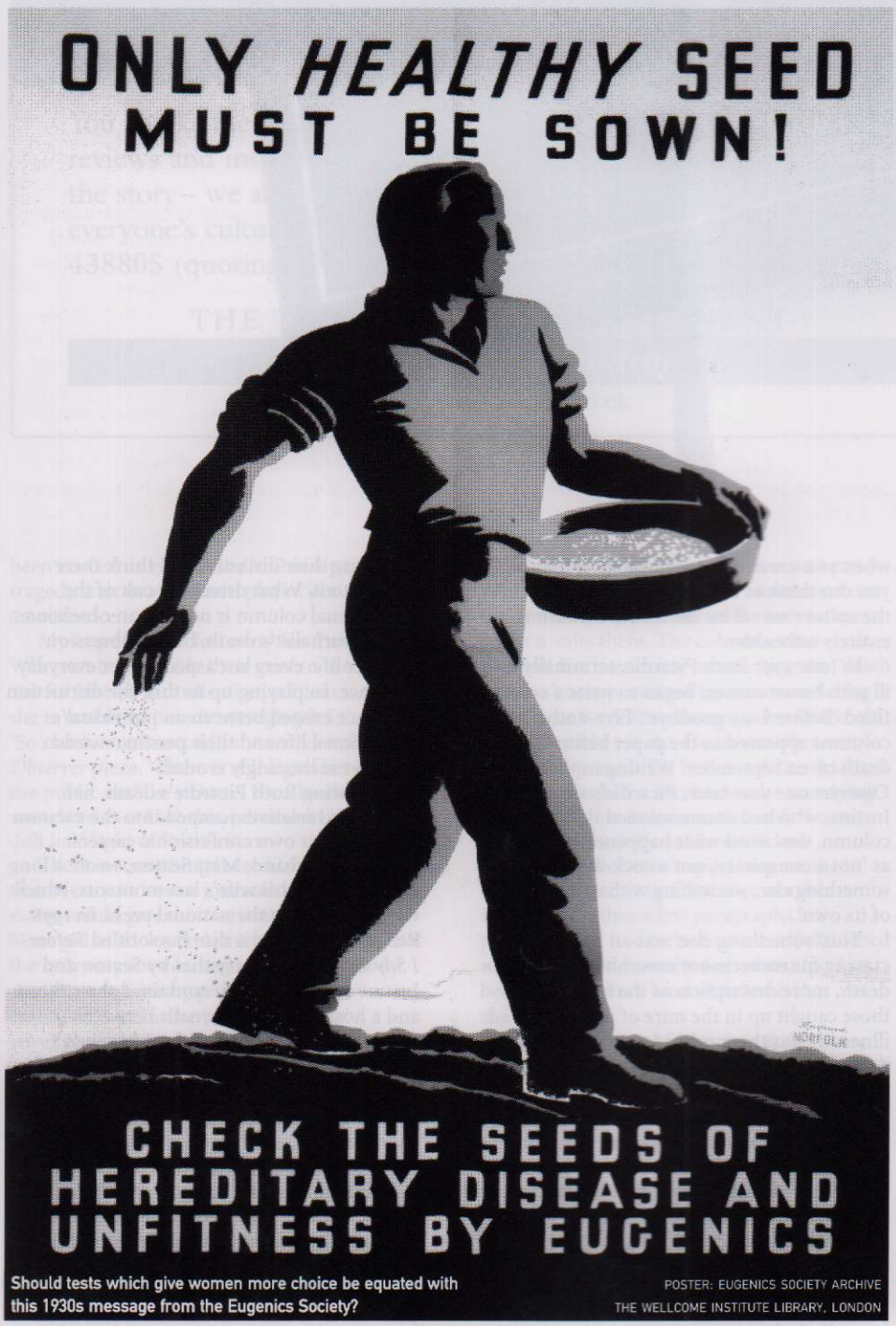
These new technologies are a means to extend women's choice in pregnancy. They allow a woman to make an informed decision about the future of her pregnancy—and about her own future. Of course, women's decisions may be shaped by the information and the counselling they receive, by their perceptions of what life with a disabled child will be like. But ultimately the choice is theirs.

It is difficult to understand how this can be associated with eugenics, a tradition that assumes society can and should be improved by the manipulation of genetic inheritance. It is even more difficult to understand how it can be associated with the practices of the Nazi regime—forced abortion, sterilisation and euthanasia. There is simply no comparison between a state that offers a woman (who wants it) a chance to gain information about her fetus, and a state that coercively sterilises women it deems unfit mothers and slaughters people it feels unworthy of life.

However, it is undeniable that the process of antenatal screening and abortion on grounds of fetal handicap goes against the grain of liberal opinion today. It is clearly judgemental and value-laden, two qualities that are strictly taboo among the politically correct. In opting to end a pregnancy on grounds of abnormality a woman is saying that, while she may be prepared to raise an able child, she is not prepared to raise a disabled one. In choosing to abort a fetus because it is abnormal a woman demonstrates that although she wanted a child, she does not want any child. To some, that seems unacceptable. To me, it is fair enough.

Most women, when they decide to have a child, have an image of what that child will be like, and fantasise about what motherhood will be like for them. When a woman discovers her child will be affected by a serious disability that image is shattered. Some women faced with this situation readjust their dreams to accommodate the knowledge they now have of their child-to-be. But for others the knowledge of abnormality can turn a wanted pregnancy into an unwanted one. The woman may feel unable—or simply unwilling—to cope with a child that will have needs she had not previously considered.

It may be true that women might be more willing to accept an abnormal pregnancy if they had a more balanced view of what life with a disabled child will be like. It may be the case that more women would be prepared



Should tests which give women more choice be equated with this 1930s message from the Eugenics Society?

POSTER: EUGENICS SOCIETY ARCHIVE THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY, LONDON

to continue abnormal pregnancies if more resources were available to help them cope with the practical problems they anticipate. It may also be true that if disabled people were subject to less prejudice, the prospect of raising a child with special needs might be more acceptable. But women have to make their decisions in the context of society as it exists.

No matter how much help were given to assist the mothers of disabled children, there will still be women who choose abortion simply because they do not wish to bear an abnormal child. Those who support women's choice on abortion must surely uphold these women's right to make that choice, and support the development of tests that enable women to make such choices.

Technologies to help detect and end abnormal pregnancies do not cause or legitimise discrimination against people with disabilities. A woman who chooses to end a pregnancy because the fetus is affected by Down's syndrome or achondroplasia does so to resolve a problem for her as an individual—not to make a statement about the status of disabled people in society.

A woman who follows the official advice and takes folic acid supplements to minimise her chance of conceiving a pregnancy with a neural tube does so because she values the good health of her potential child: she would rather it did not have spina bifida. Does it follow that she has a discriminatory attitude to people affected by spina bifida? Or is she simply trying to maximise her future child's chances? How should she be judged?

If the decision to abort an abnormal fetus expresses a negative view of a particular condition, that should not be surprising. Most of us value health more than ill-health, ability over disability. But that does not mean that we accord less human value to sick or disabled people than to well or able-bodied people. One of the eternal struggles of humanity has been to restore health in the face of disease, and to allow individuals to live their lives free from suffering and in such a way as to maximise their opportunities. Antenatal and embryo screening, and the provision of abortion on the grounds of abnormality, should be located in this humane tradition—a world away from the assumptions of eugenics. ●

ENOUGH SAID

Death to the cancer column, says Jennie Bristow

When I started out as a journalist writing comment I thought, perhaps too grandly, that my role was to try to analyse and critique the world 'out there'. The journalist's skill, I believed, lay in her ability to get under the skin of an important issue and to enlighten an audience. But with the rise of the personal/confessional column, the role of the journalist-commentator has been turned inside out.

Rather than being somebody who writes about other people, public issues, the journalist is nobody unless she herself is some kind of personality, whose raw material is little more than the events of her own life. To put it bluntly, to write about cancer, the disease, is boring and mundane. To write about cancer, the personal experience, as a cancer sufferer (or friend/relative of a cancer sufferer) is highly profound, worth double column inches and a plug on the front page. The journalist-as-professional-writer is subsumed entirely by the journalist-as-tragic-individual.

It seems to me that the journalist least likely to give a rounded, balanced view of an issue is the journalist who is personally and emotionally caught up in it. I do not blame the late Ruth Picardie, probably Britain's best-known cancer columnist, for not writing about something other than her breast cancer: when you are dying it seems logical that you can think of little else. But I do think that the culture set off by the cancer column is entirely unhealthy.

In June 1997 Ruth Picardie, terminally ill with breast cancer, began to write a column titled 'Before I say goodbye'. Five-and-a-half columns appeared in the paper before her death on 22 September. Writing in the *Observer* one year later, Picardie's sister Justine, who had commissioned the column, described what happened next as 'not a conspiracy, not a cock-up, but something else, something with a life of its own'.

This 'something else' was an insatiable craving for more: more news about Picardie's death, more description of the feelings of those caught up in the mire of terminal illness. It was the morbid fascination with death that has come to characterise society as it is dragged towards the millennium, and the very thing that Picardie, even as she was dying, criticised, coining the phrase 'autopathography' to describe the gross popularity of writers writing about their illnesses. There is indeed something weird about a society which gets off on stories of sickness, as summed up in Decca Aitkenhead's phrase 'the pornography of death'.

I share their distaste, but I think there is more to it. What drives the cult of the confessional column is not just an obsession with a journalist's death, but an obsession with her life: every last aspect of her everyday existence. In playing up to this, the distinction that once existed between an individual's professional life and their personal world becomes increasingly eroded.

Following Ruth Picardie's death, her friends and relatives jumped into the vacuum to make their own confessional careers. Picardie's husband, Matt Seaton, wrote a long essay detailing his wife's last moments, which was published in the national press. In 1998 Penguin published a slim book titled *Before I Say Goodbye*, put together by Seaton and Justine Picardie, which contained the column and a host of personal emails between Picardie and some of her closest friends. On the anniversary of Ruth Picardie's death, Justine wrote a major feature for the *Observer*, detailing her own feelings about her sister's death.

The result of all this is that Ruth Picardie, her husband and her sister have all become names in *Observer*-reading households—not because of something they have done, but because of a private tragedy that they shared and suffered. The distinction between their personal lives and their careers has

been eroded as every last detail of a private tragedy is dramatised and played out to an audience.

My impulse is to feel sorry for them. Who wants to parade their grief to the world? Yet for Justine Picardie, the problem is that she is unable to parade enough grief. 'So much is still unsaid', she writes in her *Observer* piece. 'There is still a gulf between the public and the private. It's a kind of wasteland that I inhabit, a limbo in the dull half-light of Ruth's fame.'

There is something incredibly sad about this. Here you have a journalist with a job many would give their writing hand for, bereaved of a loved relative, saying what? That the only way she can become the somebody she wants to be is by prostituting her emotions ever further, for a sobbing, voyeuristic readership.

This bothers me because I cannot understand the attraction of making your personal life public. I am as ambitious as any other workaholic young professional but, even so, I think there has to be some separation between your work and the rest of your world. You need space to think, relax, form relationships, wash your knickers and so on without subjecting every detail to the tyranny of word length and deadline. That, to me, seems self-evident.

Ironically, however, even those writers who have voiced some astute concerns about the confessional column seem ready to use it when it suits them. The columnist Julie Burchill has been feisty in attacking the 'death column', as represented by cancer-suffering journalists Ruth Picardie and John Diamond. On 5 December in the *Guardian Weekend*, Burchill reported that her own father had just died. Although she had known he was dying from cancer for five years, she said, 'I never once mentioned it', unlike other low journalists who were 'capitalising on the death of a family member'. Yet, maybe inevitably, within a few paragraphs her public protest had turned into a self-absorbed reflection upon how she feels about her loss, becoming the very kind of column that she despises.

In her *Guardian* column on 27 October, self-publicised neurotic Elizabeth Wurtzel (author of *Prozac Nation*) claimed to 'despise' the 'private journals of non-public figures'. Coming from somebody who made her name by writing about her own depression, this is a bit rich; as she admitted, 'it is the memoir of precisely the variety I am guilty of producing that I am sick of'. A case of post-traumatic syntax disorder, perhaps?

So everybody despises this trend, but we all feel compelled to do it sooner or later. And so the emotional bandwagon gathers pace, threatening to reduce journalism to the kind of diary-writing you did as a teenager: overhyped, self-obsessed and, when it's been done once, boring.

Yet to say this is to risk being treated as though you are stamping on the victims' graves and their relatives' hearts. In December Nicola Horlick, well-known fund manager and 'supermum', wrote a two-page feature in the *Sunday Times* about the death of her daughter from leukaemia. Horlick attacked a journalist who had criticised the fashion for stories about death. 'I would say to him that I feel that it is important to confront these issues and to learn from other people's experiences', she retorted. She said she had been comforted by Ruth Picardie's and John Diamond's columns, and hoped her own story might comfort others.

What do you say to that? When it comes to easing the pain of a bereaved mother, defending standards and principles of journalism just seems unfeeling and petty.

But it's not. For journalists and their readers alike, there has to be more to news and commentary than personal, self-absorbed emotion. If the news is to mean anything more than the over-dramatised private lives of the people who write it, the death column has got to go. ●

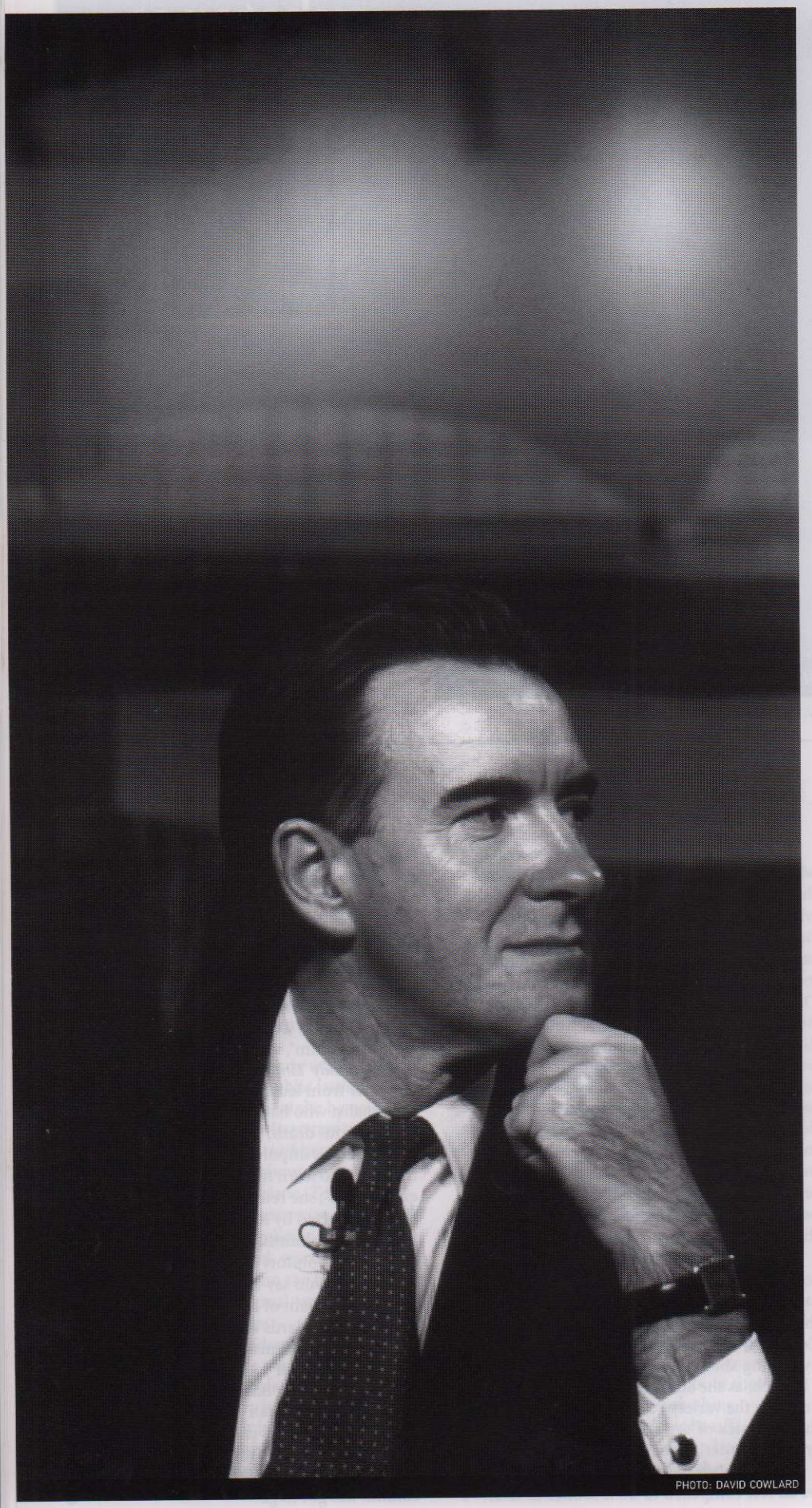


PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

Politicians, having power but not wealth, are perennially tempted to translate the one into the other. As long as there has been a parliament there has been a degree of corruption, going back to the Chancellor Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam in the fifteenth century.

The corruption of politics—a simple fact of the separation of political authority and capitalist wealth—though, is a different thing from the politics of corruption. The politics of corruption started, in Britain at least, as a public crusade by the Labour opposition and the press against the then Conservative government.

There was substance to some of the allegations made against the Tories, but there was also a lot of pious grandstanding. Venal arrangements that had been an accepted part of the everyday business of politics were suddenly cast in a new light. Hospitality that had been seen as a perk of the job was now presented as evidence of corruption.

The politics of corruption has transformed British public life, most importantly in destroying the Conservative Party. More recently it has come back to haunt the New Labour administration that had previously gained by it. But it is important to understand what the political crusade against corruption is.

For New Labour, crying 'corruption' was a way of attacking the Conservative Party while leaving Conservative politics uncriticised. New Labour had, after all, adopted the Tories' pro-market policies wholesale. Making an issue out of their opponents' moral rectitude was a way of squaring the circle of how to criticise a government whose policies you are largely in tune with. Crying corruption let New Labour reap votes where they had not sown a political alternative.

For the media, too, the campaign against corruption was a kind of fantasy politics, in which a government whose grip on power seemed intractable could be demolished with a single exposé. Exposing Tory sleaze cut the Gordian knot of the Tories' grip on parliament.

But the crusade against corruption also transformed the political landscape. The hope that the reputation of parliament would be restored by a change of government was a pious wish. By raising the issue of personal rectitude with such single-mindedness, New Labour and the media between them had changed the nature of politics. In the absence of political differences, personal morality became the point on which all judgements turned.

New Labour's promises of transparency in government and a new pact with the people altered the expectations and perceptions of how ministers and MPs ought to behave. The harsh spotlight has fallen on the personal morality of the politicians, to the exclusion of their public policies. There is little point complaining that the press is overwhelmingly concerned with personal issues and missing out on 'real' politics.

LABOURING UNDER AN ILLUSION

James Heartfield explains why Blair's government can never live up to its promise to be sleaze-free

Thanks to the changes wrought through the anti-corruption crusade, personal character is the substance of modern politics.

The expectations that politicians would become latter-day monks, foregoing all pleasures of the flesh and personal ambition, was, to say the least, unrealistic. Former trade and industry secretary Peter Mandelson's house has been touted as a sign of high living. But how many Fleet Street editors have a house valued less than £500 000? It is hardly outrageous that one of the most important figures in the government should not live in a council flat. But then it was Mandelson more than most who promoted the idea that New Labour could be trusted to behave like maiden aunts.

But if the promise of saintly forbearance is unrealistic for politicians in general, it is doubly unrealistic for New Labour. Having cut itself off from its traditional source of funds, the trade union leadership, New Labour made itself dependent on the largesse of a handful of carpet-bagging 'socialist millionaires'. At the same time, Labour made a point of opening up government to business influence, without ever really considering that businessmen are not in the habit of giving something for nothing.

Millionaire Geoffrey Robinson's influence snaked through New Labour—disproportionately because, despite the hype, the rich and wealthy are not naturally attracted to New Labour. Other high-profile supporters like Bernie Ecclestone, the tobacco-advertising Formula One millionaire, made big donations that drew the obvious question: what does he get in return? The more that New Labour boasted of its financial transparency, the more obvious its makeshift links to business became, especially since they were put together with such indecent haste. New Labour's *nouveaux riche* were likely to attract some comment anyway, but with the ostentatious protestations of clean hands and abstemious lifestyles, the scandals that followed were entirely predictable.

The character issue won Labour the election, and it is unrealistic to imagine that it would just go away, leaving parliament to return to business as usual. Character is now everything in political life. The prime minister's overplayed trump card is to put his personal reputation on the line. With character dominating public life, it is of course understandable that where the government falls down is where ministers fail to live up to the puritanical ideal that they have created.

The protests that newspapers ought not to be interested in the private lives of philandering Robin Cook, cruising Ron Davies or Jack Straw's dope-smoking son is laughable. Why should they not be interested in the very commodity that New Labour's politicians have been trading in since taking office: moral righteousness?

The impact of such personal scandals is entirely degrading, not just to the politicians concerned but to the public as a whole.

THE SUBSTANCE OF POLITICAL LIFE TODAY IS THE CHARACTER AND PERSONAL BEHAVIOUR OF THE POLITICIANS THEMSELVES

The ghoulish details of Robin Cook's personal life are shaming not just to him or his wife, but to all of us who are drawn inexorably on to read the wall-to-wall coverage. With politicians that claim a monopoly on the moral high-ground, there is nothing to do but drag them down, expose their moral foibles and persuade ourselves that they are humanly flawed like us. The consequence is to debase everybody concerned.

With the sacking of ministers Mandelson, Robinson and adviser Charlie Whelan, there is another factor driving the scandal-hungry political process: in-fighting. Without any overriding ideological goals to cohere New Labour, the factional disputes between different cliques are always on the verge of spinning out of control. The forensic analysis of who briefed against whom makes interesting reading, if you are captivated by palace intrigues. It appears that friends of chancellor Gordon Brown's helped leak the story that trade secretary Peter Mandelson had an interest-free loan from paymaster general Geoffrey Robinson.

This kind of cliquish politics arises when there is not much else that binds New Labour together. Blair's presidential style of governing leaves the cabinet with little else to do than plot and scheme against each other, using their preferred weapons of briefing, leaking and spinning. It is tempting to read grand differences of approach into the factions, but that is to give them more credence than they deserve.

Some have tried to force the Mandelson/Brown rivalry into a New Labour/old Labour conflict, as if politics could still be understood in terms of left v right. The truth is that both men are architects of New Labour. If there are differences they are much more to do with the different functions that the two men have played in the transformation of the Labour Party. Mandelson's role managing the party and its rebellious members, as well as forging links with the Liberal Democrats, has made him into a hate figure for the left. But the truth is that the 'iron chancellor' Gordon Brown is just as implicated in changing Labour's clothes, abandoning Keynesian 'tax and spend' welfarism. Old Labour policies have no influence on the party, except in the nostalgic desire of the liberal press to find a principle to beat New Labour with.

The attempts by party managers like Jack Cunningham to relaunch Labour's political agenda are particularly forced. Protesting too much, Labour's ministers blame the press for trivialising politics with attention to personal foibles and in-fighting, as if these were not the things that ministers are mostly preoccupied with. Millbank Tower acted after the Mandelson/Robinson/Whelan resignations to publicise a 'raft' of policy proposals. Now try to name one of them.

Ministers reel off a list of government departments as if these in themselves constituted policy: health, employment, prisons…The truth is that the substance of political life today is the character and personal behaviour of the politicians themselves. New Labour made it that way, when they sought to sidestep the political struggle against the Tories in favour of a moral crusade against corruption.

The one person who has managed to stand above the in-fighting is the prime minister Tony Blair. And yet he more than anybody personifies the 'character' issue in British politics. For all the personal cliques in the New Labour government, it is important that Blair stands above the fray, and so he is largely insulated from the cliquishness that divides his cabinet. But this is authority at a terrible cost. Blair's holier-than-thou image is the ideal compliment to his sleaze-prone government. ●

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Mick Hume
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LM Mail

THE TRUTH ABOUT LM

Rather than attempting to answer my case against *LM*, Mick Hume merely misrepresents it ('Heard the one about *LM* and the South African millionaire?', December 1998/January 1999).

He suggests that I am 'drawing a new line on libel': defending free speech for everybody but *LM*. My article began with the words 'Britain's libel laws are unfair', and went on to describe ITN's suit as 'oppressive'. Strangely, I appear not to have made myself clear, so let me spell it out in terms that even Mick should be able to understand: I deplore ITN's suit against *LM*. It is a bully's tactic, which I consider repressive and unjust.

You suggest that the only link I have uncovered between *LM* and its contributors and either the far right or big business is your magazine's continuing association with Ron Arnold of the hard-right Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise. But I covered in detail the striking congruities between *LM*'s agenda and that of the Libertarian Alliance. I showed how Frank Furedi had been offering his services to the major superstores and the Food and Drink Federation. In the text submitted to *Prospect* magazine I also mentioned that the 'anti-imperialist' *LM* has been running articles by Roger Bate of the Thatcherite Institute for Economic Affairs, which advocates, among other interesting ideas, that African countries should be sold to multinational corporations in order to bring 'good government' to the continent.

You suggest that 'rather than take issue with *LM*'s arguments', I sought instead 'to try to find *LM* guilty by association and innuendo'. Wrong again, I'm afraid: as well as cataloguing your associates, I also tackled your themes, in particular challenging *LM*'s crude and naive understanding of freedom, an understanding that recognises only people's 'freedom to' and not their 'freedom from'.

You say that your politics transcends the old left/right divide, but you consistently single out the left for attack, while echoing the arguments of the far right. Correspondence I have received in response to my article details how the organisation that gave rise to *LM*, the RCP, sought to undermine the miner's strike, OutRage! and the Zapatistas; specifically targeting, in other words, some of the left's most effective outlets for radical action. What else are we to make of this?

George Monbiot
London

Attending a conference on an unrelated matter, I was surprised to be handed a small bundle of articles from the *Guardian* and *Observer*, detailing alleged 'revelations' about *LM* magazine's links with the far right. I was assured that, now 'the facts' were out about *LM*'s shady links, there was no need for anybody to feel obliged to support the magazine in the libel case with ITN. Phew, thank God for that; now all of us who have our differences with *LM* have a perfect excuse to forget about our principles on free speech!

Speaking of which, the most ironic thing is that, as every environmentalist knows, the author of the main allegations, George Monbiot of the *Guardian*, is himself at odds with ITN over their coverage of Nigeria, Shell, indigenous peoples and so on. But it seems that they can at least find one thing to agree upon, which is nice: that, in the words of Mr anti-libel laws Monbiot's article, '*LM*'s survival is no great liberal cause'. Seems you're 'no great liberal' yourself, George, after all.

J Power
London

THAT'S WHAT'S WRONG WITH ANIMAL RESEARCH

Dr Stuart Derbyshire's article ('What's wrong with animal research?', November 1998) contains many mistakes. His claim that experiments on animals are necessary in order to advance medical knowledge may well be true. But his argument that experiments on animals have resulted in such advances does not support that conclusion. Derbyshire needs to show that medical advances could not have been made without conducting the experiments on animals. There may have been other methods of advancing medicine without inflicting cruelty on animals.

Take, for example, his case of research into the bridging of gaps in the spinal cords of rats, which could have benefits for many paraplegics ('like Christopher Reeve'. Do potential benefits to popular entertainers make experiments more justified?). Derbyshire assumes without argument that the research could not have been done any other way, such as through the use of computer models.

He argues that requirements such as needing a license from the Home Office and submitting the proposed experiment to an ethical assessment team mean that 'many researchers have decided it is not worth the burden'. But if the medical benefits are as significant as he claims, then how can it not be worth the effort?

Derbyshire claims that the reason why we do not hear much about the medical benefits of animal experiments is due to 'the PR success of animal rights organisations'. Perhaps a more straightforward explanation is nearer the truth: that there simply aren't as many benefits as he seems to think.

The most disturbing aspect of Derbyshire's piece is that what few concessions he makes towards a more decent treatment of animals are motivated not by any concern for their welfare but purely for efficiency reasons. Severely mistreating animals, he says, would waste time, possibly ruin the experiment and hinder discovery. To Derbyshire, animals are the moral equivalents of rocks or a pair of shoes. They are for whatever purpose humans wish to make of them.

Simon Clarke
Oxford

LM claims to believe in science and rationality, yet ignores the scientific case against vivisection. Evidence of vivisection's unreliability does not fit in with your crusade against animals. I challenge somebody at *LM* to read *Vivisection Unveiled* and then continue repeating what the vivisectors tell you to say.

Andrew Blake, who is quoted in your pro-vivisection article, claims he must love animals because he grew up on a farm. But animal farming is all about killing animals; why should anybody believe him when he tries to make out that vivisection is necessary?

You say you are against censorship. But you ignore the opinions of those who disagree with you, such as disabled anti-vivisectionists.

Katharine A Gilchrist
Kent

WE WELCOME READERS' VIEWS AND CRITICISMS

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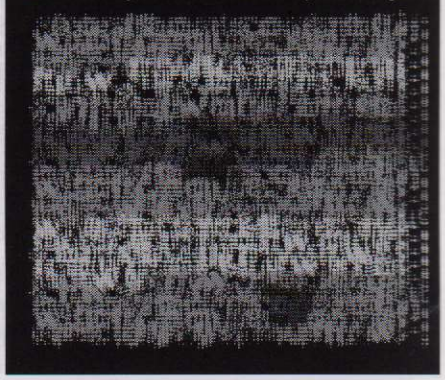

To explain the crisis in the Gulf, you need to look no further than London and Washington, argues Brendan O'Neill

War without end

Why was Iraq the big international issue of 1998, culminating in British and US air strikes in December? Bill Clinton and Tony Blair would have us believe that Iraq poses a threat to world peace by continuing to build 'weapons of mass destruction'. According to Blair, December's air strikes were an attempt to 'stop Saddam Hussein from...developing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons' (*Sun*, 17 December 1998).

Yet after seven years and more than 2400 inspections, UNSCOM (the United Nations Special Commission to Iraq charged with locating the 'weapons of mass destruction') has failed to find a single prohibited weapon. Asked what he thought Iraq's arsenal consisted of, Charles Duelfer, deputy chairman of UNSCOM, said, 'That's a good question...We have enormous uncertainty' (*Impact*, CNN, 4 March 1998). In the nine months since Duelfer made that comment UNSCOM has still not found anything incriminating. But on the 'uncertain' notion that Saddam Hussein is developing deadly weapons, Iraq has been bombed and subjected to crippling sanctions.

In reality, the conflict between the British and US governments and Iraq has nothing to do with 'weapons of mass destruction'. The only such weapons that we know for certain exist in the Gulf are those used by the British and US forces. Last year's air strikes were justified not by the discovery of Iraqi weapons but by the fact that the Iraqis failed to submit documents about their factories and chemical plants to UNSCOM. It seems that the only thing Iraq can really be accused of is hiding 'memos of mass destruction' and wanting to keep its internal affairs private.

The British and US governments seem to be in a permanent state of war with Iraq. Last year the 'Gulf crisis' was the major theme of British and US foreign policy and looks set to be the big international issue of 1999. Already this year there have been 'dog-fights' between the Iraqi army and US fighter planes and Blair has once again warned Saddam not to get ideas above his station.

This is a war without end. The Gulf crisis can never be resolved because it is not about what is happening in Iraq and not about 'weapons of mass destruction' or Saddam's threat to his neighbours. It is driven entirely by what is happening in the West.

The weapons inspectors of UNSCOM play an important part in sustaining the permanent state of crisis between the West and Iraq. The real role of UNSCOM was exposed by ex-member Scott Ritter, who has been doing the rounds of the US and British media, describing the weapons inspectors as being like 'spies'. UNSCOM inspectors have gone from demanding access to factories and chemical plants to demanding access to Iraq's presidential palaces and the Baath Party headquarters in Baghdad. By its very nature the search for weapons is ongoing and can never be satisfied, at least not until the weapons inspectors give Saddam himself an intimate body search.

UNSCOM is an open-ended licence to create a crisis between the British and US governments and Iraq. According to Iraqi minister for oil General Amer Rashid, 'The policy...within UNSCOM is always to have an issue under consideration. So always the technique is to make it endless, this tunnel without a light at the end; the goal post is always moving'. This is the reality of UNSCOM; not as a body with a definite brief that can be achieved over a certain period of time, but as an ever-present force which can 'move the goal posts' when it feels like it and muster up a crisis.

This ability to conjure up a crisis at any time serves Britain and America well. The endless war with Iraq is driven by internal US considerations. Many cynics questioned Clinton's motives in taking military action against Iraq, accusing him of trying to deflect attention from the impeachment procedures which were due to take place just days later. But military intervention abroad points to more deep-seated problems in countries like America and Britain.

At a time when not very much goes right for Western leaders they need the international arena in which to assert their authority. This is an ongoing crisis of authority which existed before Clinton and will exist after him. The permanent state of crisis with Iraq gives Clinton the ability to turn to the Gulf whenever he needs to bolster his position as the world's moral policeman and counter the US view of the president as 'Sick Willie'.

New Labour has become involved in the Gulf crisis as a result of its natural inclination to assume the moral high-ground on every issue. Tony Blair has not only been able to improve his relationship with Clinton through the Iraq crisis, it is also the perfect issue on which he can deliver a sermon and look down his nose at those beneath him. Hence all his language about 'degrading Saddam' and putting him 'back in his cage'. The Gulf crisis goes on, not because the weapons inspectors have so far failed to find (non-existent) weapons, but because the crisis continues to serve the purposes of the British and US governments.

The transparent and self-serving nature of Britain and America's policy on the Gulf has rarely been so exposed. This was illustrated in December by America's isolation in launching the missile attacks on Baghdad. The UN secretary-general Kofi Annan registered his opposition to the air strikes by saying that his thoughts were with the men and women of Iraq. Other members of the UN security council were either openly hostile, like China and Russia, or quietly hostile, like France. Such differing views among the leaders of the 'international community' exposed the artificiality of Britain and America's campaign.

For the British and the US governments, Iraq has become the one place where they are sure they can stand tall and look down on the world. In their pursuit of this moral authority Clinton and Blair have clearly decided that Iraqi lives are worthless and expendable. •

ANN BRADLEY

Seriously sick of animal rights

Despite their dramatic hunger-strike tactics, animal rights activists have failed to achieve a public government commitment to limit research on animals. But they seem to be exerting a fair amount of influence behind the scenes. Those involved in medical research are complaining that the government is adopting an increasingly negative attitude to animal research. According to Dr Mike Matfield, head of the Research Defence Society, an organisation established to counter the misinformation perpetrated by the animal rights lobby, New Labour 'seems to want to appease the anti-vivisection movement by adding more and more restrictions, bureaucracy and controls'.

Matfield and his colleagues complain that recent changes to the regulations that restrict animal research are making it more and more difficult for the scientific community to make progress in important areas of work. In a style that is increasingly typical of this government, changes to statutory regulations are made not to solve problems or improve the quality of work, but with the opportunistic intention of creating headlines that will generate a sympathetic public response. So, last year, when the Home Office substantially increased the regulations in place under the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, they failed to consult any representatives of the scientific community—not even their own Office of Science and Technology. The government probably thought it was unnecessary. They were guaranteed pats on the back all round from animal rights supporters, whose commitment to ending animal research is based on complete ignorance of what such research involves. And pats on the back are what ministers crave.

Unfortunately, public relations exercises intended to show that the government listens to the views of the nation have practical consequences for those working in the field of animal research.

In this case the new regulations mean that scientists have to apply for a licence, not only at the start of any research project involving the use of animals, but also every time the procedures vary. And, of course, this happens frequently because the course of scientific research cannot be predicted with complete accuracy ahead of time. The consequence of this is that the Home Office is flooded with requests for licences at a time when there is little incentive for the government to invest resources in speeding projects along. The PR shine would quickly tarnish if news broke that the government was increasing the number of licences granted.

Like it or not, most medical advances are based on animal research

The Research Defence Society claims that the Home Office currently has a backlog of more than 1200 requests to amend animal research licences. This represents 1200 medical research projects that have been stalled for no rational reason.

Faced with the lurid and emotive propaganda of the anti-vivisection groups, it is easy to forget that those engaged in animal research are not sadists, but scientists driven to find treatments and cures for illness.

Like it or not, most medical advances are based on animal research. There may be a lot one can do with computer models and cell cultures but they cannot possibly substitute for work with an entire organism. If we were to delete all the biological or medical knowledge gained from studies on live animals—and the subsequent advances that depended on that knowledge—we would lose much of what we know about pharmacology, biochemistry, physiology, genetics, immunology, pathology and medical science. Dr Mike Matfield claims we would also have to delete huge contributions to the applied studies of surgery, clinical chemistry, drug development, vaccine development, radiotherapy and other areas that are essential for the development of new treatments and diagnostic techniques.

I lost what little patience I had left for the anti-vivisection lobby several years ago when I met and interviewed Andrew Blake, then a twentysomething wheelchair-bound sufferer of Fredreich's Ataxia. Blake had just set up an organisation called Seriously Ill for Medical Research. He believed that the only hope for people suffering from serious illness is a major breakthrough in medical research and that for many, including him, the hope of this was the only thing that made life worth living.

We talked about the effect of threats to scientists and raids on laboratories and he calmly explained that all of these delayed breakthroughs that could help those suffering serious illness. I did not have to check my notes of the conversation (although I did) to bring to mind his conclusion: 'We are the ones who eventually pay the price with our extended suffering.' Even though Andrew Blake was referring to the delays to research caused by the stunts and violence of animal rights activists, his point applies equally to the delays caused by unnecessary bureaucracy.

Sick people may be less photogenic than beagles, chimps and fluffy bunnies but they're infinitely more deserving of our concern. •

A CULTURE OF LOW EXPECTATIONS

All the fuss about 'dumbing down' appears to assume that people are becoming more stupid. On the contrary, says Frank Furedi: it is society's elites that have lowered their standards and embraced the banal

'Dumbing down' is one of those confusing concepts that obscures as much as it reveals. People in general are probably no less interested in ideas than they were three or four generations ago. Although there is a lot of crass culture about, it is possible to find great books, watch inspiring films and even encounter great music. Visit a decent bookshop and you will see dozens of customers leafing through heavy-looking tomes. Most kids you meet are curious, imaginative and open to new ideas. At least when they begin their courses, the first-year university students I teach are passionate about learning and aspire to a first-class education.

In as much as it means anything, dumbing down does not refer to the intelligence of most people. Rather it is about culture—or more specifically about the elites who influence and regulate the flow of cultural ideas.

Strictly speaking one should not even call these people an elite today, since they self-consciously instruct the rest of society that elitism is wrong and that the institutions of culture and education should be made more relevant to everybody's concerns. That might sound admirably egalitarian. But in many respects an elite that refuses to acknowledge its status is even worse than one that revels in it.

The old elitist snobbery has been replaced by one that masquerades as anti-elitism. This new snobbery regards anything that is truly challenging and demanding as way beyond the capacity of 'ordinary people'. The new snobs demand that people should be taught only what is deemed to be relevant to their little lives. Their message is that we should not expect too much of ordinary people. Competition and examinations are often indicted for being divisive, by which they mean that it is wrong to stigmatise failure or praise achievement. The elitism of the new breed of cultural populist is strikingly manifested in the conviction that they know what is best for others.

Dumbing down in contemporary society is not simply about the lowering of standards. Its distinctive feature is the transformation of knowledge into a commodity that can do little more than serve the self. Knowledge is no longer really seen as a means of understanding the world outside yourself. Instead it serves no purpose higher than that of personal coping and survival. That is why, sadly, many of the people leafing through the latest publications in bookshops are probably searching self-help books for answers to their personal problems. Since ideas need serve no cause that transcends the individual self, it is perhaps unsurprising that we are not living through a period of bold intellectual experimentation or a renaissance in culture. The individuation of knowledge, like the reduction of understanding to 'self-awareness', renders it utterly banal.

In one sense the current debate about dumbing down represents a recurrent theme in modern Western culture. It seems that every generation discovers a new education crisis and examples of falling standards. Throughout this century the cultural elites of one generation have reacted to those of the previous era, and declared that their view of the world offered a better way forward than the old-fashioned ways of their predecessors. Conservative critics of mass society have always been particularly sensitive to manifestations of cultural decline. In turn, radical thinkers have persuasively argued that the traditionalist defence of standards is often nothing more than a self-serving argument for protecting the unearned privileges of a powerful minority.

So at least superficially nothing has changed. However, look more closely and the debate about dumbing down today has little in common with those of the past. Critics of tradition focused their attack on a system of education which was unfair because it excluded those who were potentially more able than its mediocre beneficiaries. They criticised the dominant culture on the grounds that it was banal and pedestrian. Radical critics did not simply demand a more accessible or user-friendly culture, but one that was more experimental and dynamic than their exhausted target. No doubt the nineteenth and twentieth-century avant garde could be accused of being earnestly pretentious and promiscuous in its commitments, but in its own way it offered a vision of human advance and achievement.

'Hello down there'

What is truly frightening about the discussion on dumbing down today is the absence of any competing visions of the future. For the cultural populists there is in any case little to worry about. Their concern is merely to break down the last pretensions of elitism—provide a bit more access, a bit more diversity, pepper it with a measure of life-long learning and offer a guarantee of skills counselling. On the other side, those genuinely anguished by contemporary trends often seem to do little more than sneer about the dumbing down of the BBC or some other hallowed institution. Well-rehearsed platitudes about standards and excellence and a few nostalgic references to the good old days tend to exhaust the pessimistic repertoire. Dumbed-down critics of dumbing down can easily be dismissed as pathetic yesterday's men by today's tuned-in facilitators.

The debate about dumbing down has little in common with the big controversies in the past for the simple reason that there are no issues of substance at stake. Why? The old elites have vacated the battlefield of ideas and of culture. Traumatised by changes that they do not understand, they are entirely preoccupied with holding the line rather than looking forward. But in a changing world no line can be held indefinitely. The mere suggestion that the Royal Opera is out of touch with the people of Burnley, or that Oxbridge is elitist, now provokes protestations of innocence from the old guard who appear embarrassed by institutions which would once have been their greatest sources of pride. That the old elite has failed to hold the line on virtually every issue can be seen

in the rather sad spectacle of a monarchy that cultivates the image of a dysfunctional suburban family, an Anglican Church whose most potent symbol of ritual has become a teddy bear, and a Tory Party leader who thinks it is cool to dress down.

Unlike the old guard, the new purveyors of accessible culture are in the privileged position of having no line to hold. These buyers and sellers of education and the arts have no principled views about any of the fundamental questions that affect our lives. They are characteristically pragmatic and opportunistic, and tend to regard any public display of loyalty and commitment as terribly gauche and old-fashioned. They are also instinctively relativistic, seeing any claim to truth and knowledge as naive, if not impertinent. It has become fashionable to slag off the Canon. The phrase 'nobody has a monopoly on truth' trips off the tongue as a prelude to claiming that everybody's views are equally valid. So Western science is denounced as arrogant and elitist, no better (and often worse) than the magical rituals practised by Native American rainmakers.

In a world where knowledge cannot claim to offer big truths, only partial insights into the individual psyche, the realm of ideas can only be of limited relevance to people. Rationality, scientific logic and abstract reasoning have to vie with more pedestrian ways of making sense of the world, from astrology to agony aunts. The popular media scorns the highly educated. The truth of the child, the intuitive insights of autistic personalities and Forrest Gumps are apparently more relevant to our lives than the theoretical elaborations of high thinkers.

Of course there is nothing entirely new in this populist celebration of homespun truths and folksy ignorance. Marginal cults have always been fascinated by primitivism and other romantic currents. The difference today is that these sentiments are not confined to the margins. Even institutions of higher learning pride themselves on their ability to 'demystify' claims to objectivity and truth. Those who search for answers are treated with derision and big ideas are treated with suspicion.

There was a time when university students were challenged to question their commonsense view of the world. A good university education sought to equip students with an ability to think critically, to acquire an understanding of the world that would be inaccessible through their direct personal experience. Today such an education is denounced as elitist and, worse still, as irrelevant to people's lives. On the contrary, students are encouraged to talk about their experience and tutors are instructed to offer courses that are relevant to their teenage customers' experience. Instead of learning to question their commonsense assumptions, students are taught to become sceptical about the wider claims of truth, objectivity or of any big idea.

Such a strongly anti-intellectual climate inevitably flatters mediocrity. In the past reactionary elites never tired of criticising public education on the grounds that a 'little knowledge' could be a dangerous thing in the hands of the semi-literate masses. For all their faults they did recognise the power of a higher education—that was why they were determined to keep it for themselves. Today's cultural elites are not so much against a 'little knowledge'. Indeed, their policy is to offer access to a little education for all. The aspiration for higher knowledge, however, is off the dumbed-down agenda. ●

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Dumbing Down, Wising Up?

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British TV networks are cloning their own versions of Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey. News programmes are opting for the soundbite in place of the in-depth investigation. The once-serene world of classical music is quaking with self-doubt, while Radio 4 directors are attacked for being either too shallow or too stuffy. In our schools there is much talk of standards, but little sign of excellence. In our universities the idea of a liberal education seems to be sacrificed for the sake of greater accessibility. But does all this mean we are 'dumbing down'? People are reading more than ever (and it's not all Jeffrey Archer), and going to more intellectually demanding movies. As for music, Beethoven and Mahler are no longer a closed CD to young people the way they were for many of their parents.

Perhaps we are exaggerating our fears, and our anxiety will pass with the millennium. Or perhaps the problem is not as black and white as it appears. Something new and even disturbing is happening to our culture, but it may not have much to do with creeping vulgarity or people getting stupider.

'Culture Wars' aims to put to question some of today's most cherished cultural values and assumptions. Everybody is concerned about the future of our culture. 'Culture Wars' is a chance to work out what exactly is going wrong.

Claire Fox and Mark Ryan, conference directors

THE TYRANNY OF 'RELEVANCE'

Mark Ryan surveys the degradation of art and culture

When the government announced in December that it was going to reorganise the funding of the arts, it did so with the sort of bureaucratic threats that even Stalin's minister for culture might have blanched at. New Labour would not just be handing out money, the minister announced, 'we are going to set targets and chase them'. I can only speculate as to what these targets might be. Perhaps London's orchestras should speed up their performances with a view to maximising customer throughput. Maybe the minister thinks that one performance a night is too relaxed a schedule, especially since conductors and orchestras know all the tunes so well.

While old Labour felt a paternalistic duty to bring high culture to the masses, New Labour sucks up to the entertainment industry at every opportunity while issuing targets and threats to what it sees as elitist culture. Cabinet minister Mo Mowlam's suggestion that Paul McCartney should succeed the late Ted Hughes as poet laureate captured this government's cultural values.

Fifty years ago governments and elites, not just in Britain but throughout the Western world, feared for the preservation of high culture and set about building the ramparts which they thought would preserve that culture from the encroachments of the masses. The Arts Council, Radio 3 and the South Bank are all, to some extent, the product of this cultural fear. In the event the fears were misguided. With few exceptions, good art and culture will always attract new audiences without the help of government preservation orders.

Today, by contrast, the New Labour government and the new elites it represents seem set on undermining many treasured cultural achievements. All this is done in the name of hostility to elitism, empowering minorities and giving 'the People' what they want. The current expressions of concern about dumbing down are a confused recognition of this cultural suicide of the elite.

Student-centred learning, fly-on-the-wall television, museums making exhibits accessible and fun; all these developments and more are promoted as a long-awaited concession to the popular will. The new mantra is that education and culture must be made more 'relevant' to everyday life. But the pressure for this change does not really come from below. It is coming from above, from those in authority, who flatter the public with the illusion that it is they, the public, who are making all the decisions.

But who decides what is relevant to 'ordinary people'? And who enforces the new standards on public life?

Earlier this year the BBC conducted a viewer consultation into what sort of news programmes the public wanted. The vast majority said they did not want their news to be dumbed down, but that they did want news reports to explain why reported events were important and relevant to their lives.

When it comes to the news I suspect I am no different from most people—I like it straightforward, interesting and unbiased. Put me in a focus group, however, and ask me 'how do you really like your news?', I could well imagine myself saying some rather silly things. If the facilitator

PHOTO: DANIELE GATTI, MUSIC DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA, BY ADAM HINTON

(implicator would be a better word for this new eminence grise) asked me 'do you want news to be more relevant to your everyday life?', I could imagine myself saying 'yes, not a bad idea', rather than barking back that I only like my news when it is totally irrelevant.

But what is relevant news? Most of the newsworthy events which take place in the world have no immediate bearing on our daily lives. Generally it is only in times of war or of very grave crisis that individuals are directly touched by political events from afar. The only way most news stories can be made relevant is to short circuit the troublesome process of understanding and appeal directly to the emotions of the viewer. But that is what the BBC and other news organisations are doing anyway. Foreign news especially has become a series of interchangeable reports on the effects of war, famine, ethnic conflict, etc on 'the victims' in general and 'the children' in particular. Such reports have substituted ersatz emotion for real understanding.

The consultation process which concluded that the news should be made more relevant was a rubber stamp for what the BBC is already delivering. Thanks to the bogus consultation, those who object to the new emphasis on emotional news will be told 'but this is what the punters want, they asked for it'.

Consultation bodies, focus groups, and the vast network of customer awareness campaigns that proliferate in our society like mutant cells, are upheld as an overdue awakening to other voices and a settling of scores with elitism. But this fraud masks something very different—a profound disdain at the top of society for the capacities of the average man and woman to go beyond their limited experience and grapple with what is difficult and challenging. A new set of virtues has come into being which narrows the scope for man's creativity more surely than any censor. From children's literature to grand opera, the new principle of judgement is no longer whether something provokes the imagination and intellect, but whether it is relevant, accessible and inclusive.

I am convinced that something dies in the brain whenever these words are uttered. It is as if no further explanation is needed: if something is deemed relevant, accessible and inclusive, then it is good by definition. Yet it is quite possible to argue that the opposite is the case. If we really were to take the virtue of 'relevance' seriously as the standard by which culture must be judged, we would die of boredom and inertia.

Almost anything worthwhile in the development of man's higher faculties has seemed at first irrelevant, inaccessible and exclusive. Any serious idea or work of art involves a struggle with our immediate sensation and received wisdom. If it was otherwise, human culture would not have developed. It seems slightly absurd to have to assert such obvious truths. But at a time when nearly every past triumph of genius and insight is being rubbished by armies of academics and cultural commentators, such assertions are necessary.

Look at the current crisis at the Royal Opera House (ROH), as its management recoils in terror from the charge of elitism. By its nature opera takes a leap of the imagination which many people find unacceptable. This is ultimately a matter of taste. Tolstoy loathed opera for its outrageous violation of realism, but this at least was an artistic judgement. Judge it, however, by the criteria of relevance, accessibility and inclusiveness, and it can only stand guilty as charged.

The result is that one of the best opera houses in the world stands at the brink of collapse. The ROH may always be in a state of financial crisis—opera is a desperately expensive business—but now it has an existential crisis to cap it all. The dark demands from the culture secretary, Chris 'Zhdanov' Smith, for a People's Opera House, together with the Eyre report damning the ROH for its elitism (provoking a debate of mind-crunching idiocy over whether those who go to the opera wearing trainers and string vests should be made to feel uncomfortable), would sap the will of most institutions. It is not too surprising that Bernard Haitink, one of the world's finest conductors, has threatened to resign and that the House is closed until further notice.

The accusation of elitism today seems motivated less by a spirit of egalitarianism than by contempt for human achievement in the past and human striving in the present. It is an attempt to put us all in our little boxes where we never have to go beyond our own limitations and rise to what is challenging and ennobling. Once the challenges of comprehending the real world are removed, in the name of relevance, the only problem that remains is to raise the self-esteem of the box people and to persuade them that in fact they are really marvellous as they are, and should not trouble themselves about anything outside the box. The extent to which education is turning away from acquiring bodies of knowledge and towards the development of self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence shows how snugly a culture of narcissism sits with philistinism.

Are we entering a new dark age? Perhaps not, but the gains of civilisation are not vouchsafed to each generation. The higher faculties will only remain high if they are exercised and developed. Mourning for a bygone 'golden age' or retiring into the living room in the hope of creating an oasis of authentic being separate from a cold world outside offer no solution. Defending the achievements of civilisation means fighting the tyranny of relevance. ●

ANY SERIOUS IDEA OR WORK OF ART INVOLVES A STRUGGLE WITH OUR IMMEDIATE SENSATION AND RECEIVED WISDOM

Change the setting, change the costumes, but leave Shakespeare's language alone, sayeth Sandy Starr

The Bard should be hard

'I'm not at all worried that our Shakespeare films—currently to be scripted by Hanif Kureshi, Andrew Davies, Paula Milne, Jimmy McGovern and Lucy Gannon—will lead to the accusation of dumbing down.'

Nick Elliot, ITV's controller of drama, has approved a £28 million project to adapt plays such as *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into contemporary drama. These productions will not only update the setting of Shakespeare; they will also modernise his language. Elliot was clearly having trouble understanding why I had invited him to a debate on Shakespeare at a conference entitled 'Culture Wars: Dumbing Down, Wising Up?'.

Updating Shakespeare is all the vogue today. The latest film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and played as a gangland drama in a US city, was a smash hit, credited with making Shakespeare more meaningful to a 1990s audience. Even Kenneth Branagh has said he wants to bring Shakespeare's plays up to date in their language as well as their setting.

Audiences at the 1998 Edinburgh Fringe Festival could choose from several Shakespeare-related productions, but had they wished to see Shakespeare's own plays performed in a traditional setting they would have been disappointed. There was *OJ/Othello*, which updated the story of Shakespeare's Moor with reference to the OJ Simpson trial. There was *Shakespeare's Women*, in which Tara Hendry performed as seven different characters from Shakespeare plays spliced together. There was even a rave version of *The Tempest*, with live video-feeds, a pounding drum'n'bass soundtrack and a glam-rock Ariel.

Is there anything wrong in experimenting with Shakespeare? *OJ/Othello*, for instance, was an ingenious work that deservedly won several Fringe awards. Can it be true to suggest that modernising Shakespeare means dumbing him down, when the results can be so impressive?

Attempts to recreate 'authentic' Shakespeare at the reconstructed Globe Theatre have been criticised as tedious, contrived and historically inaccurate. Why strive for authenticity when the joy of Shakespeare is precisely that he engages with the concerns of the age in which he is performed? If we resist the modernisation of Shakespeare, are we in danger of subscribing to Bardolatry?

Using Shakespeare as a springboard to something original is nothing new. Earlier endeavours include the musical *West Side Story* (inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*), and the cult films *Forbidden Planet* (*The Tempest*) and *Ran* (*King Lear*). Go further back and there is *All For Love*, a popular adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* written by John Dryden in 1677, whose praises were still being sung by TS Eliot this century. It would be impossible to deny that much great theatre and cinema has come from taking liberties with Shakespeare.

It is important to realise, however, that neither *OJ/Othello* nor *West Side Story* ever claimed to be Shakespeare; they only claimed Shakespeare as an inspiration. ITV, on the other hand, is presenting its modernised Shakespeare as the genuine article. Given that these versions retain neither the setting nor the language of the Bard, all that remains of him is the plot. And since Shakespeare appropriated most of his stories from other sources, it makes little sense for ITV to attribute any of its new productions to Shakespeare. The plot of *Macbeth* was taken by Shakespeare from the Scottish section of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, that of *The Tempest* was taken from Jourdan's 1610 pamphlet *A Discovery of the Bermudas*, and that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a mishmash of Ovid and Chaucer.

What makes Shakespeare's plays unique and worthy of his name is the beauty and complexity of his language. If anything in his plays can be credited with addressing the aspirations and preoccupations of every century since they were written, it is the language. Without imagery and metaphor *The Tempest* becomes little more than the tale of a motley group of sailors wandering around an island and getting drunk with an overgrown fish. When Miranda encounters a group of men for the first time and says, 'How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,/That has such people in't!', it is her language that conveys the conquering of new frontiers, not just the fact that she is impressed. Good TV writer though he is, it seems unlikely that the words of Jimmy *Cracker* McGovern could have the same effect.

If there is a genuine dumbing down of Shakespeare today it is to be found not in the attempt to popularise the plays, but in the increasingly popular belief that the locus of his work is to be found elsewhere than his language. Admittedly, Shakespeare's vocabulary is over three centuries old and can be difficult for the uninitiated. But the effort required to come to grips with it pays rich dividends: access to the most profound human concerns expressed in beautiful blank verse, expanding the horizons of the imagination. When today's schoolchildren are told that Shakespeare need not be as daunting as he seems because he can be understood in terms of the mundane reality of everyday life, their imagination is being impoverished.

It would be wonderful to think that the newfound popularity of Shakespeare is evidence of 'wising up' in society. But it is not Shakespeare proper that is being mass marketed to a new audience. Sadly, Hollywood and ITV seem intent on feeding us only diet-Shakespeare, with most of the calories removed. When his language has inspired and entranced for 350 years, a low-cal Bard is no substitute for the real thing. •

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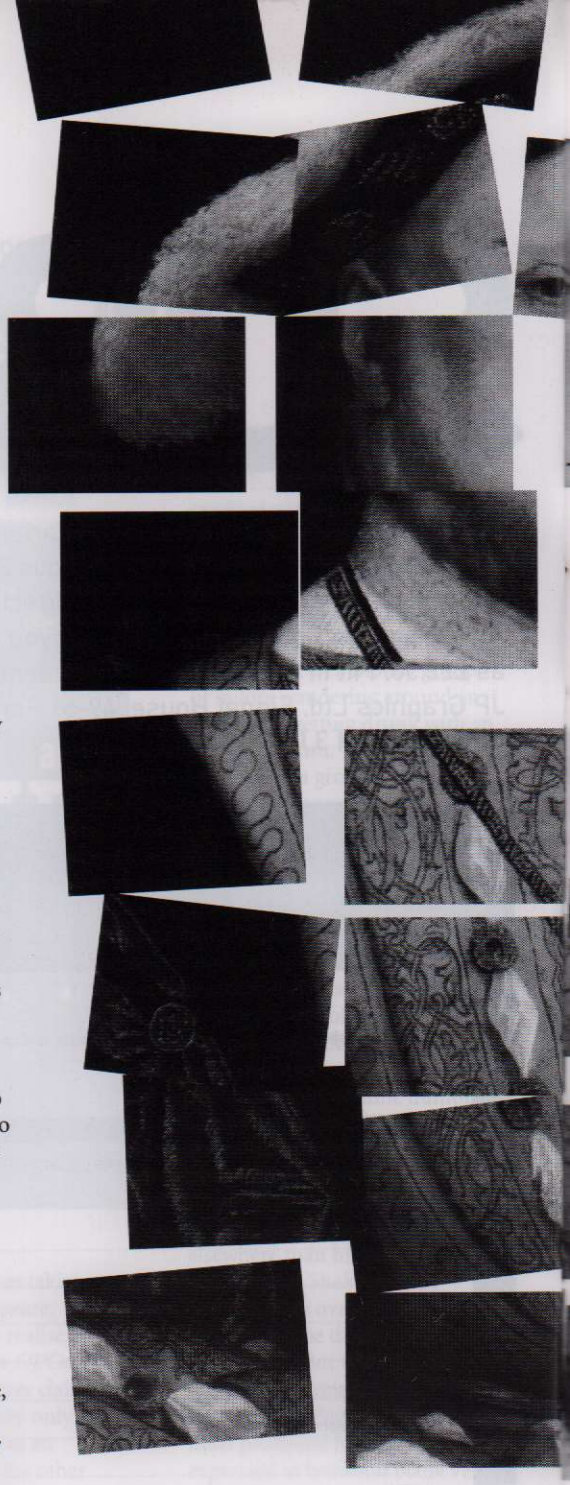

Dr John Maddicott finds Oxford's new history syllabus fragmented, incoherent and confused

Oxford University has abandoned any attempt to study English history in a continuous way. The result has been the fragmentation of the syllabus and its transformation into a sort of self-service restaurant, where the menu is exclusively *à la carte* and the tables are almost all separate.

Thirty years ago the Oxford modern history syllabus had not changed in any radical way since its devising just over a century earlier. At its centre lay the continuous study of English history from the end of Roman Britain to the mid-twentieth century. The syllabus kept a respectable balance between England and Europe, compulsion and choice, breadth and depth, primary sources and secondary authorities.

But there was much to be said against it. The inauguration ritual was a one-term preliminary examination which, with its five papers, including unseens in two foreign languages, was an ordeal to freshmen who were often homesick, unconfident and linguistically inept. Undergraduates then moved to a regime of three essays a fortnight, in some colleges two a week, for most of their remaining time. The syllabus gave only limited opportunities to study non-European history.

It was for its biases and omissions, rather than for its demands, that this syllabus came increasingly under attack from both dons and undergraduates between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. It was seen as being too much governed by the outdated ideals of education for public life and public service, too Anglocentric, too much dominated by politics, too strictly directed towards chronology, narrative and the broad sweep, too negligent of both middle-aged disciplines, such as art history and the history of science, and of younger ones, such as anthropology and sociology. It had failed to move with the times.

Yet its critics ignored some of the chief strengths of the syllabus. However narrow it might seem—and it was not very narrow—it gave undergraduates a secure grounding in what was for the great majority the history of their own country over a very long period. It allowed them to observe the slow processes of evolution and change, to follow through the development of institutions, such as parliament, or fluctuations in society and economy, such as those of population, and to make comparisons across the centuries. It also met the need for English citizens to know the history of England in some detail.

Thirty years on, the whole tradition represented by [the old] syllabus has disintegrated, and the presuppositions which sustained it have disappeared.

To some extent change has been a matter of reacting to external forces, affecting other subjects besides history. The norm of one essay per week, for example, was implemented only when the explosion of secondary literature seemed to make fewer and longer reading-lists inevitable; though it was predicated too on a rather pessimistic assessment of undergraduates' capacity for academic work. In a similar way the marked decline of vacation reading, the result mainly of the more pressing need for paid employment in the vacations, accelerated the trend away from a comprehensive and well-integrated syllabus. Undergraduates could no longer be expected to have familiarised themselves with a period, and to have read the classic commentaries on it, before moving on to detailed study in the term. But there were other more endogenous factors which arose from new views about what the history course itself should contain.

The degree to which political and cultural assumptions have shaped the history syllabus is nothing to be surprised at. The original syllabus was formed as much by contemporary notions of empire, service and race as the syllabus of the 1990s is by a view of England's (and Britain's) diminished place in a vastly different world. But while the Victorian ideals gave rise to a course which was coherent in the range of history which it covered, the scholarship on which it rested and the education which it provided, the present course lacks any such quality. What Oxford historians know when they graduate is now largely a matter of bits and pieces. It certainly cannot be assumed that they have a working knowledge of how their own country has evolved.

It is now possible to take finals without ever having encountered the Magna Carta or the Reformation or the Revolution of 1688 or the Reform Bill of 1832. If this seems too Whiggish and political a selection one could equally well substitute the medieval peasant economy, the Black Death, the Industrial Revolution, or nineteenth-century social reform. Nor has any comparable structure replaced what has been lost—

Ahistorical imagination

There is often a fine line between a child's history lesson and his or her creative writing class, says Louise Fahey

'Empathy' is now a key part of national curriculum history teaching. The idea is that, by asking children to project themselves into a situation or the mind of somebody from the past, we can help pupils to relate to a history that would otherwise be alien to them.

But in struggling to make history more 'accessible' to our pupils, are we helping to develop their historical imagination? Or are we depriving them of the knowledge this imagination requires?

The motivation for empathy in history teaching seems to be a fear that pupils find the subject boring or old-fashioned. Subjects such as the English Civil War, the French Revolution and the British Empire can now be skipped over because they are considered too difficult or Eurocentric for the children of today. Pupils are more likely to be asked to investigate the life of a slave on a nineteenth-century plantation or the role of women in the Civil War. This is seen as making history more accessible and interesting, and teaching children to be tolerant of different belief systems. But if children's knowledge depends on those aspects of the past that are easy to teach and learn, they will end up with a patchy view of the history.

Historical imagination requires a good knowledge of the subject. Without this children can only make up stories from the past. A colleague recently described an essay by a GCSE candidate who was studying the Chinese communist revolution of 1949. Pupils were asked to imagine they were participating in Chairman Mao's long march and to write an account of their experiences. This candidate wrote an exchange between a mother and daughter about the mother's discomfort, because her foot bindings were too tight and there were still several thousand miles to go.

The use of empathy in the classroom tends to concentrate on the hidden voices from the past: the peasant or the mill-worker. This can lead to banal, unchallenging lessons. Pupils may have a limited knowledge of the feudal system, but know that peasants had no rights and were tied to the land; they may also have been shown a picture of a peasant's cottage. The resulting written work is very often a narrative description of a dull and miserable life, which changes little from period to period. Pupils may have little sense of time or historical context, but will get a mark as long as their answers are plausible if not historically accurate in any specific sense.

Roleplay and empathy work are not necessarily bad classroom techniques, but they can become a substitute for teaching historical content. History teachers should be asking whether what we teach should be based on what children want to learn, and questioning the consequences of this. If history were completely designed to relate to children's lives today, we might deny them access to knowledge and subjects which could arouse their curiosity in a world bigger than the small one they inhabit. ●

least of all, perhaps, one founded on the aspirations of those who, a generation and more ago, hoped to see 'a new kind of history' embodied in the Oxford syllabus.

Art history, the history of science, the history of ideas, are there; but they sit on the margins, set apart in 'special and further subjects' for the benefit of *aficionados*. The position of the newer disciplines such as anthropology and sociology is still more marginal. The average undergraduate is hardly more likely to have digested Evans-Pritchard on witchcraft among the Azande than, nowadays, to have read Michael Brock on the Great Reform Bill. What has emerged is not a new syllabus but an old one broken into pieces.

This was not at all what the young Turks of the 1950s and 60s had in mind when they urged reform on a conservative faculty. That aspiration and achievement have diverged so widely is not only to be explained in terms of responses to the unpredicted and unpredictable social and political changes of the long 30-year interim. The pressures applied from that direction have clearly played their part. But more salient have been a decline in academic confidence, an easy acceptance of what is fashionable and an overriding reluctance to try to decide what the subject of history at Oxford ought to be about. The result is incoherence and confusion: an outcome which no would-be reformer in the pre-reform era can have wanted and one that has been eventually arrived at almost (as Gibbon would have said) insensibly. ●

Dr John Maddicott is a fellow and tutor at Exeter College, Oxford. This is an edited version of an article in *Oxford Magazine*, no158

'WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF REAL-LIFE SOAP'

Paddington Green: BBC1's latest stop for the docusoap PHOTO: BBC

Is factual programming becoming an extended arm of TV entertainment? asks Richard Kilborn

The charge is a familiar one: that in these ratings-obsessed times we are witnessing a worrying decline in the quality of factual programming on UK terrestrial channels. Hard-hitting, thought-provoking documentaries are allegedly becoming a comparative rarity and the whole factual domain is being usurped by various forms of reality programming and by the omnipresent docusoap.

What substance is there to these charges? Is it an open-and-shut case of dumbing down? Ask the broadcasters themselves and most will tell you that factual programming has never been in a healthier state. They will remind you that, just a few short years ago, documentary or factual programming was regarded as a distinct scheduling liability. Now, they proudly proclaim, it has become one of the main weapons in the scheduler's armoury, to the extent that at key points in the early evening schedule a relatively low-cost docusoap can frequently command larger audiences than the more expensive sitcoms and drama series on which the mainstream channels had hitherto relied.

Quite understandably—given the ultra-competitive times in which we live—the popularity of the new factual formats has led to frenetic commissioning activity, as broadcasters attempt to cash in on the pulling power of these programmes. Cloning has also become a widespread phenomenon as rival channels seek to steal a march on their competitors.

Concern is already being expressed in many quarters about the consequences of this factual renaissance. TV executives fear that over-commissioning will kill the goose that laid the golden egg. How long will it be before audience fatigue sets in? Can viewers really want to hear any more about the shenanigans of upper-class chalet girls in Swiss ski-resorts?

Broadcasting critics, on the other hand, are more concerned about what they see as a worrying decline in standards of factual/documentary provision, particularly the growing tendency to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. Does the intensely competitive broadcasting environment make it more likely, for instance, that programme makers will be driven to the sorts of fabrication into which the makers of the Carlton production *The Connection* were tempted? Likewise, should we be not a little concerned that participants in docusoaps are often singled out for their performance potential, or that there is often complicity between filmmaker and subject in setting up situations? In short, aren't many of these developments living proof that factual programming is fast becoming the extended arm of TV entertainment?

The picture is perhaps not quite so gloomy as some would make out. Factual provision in the UK still holds up well compared with other European countries. Nobody is complacent, however, about the threats posed as broadcasting priorities change. Firstly there is the fear that, in an increasingly commercialised climate, the very currency of documentary will be progressively devalued. Secondly, there is the concern that, as the public service ethos in broadcasting becomes steadily eroded, so it will become more and more difficult to find space in the schedules for programme material which demands the viewers' more concentrated attention. Thirdly, if the various 'softer' forms of documentary become the norm, then marketplace laws will dictate that the younger generation of programme makers will find it difficult to acquire the skills necessary for producing those cutting-edge documentaries, which often rely on extensive investigative research.

Though we would do well to heed some of the warning signs, it would be foolhardy to suggest that UK factual programming was in some kind of crisis. The BBC (for all its current over-reliance on docusoaps) still provides a wide range of factual material, including what are labelled as 'serious' or 'creative' documentaries. Likewise Channel 4 (in spite of occasional doubts expressed about popularising tendencies since it began to sell its own airtime) has remained faithful to its promise, enshrined in its original remit, to maintain a strong documentary portfolio.

The same cannot, unfortunately, be said for ITV, whose factual/documentary provision—in spite of all protestations to the contrary—has in recent years undergone a qualitative decline. In the words of a report produced by the broadcasters' lobby group the Campaign for Quality Television: 'For more than 20 years ITV earned a worldwide reputation for producing major documentary films…Now that tradition is under threat. What the Independent Television Commission describes as "serious documentary coverage" has been cut back to the point where it is barely viable to produce…And having been allowed to wither by ITV itself, serious documentaries are now sown so thinly—randomly—throughout the network schedules that it is all but impossible for the audiences which used to watch them to know when they might appear.'

Looking to the future, the pessimists foresee a further squeeze on the more serious or challenging form of documentary/factual programming with a concomitant rise in the number of lightweight lifestyle and reality programmes. The optimists take the line that programme makers will be given the opportunity to add to the existing range of factual formats and to experiment with other delivery modes (for example, the internet, which will allow viewers to access material not included in the broadcast package).

Whatever else happens, of one thing we can be sure: the process of commodification will proceed apace. The crucial question is likely to be: can television in the first decade of the new millennium still retain at least some space in its schedules for those programmes which address viewers principally as knowledge-seeking citizens, as distinct from entertainment-hungry consumers? •

Richard Kilborn is a senior lecturer in film and media studies at the University of Stirling, and co-author (with John Izod) of *An Introduction to Television Documentary* (Manchester University Press, 1997)

KITCHEN-SUNK DRAMA

Today's docusoaps compare badly with art that patronised the masses in the past, writes James Heartfield

STANLEY SPENCER, SHIPBUILDING ON THE CLYDE: THE TEMPLATE, 1941-42 507 X 5790MM (DETAIL)

Art for the People, an exhibition featuring scenes of ordinary life, was organised by the leftish Artists International Association (AIA) back in 1939. The AIA was part of a movement of 'social realism' in painting, inspired in part by the heroic representations of workers and peasants in official Soviet art. Translated into the humdrum Britain of the 1930s and 40s, social realism became a celebration of the contribution of working class people to the nation's wealth, and later to the war effort. Paintings exhibited by the AIA carried titles like 'Children of the Gorbals' (John Minton), 'London street scene' (Barnett Freedman), 'Washing up' (Stanley Spencer), 'Ruby Loftus screwing a breech ring' (Laura Knight), and 'Selling the *Daily Worker* outside the projectile engineering works' (Clive Branson).

It was remarkable to see ordinary lives depicted in the oil and canvas once reserved for middle class interiors and country estates. Some of the work of the social realists was more than remarkable. Stanley Spencer's vast panels 'Shipbuilding on the Clyde', commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee, teem with men and women, bent to their purpose, illuminated by the light of their welding torches. The heroism and the humanity are not caricatured, though the scene carries all the strange menace of Spencer's religious allegorical paintings.

At the GPO film unit the interest in the lives of working people was a creative impulse. John Grierson innovated a new style in documentary film that was honest to its subject matter, and did not turn away from what was discomforting to its audience. Humphrey Jennings and WH Auden worked with Grierson, as did Carol Reed, who went on to direct *The Third Man*. There was comedy among the social realism at the GPO unit, as when the arch Auden did not have the heart to explain to an innocent Jennings what was wrong with the line 'the workers lay down their enormous tools'. Meanwhile Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop put ordinary lives on the stage, along with Brendan Behan's *Quare Fellow*.

There was a lot wrong with social realism. It often descended into a titillation of middle class audiences with patronising reflections on working class squalor. When the War Department sent Shakespeare to the Welsh Valleys the actors called it 'missionary work'. The propaganda films that Grierson's apprentices made, of common people pulling together to beat Hitler, did not tell the real story of class tensions in the midst of the war, but sold a myth of merrie England and maypole dances. Like their Soviet counterparts, the social realists were in danger of romanticising social conditions that were degrading and plainly unheroic.

But for all that the social realists of the 1930s and 40s were progressive-minded people, with a real concern for their subjects. The influence of social realism in the European arts was sufficiently alarming to the US Central Intelligence Agency for them to sponsor abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock as a counterweight to the imagined influence of 'Soviet-inspired' art.

By contrast, today's social realists and docusoaps have a less ambitious project, and a more awkward relationship to their subjects.

Scottish painters Ken Currie and Peter Howson (currently gracing the cover of The Beautiful South's album *Quench*) consciously plundered the imagery of the original social realists, but as a requiem to a defeated class. Currie's mangled bruisers are a record of an industrial class thrown on the scrap heap. Howson's vicious caricatures of an overweight, scrofulous underclass wear sneers, sneakers, and backward baseball caps, sport pit-bull terriers and even, in one flight of fantasy, string up a saintly, white-bearded intellectual from a lamppost. In America writers like Raymond Carver and actor-playwright Sam Shepard trawl the trailer-trash for their gritty realism, while James Kelman's novel *How Late It Was, How Late* takes us on a nightmare journey with a Glaswegian jakey blinded by drink and violence. It is worth bearing in mind that Britain's social realist filmmakers, like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, play as art-house cinema in America.

In television the docusoap is the most remarkable venture in putting ordinary life centre stage. The stars of *Airport*, *Driving School*, *Lakeside* are as far from Hollywood glamour as they could be—and quite a distance from their grandparents, as depicted by the Artists International Association and the GPO film unit. This is a post-industrial working class that works in services, like shopping malls. There is little danger of a bogus celebration of the heroism and dignity of labour in the docusoap. Its heroes, like smirking Jeremy in *Airport*, are camp, self-deprecating and often media-conscious, making witty asides to the camera. Not a great deal of work seems to go on in Britain's service industries—more bitching about colleagues and socialising than Spenceresque Glasgow-shipbuilding graft.

At its best the observational format has supported some compelling television, like Lucy Blakstad's *Lido*. But sad to say, these are exceptions to the rule. There is no doubt that observational documentary is popular, and the very banality of the problems of the everyday hold vast audiences transfixed. But the gravitation towards this kind of 'People's television' is a celebration of the passive and small-minded side of folk like us.

The docusoap has rushed to fill the vacuum where the filmmakers' own creativity should be. They find their own lack of ambition reflected in the modest quirkiness of the unrich and 15-minute famous—but now transformed into valuable airtime, and on the cheap.

The old social realism descended into a celebration of the very conditions of working class life that ought to have been done away with. As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky warned, 'Those who believe in a "pock-marked" art are imbued with contempt for the masses' (Ann Arbor, *Literature and Revolution*, p204). The new 'People's television' redoubles those faults, without even a romantic misrepresentation of working class life to vitiate it, and makes a virtue out of the banality of the everyday. ●

LEVELLING DOWN

By prizing consistency over creativity, argues Susan Gregory, school assessments risk stifling children—especially boys

Recently I was talking about the Literacy Hour, the government initiative to raise standards in primary schools, with 14-year old students. 'My brother's had to sign a contract', said one boy, 'saying he'll behave himself while he's doing it. He's nine!'.

'What do you think about that?' I asked. 'Not a lot', said Paul. 'It's natural for kids to be naughty some of the time.' Girls spoke up in agreement. 'School wouldn't be any fun if kids were never naughty.'

Contracts of unconditional good behaviour are licences for teachers to be boring. And bad behaviour in the very young might be a legitimate form of direct action: 'If you deliver worthy, government-prescribed Literacy Hours from reception class to year six, we shall rebel.' This is not to say that Literacy Hours necessarily are boring—just that children are natural subversives.

I start by mentioning Literacy Hour because, at worst, it encourages children to jump through hoops for five hours a week. This is so that, come the year 2002, if we're on line with government targets, 80 per cent of our 11-year olds can jump through the hoop marked Key Stage Two English SATs and emerge the other side triumphantly labelled Level Four. And for what?

The very word 'level' I have always considered an educational anathema. It suggests that we can take a sample, at any time, of any age group in our society and 'level' it. I don't believe this for one moment. I don't believe that this is how human beings are, by nature. We are all, it seems to me, a fever chart of peaks and sloughs. And if we try to measure ourselves in 'levels' we are demanding a consistency of performance that is alien to our very nature.

If we demand this consistency determinedly enough, we shall end up with those who are capable of delivering consistently somehow triumphing educationally. I see this leading almost inevitably to a blander, less excitable and exciting performance being preferred to one that is erratic, but exceptional. The consequence of this can be to reward mediocrity, as long as it is consistently mediocre, while ignoring bursts of great creativity. This is already happening.

The performance of students according to the recent Key Stage Three English SATs results made my eyebrows shoot up, not for the first time. Boys in particular, whom our school had rated for the cogency and accuracy of their writing, were 'coming out' as much as two 'levels' below what they had been perceived as reaching through continuous assessment. The same can be said of some girls.

When I looked closely at such students' papers, two things struck me. Their appreciation of sharp writing in others was outstanding. They were stylistically adept in their own free writing. Their chosen subject matter did incline to the lurid—the death by heart attack of an elderly widow terrorised, unwittingly, by her own cat; the revenge meted out on one friend by another after a climbing accident. These stories are reminiscent of the work of Stephen King and James Herbert, and possibly reflect the boys' preferred reading.

Stephen King is well known for his irritation at being typecast as a non-serious writer solely on the grounds of his choosing to write horror. I suspect that many of our students, particularly boys, are being typecast in just the same way.

I do not want to denigrate the performance of the girls who, according to the SATs results, far outstripped these boys. At their very best they were stylistically inventive, stunning, shocking. But a number of the more highly rated performances smacked of the 'little princess' syndrome to me. There was something disturbingly precious about them. Consistent, yes. Almost perfectly accurate in spelling and punctuation, yes. But faintly cloying, yes.

There was something louche about them. They covered a lot of paper, but not an awful lot was being said. At their worst they were self-regarding, arch and coy. In a culture that encourages narcissism in the young, particularly the female young, this is hardly surprising. But we don't have to perpetuate this culture forever, and a sure way of doing so is to give it official status via our testing system.

When I wrote to the body with overall responsibility for Key Stage Three English SATs, it was acknowledged that the position for boys in particular is 'far from straightforward'. The unevenness of their performance was conceded, as was the fact that they scored particularly highly on certain kinds of questions. Why, then, is their 'best performance' not being given the recognition it deserves?

When we think of those established writers who many consider 'the greats', is it the consistency of their performance that awes us? Where do we find that consistency? I just don't see it. Time seems to render the duff patches of the famous strangely inconspicuous. But for many of our young male students and many misjudged females, too, disheartened and demoralised by a system of national assessment that purports to serve us all, time is not on their side.

If their creative thrust goes comparatively unrecognised and unappreciated, particularly by those bodies who officially assess them and in whom they, most pitifully, place so much trust, they are liable to quit thrusting in disgust. And as for 'levels', we all know what Shakespeare implied about them. 'Comparisons are odorous!' Quite simply, they stink. •

Why scrap grammar schools now?

Abolishing the remaining grammars can only hasten the decline of standards across the education system, argues Joanna Williams

I teach at a girls' grammar school in Birmingham which selects its pupils by examination. The fate of this kind of school is now in the balance. From September all parents will be able to vote in a government-initiated ballot on the admissions policy of grammar schools in their area. This move has been received as the latest step towards abolishing the remaining grammar schools.

There are many good reasons to oppose selection in education, and to recognise that grammar schools are outdated. A decent society should not think about determining a child's prospects on the basis of two mornings worth of exam papers sat at the age of 11. We need an education system that offers every child in the country the chance to be challenged and pushed to achieve the best they can.

Unfortunately, abolishing the grammars will not bring this day nearer. Far from it. The campaign against grammar schools seems more about lowering the expectations we have of all children and the standards we expect from them.

Last summer my school achieved the highest GCSE results in the country. When the press telephoned, the headteacher and deputy expressed their delight at the results but equally felt the need to defend the school against the charge of being an 'exam factory'. The questioners implied that, since this was a selective grammar school, the girls must have achieved their results only after being made to spend 20 hours a day with their noses in books, buried under a mountain of homework, and reduced to being stressed-out exam addicts.

The assumption seems to be that grammar school girls will grow up to be academically gifted but socially inadequate. In fact most pupils at my school seem pretty well-rounded. The problems and awkwardness they do suffer from tend to emphasise their normality as teenagers, rather than their uniqueness. They have just as much trouble with acne and broken hearts as I did when I was 15 and attended the local comp.

Most of the pupils thrive in an environment where teachers have high expectations of them. When these expectations are actually exceeded, they are obviously not unrealistic. And this is not true for grammar school pupils alone. Children at any school will perform better when they are expected to achieve, rising to the challenge and often surprising themselves. The major difference between grammar and comprehensive pupils is that those at grammar schools tend to be under a greater pressure of expectation, from peers, parents, society and themselves.

Grammar schools also seem more likely to measure their achievements against high standards, aiming for the highest A-level grades, the best universities and, ultimately, the top professions. In the comprehensives where I have worked the emphasis from many teachers seems to be, at best, on pupils improving upon their own previous achievements, rather than achieving in comparison to others or against an objective standard. At worst, I have met teachers whose expectations of their pupils go no further than that they turn up and sit still in their seats for the duration of the lesson.

Resource differences are important. My school has superb facilities for sport, information technology, music and drama, and the opportunity to study a wider range of subjects: Latin from the age of 12 and Greek from 14. Grammar schools are generally more able to attract the teachers they want and to keep them, resulting in a highly qualified, stable, well-motivated staff. Staff, students and parents are all working for the same end, in a school where worries about expense are subsumed by a concern with the quality of education.

Yet instead of people demanding more such excellent schools, today's campaigns want simply to abolish the few grammar schools left. This is the spirit of the government's proposed ballot of local parents. If I were the parent of a child who had failed the 11-plus and whose school had a reputation as second-rate, I imagine I might feel peeved enough to vote against the grammar school's selection policy. But that would not raise the educational standards of the comprehensive one jot. Nor will the government's proposal give any extra resources to the comprehensives. Scrapping the remaining grammars will do nothing to improve the education available to all. Instead it can only hasten the decline of standards across the system.

Grammar schools may be elitist, snobby, unfair, sexist and many, many things, but they do set a standard for others to aim at. Without that golden standard mediocrity becomes the norm and there is little pressure for anybody to strive for anything more. There is much talk about falling standards of GCSE and A-level examinations, but standards are surely maintained by keeping the schools that are doing well and encouraging them to do even better. Scrapping the schools that perform best may appear to raise the standards of comprehensives—but only because the level of expected achievement has dropped.

It is true that pupils who get into grammar schools are not always the most intelligent, but come from the best primary schools, had the best tutors or have parents pushy and sussed enough to know how to play the system. I object to the fact that children who fail the 11-plus get a second-rate education: if anything, I have sympathy with those who say that less academically able pupils need more of a teacher's time and resources than their more gifted peers.

If we were creating the education system from scratch, there would be no place for grammar schools. But in today's circumstances, abolishing the grammar system will only allow all schools to expect equally little of all children.

Painted on the wall of the comprehensive near my home, beneath the name of the school, is the legend 'Excellence for everyone'. But the lowering of standards to enable everybody to 'achieve' equally little is not my idea of excellence at all. ●

PRACTISING 'SAFE' MUSIC

The rock era has come and gone, says Simon Napier-Bell

In 1963 Reyner Banham wrote: 'Pop music is now so basic to the way we live, and the world we live in, that to be with it, to dig the pop scene, does not commit anyone to left or right, nor to protest or acceptance of the society we live in.'

On that analysis, Tony Blair has built a truly 'pop' government. To approve of it does not commit anybody to left or right, nor to protest or acceptance of the society we live in. This is not so much due to Blair's insight as to the worldwide trend away from confrontation. No more Cold War; no more apartheid; peace in Ireland; agreement in the Middle East—we are living in a consensual age. But for some time now it's been spreading to record companies. And what's good for world peace is lousy for the rock business.

When it started in the 1950s, rock was instantly political. You pushed your arse into tight leather jeans and shoved your credentials into the audience's face. Jumping around with a guitar was enough to show dissatisfaction with the political status quo. For people under 25, that meant the generation gap. It was a greater political divide than the differences between left and right.

By the 1960s rock'n'roll singers had given way to four and five-piece guitar groups. Mostly they wrote their own songs, which gave them scope for political comment, but their principal political statement was made through their lifestyle—opting out of mainstream society and openly smoking dope. By giving 18-year olds the right to vote, the Labour government hoped to kill off the generation gap. But the lifestyle of pop musicians helped to maintain it by promoting the use of drugs among young people.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, with the continued use of drugs, pop and rock artists retained their image of being on the fringe of society. And as long as Thatcher was in power, they kept themselves latently political, able at a whim to lend support to any suitable charity event—the homeless, the miners, legalisation of marijuana, AIDS, etc. But Blair has finished that off. Youth culture is no longer feared by the establishment; it receives grants. Aspiring pop stars can sign on the dole while they learn their trade and wait to be discovered.

This is not good for rock music. Before they can spit them angrily in our faces, young people are having their grievances removed. And if they manage to find something to rile about, they are listened to sympathetically and sent for counselling.

Nowadays, there's no generation gap, no meaningful protest, no adolescent anger. Flair, instinct and individuality have disappeared. Record companies have turned to plastic boy-groups and *Titanic* lovesongs, and if by chance they manage to find a real artist, they eschew the art of artist development and insist on recouping their expenditure from the very first album.

Until quite recently, new artists were still signed on the basis of having a small fan-base which could be enlarged during the promotion of their first album. The second album would develop them further and, if necessary, the record company could wait until the third album to recoup. By then the artist would be self-assured, with an individual sound, and a worldwide audience. Japan, for instance, whom I managed in the 1970s, reached their third album, *Quiet Life*, before they had a hit single. And it was only after their fourth album, *Tin Drum*, that they achieved real international success. A group like Japan would never get signed today.

Recently, the head of A&R at a major company saw a new group and described the lead singer as 'the biggest potential star I've seen in 10 years'. Just five years ago somebody in that position would have signed the act immediately. But with instant recoupment required, he was afraid to do so. Instead the decision was taken by consensus between the A&R staff, the marketing director, the promotion people and the MD. Naturally, the lowest common denominator prevailed. It was decided the group's music was not 'safe' enough. They could only be signed if they agreed to refine their individuality into mainstream commercial pop.

That is the attitude of all the major record companies. The result is a chart full of trivia, pop with no rough edges and no long-term artists emerging. If a group's first record is a hit, they have their moment of fame. If not, they are dropped.

Some music-business analysts think 1998 was just a bad year—meaning that next year things will improve. I disagree. This is not temporary. The rock era has come and gone, along with political polarisation and the generation gap. It has been replaced by kitsch pop, as stimulating as sucking a Murray mint. Even underground dance records have become formularised, and when you look at the music on offer it's not surprising that young people are taking more drugs than ever to go with it—like tarting up bland food with spicy sauce. Drugs have always been a junior partner to pop music. Now they're getting the upper hand.

I'm not surprised. At the moment they offer better value. •

Simon Napier-Bell is the former manager of The Yardbirds, T-Rex, Japan and WHAM!

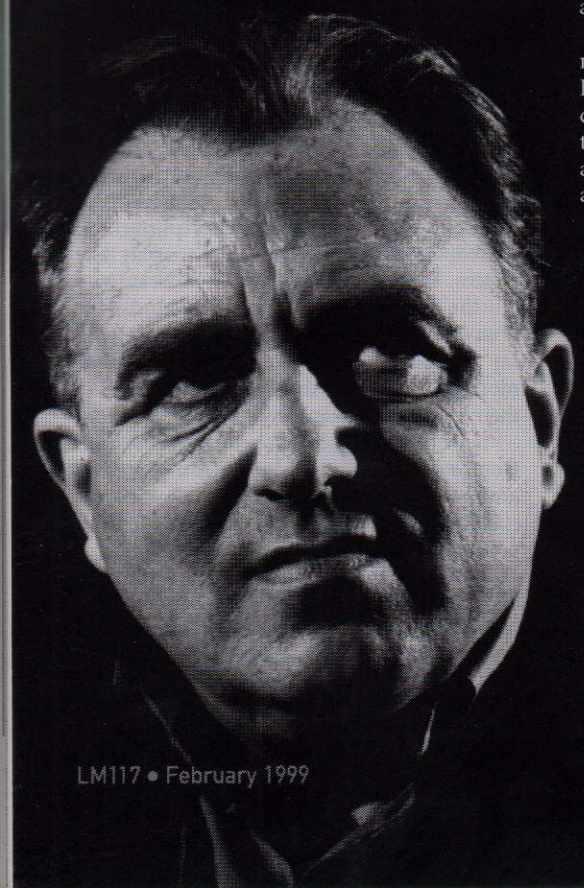

PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

STILL IGNORANT, NOT SO CRASS

Gal détourN talked to former Crass frontman Steve Ignorant about punk, Burt Bacharach and Punch and Judy

'It's not an alternative to anything, it's just shit. How can you be an alternative to the music industry when 75 per cent of the time your PA doesn't work. Stupid.' This assessment of punk's DIY ethos comes from Steve Ignorant, former frontman not only of Crass but of the whole alternative music scene.

In the late 1970s and early 80s Crass were the ultimate politicised cult band. Questions were asked about them in the House of Commons because of their anti-Falklands War record 'How does it feel (To be the mother of a thousand dead)?' and they fooled the *Observer* with a hoax tape of Thatcher and Reagan talking about the Bomb. On more than one occasion they found themselves banned and, despite doing everything on their own label, they still managed to outsell major label bands like AC/DC. They also released Bjork's first band Kukl, a fact for which they are rarely credited.

But legions of 'anarcho-punk' bands soon followed, and a new strain of right-on, vegetarian, moralistic dropouts were born—the forerunners of new-age travellers.

'Other bands came along and they were a fucking nightmare', Steve Ignorant recalls. '"Take milk in your tea?", er yeah, "wear leather?", er yeah, "is that carrot organic?", oh fuck off, please, fascist bastards! But those bands got labelled "Crass" bands, and then that became what we supposedly were.'

Although Ignorant readily admits that Crass were too purist—'we should have dealt with the music press, we cut our own throats'—he has no sympathy for the almost religious PC extremes that some followers went to. 'I remember talking to one bloke after a gig, and he was trying to be so non-sexist, non-racist, non-"everythingist", that he couldn't say anything! The language just wasn't there. *What are you trying to say?* If you like the look of that bird over there, well just say it.' He points out that the all-black Crass uniform, that many followers dutifully adopted as a pseudo-political statement, actually came about when a washing machine accident turned all their clothes dark.

In their prime, Crass were invited by EMI to sign a deal with Polydor—they refused. 'We went along and considered it, and they said, "we can market your revolution and get you into property in Gidea Park". We were like, "you've got to be fucking joking!".

'Would I go for it now? Yes I would. I think times have changed, to do it on your own is virtually impossible. It's all so sewn up. You can't even play in London without having to agree not to play in the same area for two weeks before or after—and this is just for a bloody pub. If a major label made sure the product was being produced, and then dealt with it afterwards, I'd love it, but a lot of "alternative" labels don't, or can't, do that.'

These days Steve Ignorant is suited and booted, plays a mean piano, and expresses an appreciation for Burt Bacharach, Dionne Warwick, Miles Davies and Shirley Bassey. 'It's only now that I've finished with Crass that I realise how brilliant those musicians are. Once you start trying to play those songs you realise how intricate they are; the arrangements are amazing.' Although Crass did experiment, the 'punk' for which they are remembered had its limitations. Ignorant regrets not having had the kind of musical career that would have enabled him to work with people like Bacharach and Paul Weller: 'Noel Gallagher gets the chance to sing one of Burt's songs, what a bastard!'

So does 'punk' mean anything now? 'Yep, a bloke with a mohican haircut, very brightly coloured, tartan bondage trousers with a Carling Black Label bum flap, leather jacket with Chron Gen, Crass and a Dead Kennedys symbol on it somewhere, steel toecap Doc Marten's, 24-hole with red laces, and a stud in his tongue, very spotty, holding a can of Special Brew down the King's Road!'

It should be apparent that Steve Ignorant is not the dour moralist that some might expect. 'I'm not going to spend the rest of my life in that dark corner that I used to. Once you get to 40, you realise you've got 40 left if you're lucky. I'm gonna live my life and have a bloody good laugh doing it. I think you have to go through that snarling rage thing that Crass went through, and then you start, not mellowing, but just getting things in a better perspective.'

Until a couple of years ago Ignorant made a living by performing Punch and Judy. 'That was bringing in good money, but it has to be kept traditional, with the hanging scene and all the kickings, farts and baby bashing; it's meant to be a scream against authority.' He is derisive of right-on reworkings where Punch ends up cuddling a bunny rabbit, because, like so much in society, he believes that there are too many fools following too many rules and taking the polite, safe option. 'Everyone's playing safe, look at the fuss that bloke from East 17 went through because he said he liked taking E; what's so bad about that?'

Any closing remarks? 'Yeah, I wished I'd have punched more people in the face for being such bastards to me or others.' He's obviously dumped the pacifism as well. •

Steve Ignorant is now a songwriter and performer with the band Stratford Mercenaries. He will shortly be writing his memoirs of the Crass years

PHOTO: SAM J THOMAS

alt.culture.comedy

Signs of the times

A season of Carry On films will be screened in February at the home of serious cinema—the National Film Theatre. Next door, at the Museum of the Moving Image, an exhibition celebrates years of 'great British comedy' from the Carry On team. But was it all that great? And should Britain's most prestigious cinema really be celebrating cheap comedy?

'Suddenly we stumbled across a whole world of worry that no one had ever talked openly about before. Customers spoke of the agonising experience of trying to discreetly remove pips from their mouths...'
Tesco's fruit manager Peter Dunrose describes the trauma of the 'fraught social dangers of eating oranges in public' as revealed by a report investigating why people favour seedless satsumas

'What is the next few days going to do, apart from making our politicians feel a little better?'
Flight lieutenant John Nichol, who was taken prisoner during the Gulf War, on the recent air strikes on Iraq

'It was very noisy. We had to edit out all the sounds before showing the interview'
The BBC's John Simpson recalls his interview with Colonel Gaddafi, who farted repeatedly

Fashion journalist Susan Irving is suing a hotel for £75 000 after having a pot of tea dropped in her lap. She says she is suffering from post-traumatic stress, depression, nightmares and flashbacks

'The only purpose in creating wealth like mine is to separate oneself from the riffraff'
Nicholas Van Hoogstraton who is denying the 'great unwashed' and 'disgusting creatures' (that's ramblers to you and me) access to his land

Lancashire and Cumbria police offered rewards of £500 to people who grassed up drunk drivers over the holiday period

'The BBC would not, under any circumstances, condone such behaviour. We are investigating the matter and will take the appropriate disciplinary action'
A BBC spokesman referring to the antics of Abigail Saxon, a religious affairs producer who ran naked three times around a restaurant for a bet during a 'team lunch'

Pulse FM, a pirate radio station which broadcasts in Glasgow and Paisley, is under investigation by the authorities after giving out the time and venue for a local gang fight

Puerile dross...

PHOTOS: BFI STILLS, POSTERS AND DESIGN

...or true comedy?

YES

Robert Ross, author of *The Carry On Companion* (Batsford)

I have been a fan of Carry On films since watching them on TV when I was five or six. My enjoyment of them is a kind of nostalgia which I never grew out of. Of course everybody went off them a bit in the 1980s, but then there was a resurgence of interest beginning with the fashion for Frankie Howerd. The Carry Ons are continually appealing because they are reassuringly funny.

If you look at them coldly they are a series of 31 films, each of which was made in a few weeks for two and six. But they were reflecting a period of great social upheaval from the end of the 1950s to the 1970s: and because they were not trying to be serious they reflect these changes more accurately. Remember that the Carry Ons were made as entertainment for a working class audience that would relate to the works outing in *Carry On At Your Convenience*. But apart from entertainment value there is a social history there, written purely by accident.

Of course the Carry On films are not in the David Lean league. They were meant to be popular entertainment—the 1960s equivalent of George Formby. And, like the music hall and seaside postcards, they succeed in being funny, garish and flashy.

They always were a bit old-fashioned. In some ways they were quite archaic even when they were made. For example, national service was already coming to an end when they did *Carry On Sergeant* in 1958. But the comedy is timeless, partly because it is visual. And it is not the case that the 1960s left the Carry Ons behind. In 1969, when Monty Python started, the two most popular films in Britain were *Carry On Camping* and *Carry On Again Doctor*.

The Carry Ons were family films—the whole family could go to the cinema to see them, until the mid-1970s when they started getting a bit risqué. They have always been old-fashioned in a reassuring way, which appeals to the British mentality. Britain loves a format and we like to know what we are going to get. However sophisticated we become about sex, it is nice to regress and wallow in complete smut. Instead of being smart about sex, sometimes we just want to laugh about it.

Carry On films are a form of relaxation; they are comedy in the truest sense. But you cannot be funny without offending somebody. The Carry Ons were not nasty but they are very free in their subject matter and they can laugh about anything, whereas with much of today's comedy there is a lot of stepping over things. All the more reason to celebrate the warm, affectionate but unconstrained comedy of the Carry On team. ●

NO

Ed Barrett, journalist

When I was small I was forever pestering my mother to take me to a Carry On film. She always refused, and for years I nursed a grievance. Why should I be denied the smutty pleasures enjoyed by my friends? Then I saw one on TV. Or rather, I watched about half an hour before switching it off. I immediately understood my mother's intransigence. It was not, as I had assumed, based on prudery, but on another kind of embarrassment: a grown-up and entirely admirable disdain for the feeble, puerile dross that passed for British comedy.

We are constantly told that the British people 'love' Carry On films, just as we all love the Queen Mum. But I have not met a single person with a kind word to say about them. I know thousands flocked to them in the 1950s, but in those days people would watch anything: it made a change from mucking out the pigeons or walking the whippet. By the 1970s, the only people interested in them were children too young to know better.

Today the Carry Ons have been rehabilitated. First there was a new film, *Carry On Columbus* (1992), with alternative comedians such as Julian Clary and Alexei Sayle alongside stalwarts like Jim Dale. It flopped. Now we have the bizarre spectacle of the National Film Theatre, no less, staging a Carry On 'season'. So films once dismissed as vulgar rubbish churned out for the masses are now to be afforded the same recognition as precious French auteurs and worthy Latin American documentaries.

Now, I do not like precious, worthy films any more than I like Carry Ons, but I can at least understand how they fit into the concept of a national showpiece cinema. Most films at the NFT are shown because the management thinks they have some genuine merit. I simply do not believe that they view Carry On films in this light. More likely they are riding on the coat tails of a trend for ironic 'postmodern' detachment in which any old crap assumes a spurious importance.

Modern Carry On cheerleaders often point to the films' interest as social documents, rather than to any intrinsic worth. Yet, as it happens, they are useless as social documents because the Carry On world was always completely sealed off from the world outside, and the films tell us little of the society in which they were made. Admittedly, the innuendo and double entendres of the early ones indicate that they were made in a repressed age in which all references to sex had to be coded. But this coyness persisted long after it was necessary. The sexual revolution of the 1960s did not result in any sex taking place in Carry On films. It simply prompted them to reduce their entendres from double to single; and the cruder they became, the more preposterous they seemed.

Apologists will claim that the Carry On team contained great actors. But even if you consider Sid James or Hattie Jacques 'great', that does not mean that the Carry On films were any good. Richard Burton, Michael Caine and a host of other good actors made numerous bad films.

Finally, one especially irritating Carry On legacy is a peculiarly cosy tradition of British camp. This is the road that leads from Charles Hawtrey to Larry Grayson to Graham Norton. Purse your lips, say 'pants' a lot and you will go far. Carry on camping if you must, but I will stick to *Seinfeld*. ●

alt.culture.motorways

ON THE ROAD


PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

'Get your kicks on Route 66.' 'Wir fahr'n fahr'n fahr'n auf der Autobahn.' Sadly, the British equivalent seems to be, 'Queue, queue, queue on the M22'.

The first stretch of motorway in Britain (the Preston bypass) was opened 40 years ago, followed a year later by the M1. In those days motorway openings were state occasions performed by government ministers and even royalty. And motorways made a real difference to people's lives. For the first time families could make long journeys without having to submit to the constraints of the rail network. Motorways took Britain out of the world of the station buffet and *Brief Encounter*. But 40 years on there has never been a convincing British road movie, and the dream of a fully interconnecting network of fast roads is still just a dream.

In the past 20 years only 3500 miles of road have been built in the UK, and the vast majority of these are minor roads and residential streets. In all of Britain there are only 2000 miles of motorway. Compared to the rest of Europe and the USA, this is pathetic. The Trans-European Networks will soon link Istanbul with Nizhiny Novgorod, Madrid with Oslo, and Venice with Helsinki. In California, San Diego boasts the world's first fully automated highway, a kind of conveyor belt allowing cars to drive themselves at speeds of up to 80mph, approximately six metres apart: all the benefits and none of the drawbacks of public transport, while retaining the flexibility of personal car mobility. You can even read *On The Road* while travelling on it. Meanwhile, in this country there is still no motorway link between Newcastle and Scotland.

All we have are a few fast stretches (I will not say where) and Tom Robinson's pedestrian '2,4,6,8 motorway'. Nothing to match Kraftwerk and the Autobahn. But even in Britain there are times when you can forget about traffic lights and roundabouts, and put your foot down. ●

Austin Williams is coordinator of the Transport Research Group

alt.culture.romance

LOVE FOR SALE

As Valentine's Day approaches we can expect to be bombarded with ballads, packaged, promoted and targeted to bring undying love into our lives. There will be 'pledge' ballads (B*Witched's 'To you I belong'), the 'spurned' ballad (Robbie Williams' 'Angels'), and the 'unconditional love' ballad (Bryan Adams' 'Everything I do'), all adhering to the formula of raw intro, big chorus and lots of strings for the finale. Was the food of love always as pre-packaged as this?

'Pop music *is* marketing', says Gennaro Costaldo, PR manager for HMV, 'and because of this, the industry is seen as nasty for manipulating the public. That's rubbish and it credits the public with no agency whatsoever. People aren't naive, but everyone will buy into a fantasy or a dream if it is presented in a desirable way.' By way of inviting us to step into a dream, in the run-up to Valentine's Day HMV will have displays of romantic records at the front of their stores with tie-ins and tasters blasting from the in-store radio station. In the week of Valentine's Day 1998, six of the Top 10 singles were love ballads; and if the marketing men have their way, 1999 will be just as romantic.

It would be easy to think that the age of precision marketing has brought about a spiral of musical decline. There is no doubt that the same chord sequences keep cropping up along with lyrics so predictable that a seven-year old could guess what is coming next. But pop music has always been a limited medium working to a set of rules. 'Progressive rock' may have aimed to turn pop from pap into art, but thankfully it ended back in the 1970s.

Andrew Allen, music lecturer at the Colchester Institute, sees neither an excess of marketing nor a dearth of musical standards: 'There is little difference in standard between the charts in the 1950s and the 1990s. The criticism is that today's Top 40 is manufactured, and that the emotions involved are manufactured. But the same could be said about Motown.'

Pop is no more throwaway, transient and packaged than it was before. Furthermore, it remains a strong bonding agent with the power to make us connect with the people around us. Robbie Williams knows all about this. At his concerts he no longer sings 'Angels', his career-making, heart-breaking ballad. Instead he holds out the microphone and conducts the audience in a mass singalong. Anybody in the crowd who is not moved by the overwhelming sense of togetherness which this creates is surely missing the point of the pop ballad. It may not have the spirit of a poem by Keats or the depth of a painting by Raphael, but for as long as the song lasts it will take you there. ●

James Hall is an incurable romantic

DR MICHAEL FITZPATRICK

NHS crisis—what crisis?

Just as every winter the shock appearance of snow creates chaos on the roads and railways, so the annual arrival of flu precipitates a crisis in the National Health Service. In fact, in GP surgeries and hospitals it was pretty much bank holiday business as usual—crowded waiting rooms, patients on trolleys, corpses piling up in the mortuaries, wards short of nurses, and doctors complaining about the public.

Though the number of flu cases fell short of epidemic proportions, the Christmas crisis had one novel feature. According to the *Sunday Times*, the thing that most annoyed doctors was the young men in their twenties who called ambulances to take them to hospital for treatment for their flu (10 January). This is clearly the inevitable consequence of the high-profile medical campaign for men, especially young men, to get in touch with their feelings and to take their health more seriously (see *LM*, December 1998/January 1999).

Far from exposing the breakdown of the old NHS, the winter crisis reveals the emergence of the new NHS. The contrasts are striking. Whereas the old NHS worked in a fairly straightforward way to treat diseases and care for the sick, the new NHS has a more complex mode of operation. On the one hand it devotes considerable resources to making people ill—and then it urges them to look after themselves.

The wave of demand for medical attention over Christmas was encouraged by the intensive media focus on a number of cases of meningitis, the early symptoms of which are often indistinguishable from those of flu or a number of other viral infections. Though the incidence of meningitis has remained fairly steady in recent years, the fact that each case acquires national celebrity means that every living room now boasts an expert in the diagnostic technique of inspecting a suspicious rash through a glass. Not much use in confirming meningitis, in which the rash is often a late sign, this technique is highly effective in generating anxiety about the diverse blotchy rashes that accompany numerous minor viral illnesses, especially in children.

In addition to promoting health scares that terrify many parents into bringing their children up to surgeries or to hospital casualty departments, doctors also encourage their patients to take up screening and preventive procedures. These often result in people who thought they were well discovering that they are in some state of latent disease (with a raised blood pressure or cholesterol level, an abnormal smear or a breast lump, for example).

The major medical investment in the promotion of lifestyle changes, backed by the authority of the government in the name of health, is another potent source of illness. For example, the current craze for 'going to the gym' to take exercise in the cause of greater vitality often leads to muscle strains requiring further medical attention. The vogue for condoms popularised in the great safe sex crusade leads inexorably to demands for the 'morning after' pill—especially over bank holidays following Christmas parties. The onset of a serious new year cough immediately following the resolution to stop smoking is as familiar as the bitter complaints from old people who have come down with colds despite having the flu vaccination earlier in the year.

While the government is happy to promote disease awareness in the hope that it will lead people into virtuous lifestyles, it is not so keen on funding the expanding range of medical services required to cope with the demand generated in this way. Here the Portsmouth Hospital Trust shows the way forward: in response to a shortage of nurses over Christmas, it encouraged local people to come into hospital to look after their relatives. It is not clear whether the authorities intend to request further public assistance in carrying out surgery or other forms of medical treatment.

For those who escape the familiar infections, the new NHS offers a whole new range of disorders. Conditions such as repetitive strain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome (aka ME) now afflict thousands, leading to prolonged absences from work and substantial demands on health services. Here the authorities' commitment to encouraging self-reliance is tempered by their endorsement of a range of stress-related disorders that often appear to offer an alibi for a wider loss of morale and motivation.

In all these ways, and many more, the new NHS encourages people to become patients. When a number of factors interact to intensify demand at a time when services are restricted, the result is the sort of crisis that occurred over Christmas. The perception of crisis in a quiet week for the press leads to a heated debate. Voices from the old left demand more resources for the NHS; those from the old right insist that more rationing is the answer. New Labour's 'third way' is to propose a little more money for token projects and to proceed with a lot more rationing.

There is no better symbol of the gulf between the new NHS and the old system than the changing character of doctors' home visiting. In the old days the deal was that GPs were available to their patients for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, but patients never requested a visit unless they were in dire need. The standards of medical care were often low, but so were expectations; patients were deferential, doctors enjoyed social status.

Now market forces have swept away the consensus that contained demand. Health has become a moral project and medical attention a consumer good and a right—and requests for home visits, especially from the fragile new man, have risen exponentially. Farewell family doctor, hello GP co-op, locum agency and hospital casualty. Hail the 'third way' and make ready for next winter's truly millennial NHS crisis. ●

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READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Mick Hume finds John Simpson, world affairs editor of the BBC, has some interesting things to say relating to the dispute between ITN and *LM*

'THE SECRET SHAME OF JOURNALISM'

STRANGE PLACES, QUESTIONABLE PEOPLE
John Simpson
Macmillan, £20 hbk

FIGHTING FOR PEACE
General Sir Michael Rose
Harvill Press, £18 hbk

JOHN SIMPSON IS EVERYBODY'S IDEA OF A MAN of the world. Over the past 30-odd years, he notes in *Strange Places, Questionable People*, he has 'reported from 101 countries, interviewed 120 emperors, monarchs, presidents, dictators, prime ministers and other assorted rulers, despotic, loony, or occasionally sane, and witnessed 29 wars, uprisings and revolutions'. Now in his 50s, with a comfortable office befitting the BBC world affairs editor, he continues to globetrot from one hotspot to the next. 'I am always trying to get to places where I'm not wanted', he says, 'and convincing people to do things they don't want to do; it's like selling double-glazing'.

Simpson's first autobiographical volume is a rattling good account of his life's work and worldview which pulls few punches. Readers of *LM* will, I hope, understand if I pass over most of its absorbing 560 pages, and focus on the couple of pages where Britain's most senior foreign correspondent deals with the events at the heart of the libel case which ITN has brought against this magazine.

John Simpson should be nobody's idea of a Serbomaniac. He says the Bosnian Serbs were the aggressors in Bosnia, and that he felt good when NATO bombed their positions around Sarajevo. But he also says that he 'found the international media's demonisation of them outrageous'—especially the insistence on drawing parallels between the Bosnian Serbs and the Nazis. Simpson recalls that, when he questioned the accuracy of this analogy, he was accused by the head of a top US radio station 'first of being an appeaser, then of being pro-Nazi, and finally of being anti-Semitic'.

'Yet it was British television', Simpson notes, 'which gave a powerful impetus to the idea that the Bosnian war was the present-day Holocaust'. He is talking about the ITN pictures of the Bosnian Serb-run camp at Trnopolje which, in August 1992, showed the world 'quite unforgettable' images of 'barbed wire, skeletal figures. It could have been Dachau'. But, Simpson explains, it wasn't:

'The skeletal figures weren't inside the barbed wire, for instance, they were outside it. The wire was old and ran around a small enclosure. The cameraman got behind the wire to film the scene. There was a serious food shortage, and everyone went hungry at that time; ⇨

AFTER THOSE SENSATIONAL ITN PICTURES, RECALLS SIMPSON, THE MEDIA PACK ENSURED THAT THE 'HUNT WAS ON IN BOSNIA FOR NAZI-STYLE ATROCITIES', OFTEN WITH SCANT REGARD FOR HARD EVIDENCE

⇦ but the most skeletal of all the prisoners, Fikret Alic, was just as thin weeks after his release. The ITN team's reporting was accurate; but the pictures seemed to speak for themselves. They caused a sensation in the United States.'

After those sensational ITN pictures, recalls Simpson, the media pack ensured that the 'hunt was on in Bosnia for Nazi-style atrocities', often with scant regard for hard evidence. As a result, 'a climate was created in which it became very hard to understand what was really going on, because everything came to be seen through the filter of the Holocaust. And so we had stories about extermination camps and mass rape camps, as though the Bosnian Serbs were capable of a Germanic level of organisation' (pp 444-445).

I would only add that 'The picture that fooled the world', the article in the February 1997 issue of *LM* which prompted ITN to issue libel writs, took a less generous view than John Simpson of the ITN journalists' role in the Holocaust-mongering . After all, as German journalist Thomas Deichmann pointed out, it was 'the ITN team' itself which shot those misleading images of men apparently caged behind barbed wire at Trnopolje, and who, when the world wrongly interpreted the pictures as proof of Nazi-style camps, failed to set the record straight.

John Simpson is one of the few foreign reporters to criticise the anti-Serb bias of the crusading media in Bosnia, a bias which his book quotes Nik Gowing describing as 'the secret shame of journalism'. For that Simpson also won the admiration of General Sir Michael Rose, British commander of the UN forces in Bosnia in 1994. In his new book, *Fighting For Peace*, Rose describes how he found it 'a breath of fresh air' to 'spend time with a journalist who had such an objective approach to the war'. Rose seemed to spend much of his time in Bosnia being dogged by a 'less than even-handed' international press pack with the smell of blood in its nostrils. It is not the treatment a Knight of the British Empire expects.

Rose writes of emerging from a conference with the leaders of the warring factions to be confronted by 'a horde of journalists hurling abuse' at the UN officials. After one impertinent pressman publicly accused Rose of being 'economical with the truth', the general button-holed him with the advice that 'if he ever called me a liar again I would tear his tongue out'. Rose was shocked by the media's willingness to reproduce the horror stories of Bosnian government propaganda, as when he discovered he could not get into one reportedly 'fuel-starved' Muslim town because of a local traffic jam. On another occasion he told some British soldiers that he believed the Bosnian Muslim forces outside Gorazde had deliberately 'turned and run', prompting the other side to advance, as part of a deliberate plan 'to get the UN and NATO embroiled in the war' against the Bosnian Serbs. The exchange was filmed, but Rose told the press crops waiting back at the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo that they could not use it. One reporter broke the embargo (he said he was unaware of it) and broadcast Rose's remarks, ensuring that the general would be forever branded a blasphemer on Bosnia. That reporter was Martin Bell of the BBC.

ROSE COMES ACROSS AS AN OLD SOLDIER OUT of his depth and out of his time, shocked to discover that many in the world's media did not so much want to report a war as to fight one—or, at least, they wanted him to fight an all-out war against the Serbs on their behalf. His frustration at being labelled as soft on the Bosnian Serbs is understandable enough—after all, it was him who called for the first NATO air strikes against them!

The fact that even a former SAS commander like General Rose or a battle-hardened war reporter like John Simpson could be accused of being 'appeasers' reveals the intense zealotry of the anti-Serb media in Bosnia. This cross-section of intolerant liberals and ranting right-wingers could brook no questioning of their orthodoxy, no raising of inconvenient facts, no deviation from the party line. Recalling Salman Rushdie's remark that religious people had 'a God-shaped hole in their lives', John Simpson concludes that 'one of the strangest coalitions of modern times seemed to have a crusade-shaped hole in their lives, and Bosnia was cut and shaped to fit it'. Just as those pictures of Trnopolje were cut and shaped to fit what Simpson calls 'the Nazi-Serb/Jew-Muslim' model.

Richard Dawkins is not a meme, he is a human being, says Joe Kaplinsky

SCIENCE FOR POETS?

UNWEAVING THE RAINBOW: SCIENCE, DELUSION AND THE APPETITE FOR WONDER
Richard Dawkins
Allen Lane/Penguin Press. £20 hbk

RICHARD DAWKINS' TALENTS FOR CONVEYING the ideas of modern evolutionary theory have made him one of the world's foremost popular science writers. His

TRUTH IS UNDOUBTEDLY STRANGER THAN FICTION. THE SCIENTIFIC ACCOUNT OF CREATION IS MORE AWE-INSPIRING THAN ANY RELIGIOUS STORY

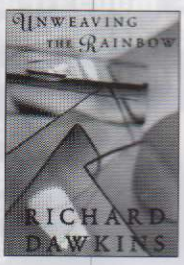
new work, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, is an argument for the value of science. His case is not based on the practical utility of science. It is not here that science is under question. Rather Dawkins takes on the harder job of arguing for the 'scientific imagination'. Science, he says, should inspire us and open our eyes in the same way as poetry. Indeed, in this sense, science is poetry.

DAWKINS MAKES A STRONG CASE. TRUTH IS undoubtedly stranger than fiction. The scientific account of creation is more awe-inspiring than any religious story. The lines 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy', which Dawkins takes as Romantic anti-science, should instead serve to remind us that the greatest ideas come from careful attention to empirical detail rather than empty abstract reflection. But in setting the practical value of science to one side Dawkins misdiagnoses the source of popular preference for superstition over science. While technology is rarely questioned *in toto*, it is the potential of scientific insights to transform humanity's relation to nature which makes Western society uncomfortable, as controversies over genetic or nuclear technologies demonstrate.

Dawkins' frustration with the nonsense of the new anti-science is understandable. A few cases, like that of Kennewick man, a skeleton discovered in Washington state in 1996, may even have broader implications for science and law. The remains of Kennewick man have been claimed by, among others, the local Indian tribes who are alarmed that scientific studies may undermine their belief that they have inhabited the land since 'the beginning of time'. The Indians want the remains reburied, and the courts appear to be backing them. Dawkins suggests that 'the best policy for the archaeologists would be to declare themselves a religion, with DNA fingerprints their sacramental totem'.

THE EXPOSITION OF EVOLUTIONARY THEORY IS at the heart of the book. Dawkins explains that it is the gene rather than the individual organism that is the unit of natural selection. An individual organism is never exactly reproduced in the next generation. It is the genes that are replicated and passed on, to where they will operate in some new combination in a new individual. From the point of view of evolutionary history the individual is ephemeral, 'a secondary, derived phenomenon, cobbled together as a consequence of the actions of fundamentally separate, even warring, agents', the genes. The point is well made, and is fleshed out by critiques of Stephen Jay Gould and Stuart Kauffman as well as a discussion of the extent to which the environments in which our ancestors lived can be read in our genes.

In the last chapter Dawkins takes on the evolution of the brain, and with it the mind. He describes how, once



the first step towards tool use or language was made, natural selection and culture must have worked in parallel to create the gulf between humans and other animals that we see today. The twist comes in trying to understand modern culture when he invokes the idea of 'memes'.

A 'meme' is supposed to be a unit of cultural inheritance, anything from a religion to poetry to science itself, which replicates itself from brain to brain in analogy to the way a gene is passed from individual to individual. Here Dawkins recognises that he is on much more speculative ground. He suggests that what matters are the memes rather than the individual mind. Just as a body is built by genes, 'Perhaps the subjective "I", the person that I feel myself to be, is the same kind of semi-illusion. The mind is a collection of fundamentally independent, even warring agents—the subjective feeling of "somebody in there" may be a cobbled, emergent semi-illusion analogous to the individual body emerging in evolution from the uneasy cooperation of genes'.

Dawkins cites fellow scientist Susan Blakemore and philosopher Daniel Dennett as the source of these ideas. In fact, they are strikingly similar to the founding ideas of postmodernism. Louis Althusser long ago declared the 'death of the subject' and Roland Barthes the 'death of the author'. It is a shame to see a similar disdain for human subjectivity expressed in Dawkins' theory of cultural inheritance.

ON A MORE POSITIVE NOTE, DAWKINS' POINTS about the 'dumbing down' of scientific education are a definite plus. As the first Charles Simonyi professor of the public understanding of science at Oxford University, he says that his book should be taken as an inaugural statement. It is good, then, to see that he has taken a critical distance from the mainstream strategy for promoting science. He describes a briefing session he attended at which scientists were encouraged to put on demonstrations in shopping malls. The key pieces of advice were always to 'make your science "relevant" to ordinary people's lives', and that the 'very word science is best avoided, because "ordinary people" find it threatening'. Dawkins' complaints that this is not real science and that it is selling the public short have been met by charges of elitism. He doesn't like the word, but is forced to concede that 'maybe elitism is not such a terrible thing'. Furthermore, 'there is a great difference between an exclusive snobbery and an embracing, flattering elitism that strives to help people raise their game and join the elite'. Here he is surely right. Encouraging young people to study science at university on the basis that it is easy and fun is selling science under false pretences. Of course science is fun. But what worthwhile occupation is not hard work, albeit worth the struggle? ●

EQUATING WHAT A CHIMPANZEE CAN DO WITH A TWIG TO THE ENTIRE RANGE OF TOOL-USING ABILITIES OF HUMANS OUGHT TO BE 'SELF-EVIDENTLY ABSURD'

Helene Guldberg talks to the animals, but finds they can't talk back

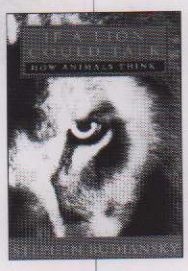
DUMB ANIMALS

IF A LION COULD TALK: HOW ANIMALS THINK
Stephen Budiansky
Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £20 hbk

IF A LION COULD TALK DEALS WITH THE QUESTION of the difference between animals and human beings. It opens with what Budiansky describes as the typical animal story of our age—newspaper reports on the heroic actions of a female gorilla, Binti, saving a three-year old boy who had fallen into a zoo's gorilla enclosure. Binti cradled the unconscious boy in her arms and carried him gently to the door of the enclosure where paramedics were waiting. It was reported that she even protected the boy from the other gorillas on her way. Budiansky tells us that this story is typical, firstly because it is taken as proof of animal empathy and understanding compared to a 'selfish and brutal humankind', and secondly, because it is 'not exactly true'. Binti did not shield the child from the other gorillas, the zookeeper did. And what was not reported was that Binti was in fact just doing what she had been trained to do. During her pregnancy she was trained by the zookeeper to develop maternal instincts involving carrying a doll and bringing it to the keeper.

It may be easy to mistake some animal behaviour as showing understanding, empathy, intelligence, or even creativity. Much animal behaviour is fascinating. But it is also the case that animals do remarkably stupid things in situations very similar to those where they previously seemed to show a degree of intelligence. This is partly because they learn many of their clever feats by pure accident. But also because animal learning is highly specialised. Their ability to learn is not a result of general cognitive processes but 'specialised channels attuned to an animal's basic hardwired behaviours'. An animal's brain is pre-wired by species-specific ecological adaptations. The problem with anthropomorphism, Budiansky warns, is that it offers a pat explanation that lets researchers off the hook from probing much deeper for alternative explanations.

Clever Hans is a case in point. Readers may be familiar with the story of how people were fooled into thinking Clever Hans, a horse, could solve mathematical problems, tell the time and even identify musical scores. But he was in fact incapable of giving the correct answer when the questioner was not present. This was because he did not 'know' the answers to any of the questions but was reading the unconscious clues of his questioners—such as a subtle bob of the head in anticipation of the correct answer. He may not have been clever in the way initially assumed but surely his actions were still impressive? The horse was reading unconscious clues that other human beings took much longer to recognise. So how can this be explained? Not by crediting horses with human intelligence but by looking to their evolutionary history. Budiansky explains that horses are social herd-dwelling animals adapted to an open environment, and have a remarkable evolved ability to pick up on subtle visual cues from their fellows. Time and again Budiansky demonstrates the flaws in animal research using 'human intelligence' as the explanation of their behaviour.



Ape studies have been the most convincing in seeming to demonstrate an embryonic intelligence. Discoveries of the 'mathematical', 'language' or 'tool-making' abilities of apes is often described as proof that the distance between 'our closest living relatives' and ourselves is further narrowed. But equating what a chimpanzee can do with a twig to the entire range of tool-using abilities of humans ought to be 'self-evidently absurd', Budiansky says. He shows that it is equally absurd to conclude that the language use of trained chimpanzees can be compared to human beings—not even a two-year old child.

Washoe was the first chimpanzee to be taught to use sign language. At one point she was seen to sign water and bird when seeing a swan. This new combination may have demonstrated a creative insight. Maybe it did, Budiansky says, but given the number of inane, meaningless and 'excruciatingly repetitive' signs Washoe made, it is maybe not surprising that some novel combinations should make sense—to us, that is. What Budiansky shows is that the things apes are good at are, in fact, the things they have evolved to do to survive in their particular ecological niche. 'And the things an animal is good at generally do not require three decades of ambiguous experiments to discover.'

Human beings, on the other hand, are not constrained by our biological make-up. Due to the power of language, Budiansky shows, we can go beyond the special-purpose hardware of our brains. Language has above all given us the ability to have thoughts about thoughts. 'The discontinuities that divide us [from animals] are less a matter of biology than a matter of what one might almost call the super-biological phenomenon of language that our minds uniquely generate. Language is something that transcends the special-purpose hardware of the minds of man and animals.' The philosopher Wittgen-stein said, 'If a lion could talk we would not understand him'. That might be true, but equally, as Budiansky shows, if a lion could talk he would no longer be a lion. ●

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