

**LM** ISSUE No **129**

An Intellectual Map for the Twenty-First Century



The Institute of Ideas **LM**

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Despite three years of smears and Britain's loaded libel laws, we're still here

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# LM 129

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Despite three years of smears and Britain's loaded libel laws, we're still here

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**MICK HUME**

**Editor**

THIS COULD BE THE LAST ISSUE OF *LM*. I write the day after the High Court ordered us to pay ITN and two of its journalists a total of £375 000 in damages, at the end of the libel case they brought over the article 'The picture that fooled the world', written by German journalist Thomas Deichmann and published three years ago in *LM*. Even before the huge bill for legal costs is added on, those damages will be more than enough to bankrupt me, the magazine's co-publisher Helene Guldberg, and the publishing company Informinc (*LM*) Ltd.

Those who know *LM* will appreciate that we do not intend to go quietly into the night. As the front cover of this issue puts it, despite three years of smears and Britain's loaded libel laws, we're still here—the mag they could not gag.

Let me make clear what that means, for the benefit of ITN's army of lawyers who will no doubt be crawling over this article. We are not going to put ourselves in contempt of court by repeating the defamatory allegations from the libel case. But we will not be silenced, either. Whatever happens, the project *LM* has pursued over the past three years, of trying to set a new agenda for public debate, will carry on one way or another. And everybody involved can rest assured that

# THE ONLY THING THIS CASE HAS PROVED 'BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT' IS THAT ENGLISH LIBEL LAW IS A DISGRACE TO DEMOCRACY AND A MENACE TO A FREE PRESS

the programme of *LM*-initiated events planned for the summer—the month-long Institute of Ideas (see inside back cover) and the series of debates at the Edinburgh festivals—will definitely go ahead. There is life after a libel trial.

None of that, however, is intended to minimise the implications of the libel case for *LM*, or for the wider cause of press freedom. As I said on the steps of the High Court after the verdict, the only thing that this case has proved 'beyond reasonable doubt' is that English libel law is a disgrace to democracy and a menace to a free press. The unprecedented use of that law by a major news organisation against an independent

magazine should be enough to send a chill through the world of investigative journalism.

Everybody surely ought to know by now that losing a libel trial is not the same thing as being proved wrong. Although we were confident of our case, we never assumed that it would be easy to win under the libel law as it stands in this country: a system that gives defendants only a one-in-10 chance of success in court. As libel defendants, we were assumed to be guilty unless we could prove our innocence—the reverse of natural justice. And as libel defendants with no money (there being no legal aid for defamation cases), facing a multimillion-pound



corporation, the odds were stacked even more heavily against us.

Almost from the moment ITN issued its threat of legal action against us, in January 1997, *LM* and those associated with it have been the targets of countless smears and dark rumours, alleging for instance that we are funded by every contemporary bogeyman from Milosevic to Monsanto. There is no suggestion that any of these smear stories originated from ITN. What is a matter of record, however, is that in July 1997 ITN added a charge of malice to its libel case, alleging that *LM* had published Thomas Deichmann's article 'with the improper motive of fuelling its campaign of pro-Serbian propaganda by smearing Western journalists...thereby hoping to further the cause of revolutionary communism and/or Marxist ideology'. For almost three years before the case, these ridiculous allegations hung over the magazine and clouded discussion of the issues involved. Yet when the case finally came to trial, the malice charges were first toned down and then quietly dropped.

At the pre-trial review in February, Justice Morland first made clear that the case would not be about the issues of free speech or journalistic standards raised by *LM*, and then ruled that all of our expert witnesses—including John Simpson of the BBC, Philip Knightley and a leading QC—could not give evidence. This meant that, when the case came to trial, it was 18 ITN witnesses versus me and Thomas Deichmann, which is presumably what the courts consider a 'level playing field'.

Despite all of this, however, our barrister Gavin Millar managed to establish in court, through the cross-examination of ITN witnesses, that the central fact in Deichmann's article, concerning the position of the barbed-wire fence at Trnopolje camp in relation to the journalists, was true. As Justice Morland said in his summing up: 'Clearly Ian Williams and Penny Marshall and their TV teams were mistaken in thinking they were not enclosed by the old barbed-wire fence', before adding in his even-handed way, 'but does it matter?'. Or as Nick Higham reported it on the BBC news that evening, 'Mr Justice Morland told the jury *LM*'s facts might have been right, but he asked, did that matter?'

From *LM*'s point of view, that dismissal of our 'facts' was as good as the judge's summing up got. The rest of it was so one-sided that it made ITN's own overpaid barrister redundant. It reached its nadir when, having quoted extensively from the evidence ITN witnesses gave in the box, the judge told the

jury that he was not going to remind them of anything Mr Hume or Mr Deichmann had said, because we were not there at Trnopolje camp on 5 August 1992. The implication that eyewitness accounts cannot be challenged after the event, a theme which ran through ITN's approach to the case, could have serious consequences for critical journalism.

Justice Morland then advised the jury that if they found against us they would have to decide the level of damages. He told them that somebody who lost both arms in an accident might expect to receive compensation of £100 000, and then said that to award the ITN journalists more than £150 000 for their damaged reputations and hurt feelings would be 'excessive'. The judge also said that damages would be aggravated if the defence had strenuously cross-examined the claimants. In other words, the more stoutly we defended ourselves, the higher price we would have to pay—further proof of how the libel laws protect freedom in our society.

It was hardly a great shock, then, when we lost the case. As a stout defender of the jury system, I do not really blame the 10 men and two women who voted against us after four hours of deliberation. We could not win because the law demanded that we prove the unprovable. As the question the judge put to the jury asked, 'Have the defendants established that Penny Marshall and Ian Williams had compiled television footage which deliberately misrepresented an emaciated Bosnian Muslim, Fikret Alic, as being caged behind a barbed-wire fence at the Serbian-run Trnopolje camp on 5 August 1992 by the selective use of videotape shots of him?'. With the judge repeatedly emphasising the word 'deliberately', we were being asked to prove what was going on inside the journalists' heads eight years ago. The jury was only likely to come to one verdict.

We have apologised for nothing, but we are not going to appeal. Life is too short to waste any more time in the bizarre world of the libel courts. We never wanted to get involved in this case. The polished-wood atmosphere of Court 14 at the Royal Courts of Justice is no place for journalists to debate such important issues. As I told the judge and jury in the witness box, I believe that people should have the right to judge the truth for themselves in the court of public opinion. What we are allowed to read or hear should not be dictated by ITN, their lawyers, or even the High Court. Exactly what Mr Justice Morland thought of my irreverent intervention was not recorded.

There is now an injunction preventing me from going into any further detail about the

story of Fikret Alic, the barbed-wire fence and the journalists at Trnopolje. Fair enough—I have no wish to make it my lifetime's work. But I will continue to raise the broader concerns which led us to publish Thomas Deichmann's article in the first place and, reluctantly, to fight the legal case: concerns about press freedom, journalistic standards, and the exploitation of the Holocaust.

The last of those three issues remains particularly close to *LM*'s heart. We have published many articles pointing out the dangers of today's unhealthy obsession with the Holocaust. Which made it all the more infuriating to read Ed Vulliamy's screeching feature in the *Guardian* the day after the verdict (especially coming after Julia Hartley-Brewer's fair reports of the case in the same paper), in which he branded *LM* 'the tinpot Holocaust denier'. In fact, as I said in my evidence during the trial, it is precisely because *LM* is concerned to counter the rewriting of history that we have pointed out how dangerous it is for people like Vulliamy to compare the Bosnian civil war to the Nazi genocide. 'The Holocaust is an absolutely unique horror in history', I argued then, 'the great crime of the twentieth century, and if you start putting it on a par with civil wars of today you can only diminish its horror, I think, and you do a disservice to the victims of the Holocaust by making those kind of inappropriate comparisons'.

As for the issue of free speech, I want to thank everybody who has supported our stand against censorship over the past three years: all those who have written or worked for the magazine for nothing, and those whose donations to the Friends of *LM* scheme and the Off the Fence Fund have helped to finance the magazine and the libel fight respectively. And I want to thank our legal team, led by Gavin Millar, who won everything in that courtroom except the verdict.

This issue of *LM* has been edited by Jennie Bristow, assisted by Brendan O'Neill and the designer, Alex Cameron. Next month's issue will, I'm afraid, be edited by me, if *LM* is still in business by then. Whatever happens next, watch this space. ●

We hope to have the transcripts  
of the trial on the *LM* website.  
Go to [www.informinc.co.uk](http://www.informinc.co.uk)



# LM Online

## CARING CONCERNS

*Lost in Care*, the Waterhouse report on abuse in North Wales children's homes finally published in February, was the latest in a string of scandals over the past decade, involving homes from Manchester to Leicestershire, and from Staffordshire to South Wales. Calls for initiatives like a children's commissioner and a complaints officer to ensure abuse is spotted and allegations are dealt with are understandable reactions to some of the horrific stories to have emerged from these inquiries.

But underneath the concern about children's homes there is a broader fear that no institution, indeed nobody, can be trusted with the young people in their care. And this assumption has its own dangers.

Children's homes are not the ideal environment in which to raise young people—even if there is no abuse. The relationship between a paid worker and a child in care is very different to the relationship between parents and their children, or foster parents and children. It lacks the bonds of familiarity, affection, security and trust that most children take for granted and which, however good the care worker, cannot be replicated through a contractual relationship. Consequently, there is a lot to be gained from the current move towards favouring alternative forms of care. According to NCH Action for Children, of the 53 300 children in care in England in 1998, only 5700 were in children's homes, and this number seems to be falling.

But the reaction to the North Wales inquiry goes much deeper than a critique of residential care. The focus on abuse in children's homes takes place at a time when all relationships between adults and children are seen as increasingly suspect. From government guidelines on smacking to high-profile children's charity campaigns, the family continues to be presented less as a safe haven than as a site for potential child abuse. Those working with children, whether teachers, voluntary workers or sports coaches, increasingly find themselves surrounded by guidelines detailing how they should behave with the children in their care. Meanwhile, children's charities and school lessons raise children's own awareness of the possibility that they might be abused by anybody, and encourage them to report any situation which makes them feel uncomfortable.

This is a no-win situation. When relationships between parents and children are constantly scrutinised for signs of abuse, the spontaneous bonds of trust and affection that child-rearing depends upon become strained. Professional teachers and care workers cannot develop constructive, trusting relationships with children in their care when both their colleagues and their charges are looking at them as potential abusers. Yet the fact remains that most adults do not abuse children, and that most care workers in residential homes put the welfare of their charges first. Whatever the solution to the problems of residential care, the current notion that 'abuse is everywhere' helps nobody. ●

Jennie Bristow ■ [jenniebristow@hotmail.com](mailto:jenniebristow@hotmail.com)

## SIGNS of the times

'As an actor, you spend most of your time waiting for the animals to get it right. They are treated much better. They have bigger trailers, more money'

Actor Tim McInnerny

'These days we are not allowed to just hit them over the head with a shovel. They have to die with dignity'

Colin Chapman, Rentokil's chief rodent controller for London

Detective constable Tom Hassell has been suspended after a complaint that he mispronounced the word 'Shi'ite' during a community and race relations session in Barkingside

'Liam, a hundred grand of your money and a hundred grand of my money, we can have a fight and we can all watch it on TV. Now what are you going to do?'

Robbie Williams, onstage at the Brit Awards, proving that the spirit of Oliver Reed lives on

## SEXY STATISTICS

According to Home Office research reported in February, there is a hidden toll of rape and sexual abuse affecting huge numbers of British women. The research claimed that the real rate of rape and sexual assault is nearly 300 000 a year—more than 10 times the number of such crimes recorded by the police. To add insult to injury, tiny proportions of the cases that are reported result in convictions.

How are these figures calculated? The notes for editors, on which the press reports were based, claim that there are 6000 recorded cases of rape a year and 17 600 recorded cases of sexual assault. But for the 'real' rate of rape and sexual assault—the figure of between 118 000 and 295 000—the press notes say this: 'various studies have found that only between 10 and 25 percent of women who report rape in self-report studies reported the offence to the police. It is possible to extrapolate from the recorded rape and sexual assault figures to provide incidence figures of...between 118 000 and 295 000.' First, the number of recorded crimes is multiplied by anything between three and 10, depending on which of the 'various studies' revealing under-reporting is used. Then the statistics are lumped together, adding the relatively low number of rape cases to figures for sexual assault (which covers flashing and other minor sexual offences, as well as serious assaults).

The Home Office report notes that a rate of attrition of 25 percent



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takes place when the police 'no-crime' reports of rape; and then goes on to say that, therefore, the recorded figures should be increased by 33 percent for reasons unexplained. But to include as real no-crime cases (even where police say that although a crime has been reported, none has actually been committed), amounts to a fairly promiscuous approach to statistical evidence on sex crimes. No wonder striking headlines, like those witnessed in February, are easy to come by.

Announcing the latest project, Baroness Jay, minister for women, was keen to emphasise the numbers of women living in fear of rape and sexual assault. Perhaps she should ask herself how much her scare statistics alone have contributed to women's anxieties. ●

Sara Hinchliffe ■ s.j.hinchliffe@sussex.ac.uk  
Read the full version of this commentary at [www.informinc.co.uk/LM/discuss/commentary/02-22-00-SEXCRIMESTATS.html](http://www.informinc.co.uk/LM/discuss/commentary/02-22-00-SEXCRIMESTATS.html)

## The what's NOT on guide

**TANGO TANGOED:** First the Independent Television Commission withdrew an advert for the soft drink Tango, in response to 67 complaints from schoolteachers who thought it would encourage bullying. Then the plan to promote Tango by selling the megaphones featured in the ad was foiled by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, which claimed that widespread use of the megaphones could cause deafness. Not something to shout about, then. **CLOUD NINE:** British Airways' ban on flight passengers drinking their own alcohol is to pass into British law, in an attempt to curb 'air rage'. Police powers are also to be increased, so that passengers can be arrested even if they have not committed an assault. It looks like reading the in-flight magazine and having the back of your seat kicked by children will have to do to pass the time. **BEEFCAKE?:** The rationale behind beef bans has finally been revealed, by no other than Leonardo DiCaprio. 'I shouldn't be eating hamburgers', he explained, 'because the methane gas cows release is the number one contributor to the destruction of the ozone layer'. Now we know. **THIS MESSAGE WILL SELF-DESTRUCT:** The USA's Bureau of Export Administration has published a regulation 'in response to the changing global market', enlarging the use of license exceptions for encryption technology. In other words, the privacy and security that come from downloading a web browser with 128-bit encryption are denied to you if you live in certain places: including Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Serbia and Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. ●

Compiled by Sandy Starr

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### RE-LENTING ON SMOKING

It's the first day of Lent—Ash Wednesday of course—and it's declared No Smoking Day by the aptly named anti-smoking campaign ASH. Geddit? So on 8 March, I am hectored by adverts, articles, campaigns and lectures designed to make me renounce my beloved Silk Cut and prove myself a born-again non-smoker.

It was with some relief, then, that I received an invitation which sanctioned sinning. FOREST, the self-proclaimed 'Voice and friend of the smoker', invited me and an assortment of journos, libertarian-leaning politicians and maverick types to a champagne breakfast at Simpson's-on-the-Strand. It was rather fun, although smokers are notoriously low on appetite at 8.30am (most of us count coffee and nicotine as our breakfast substitute). The guy from the London *Evening Standard* cheated by being photographed with a full English while really nibbling on toast and B&H,



and the journalist from *Loaded* lit up every few mouthfuls. But—for the sake of Lenten sacrifice—we all more or less religiously gave up our no-breakfast habit and munched through bacon, egg, kidney and fried bread.

There's always a danger that this kind of press stunt will just be a gathering of eccentrics. Indeed, there were a couple of moustachioed peers, the odd pipe-smoking colonel types and a few zealots who seemed to chain-smoke for effect. But then Simon Clark, FOREST's relatively new director, is a non-smoker who is committed to the freedom of individuals to do what they want; and this commitment to freedom of choice filled the dining room almost as much as the smoke. FOREST made a nice iconoclastic point to mark the start of Lent. Perhaps the new religion of anti-smoking needs a few more heretics, and a few fewer martyrs. ●

Claire Fox ■ [clairefox@easynet.co.uk](mailto:clairefox@easynet.co.uk)

This sort of thing gives the west a bad name. Even though we did play at the World Cider Drinking Championships at Portishead in 1967 and we sing about cider, this is insulting' Tommy 'I Am a Cider Drinker' Banner of The Wurzels, objecting to a new guidebook which describes West Country folk as 'contented yokels' who are partial to large quantities of scrumpy

'The weather was depressing and the food was awful' Freed Afghan hostage, after his Stansted airport ordeal

'Sometimes if players don't know a referee they can't say "What's your \*\*\*\*ing name you \*\*\*\*?". If it had been Paul Durkin, they would have said, "For \*\*\*\*'s sake, Paul, Christ Almighty, what sort of \*\*\*\*ing decision was that?". And Paul would have said, "Listen, Roy, \*\*\*\* off" Sir Alex Ferguson (asterisks courtesy of the *Daily Telegraph*)

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# COUNSEL ESTATES

Brendan O'Neill reports from the deprived Aylesbury Estate in south London, where according to the government, poverty is all in the mind

'People used to look out for each other and help each other, but that is no longer the case. Hopefully, the door-to-door counsellors will go some way towards alleviating the isolation that people feel.'

Neil Kirby, regeneration initiatives manager at Southwark Council, has declared war on depression and exclusion on the Aylesbury Estate in south London. In February, he unveiled plans for a team of eight counsellors to provide door-to-door psychiatric help, after figures revealed that a quarter of the estate's residents who visited their GP in 1998 did so to get anti-depressants. The estate has been awarded £56 million from the government's New Deal for Communities scheme, and according to Kirby, 'the initial priority will be mental health'. Five million will be spent on health, £1.2 million on the team of counsellors, and a further £600 000 on the Home and Dry project to 'improve people's self-esteem' by giving them new furniture.

According to the London magazine *Time Out*, 'the [counsellors] will replace the old-fashioned support network of friends and neighbours'. Kirby argues that a high turnover of residents and an increased fear of crime mean there is less trust on the estate than in the past—with people more likely to look out for number one than to fend for fellow residents. His regeneration team wants to tackle such 'feelings of isolation' and to address the 'psychological problems caused by poverty and exclusion'. 'Not only is there high unemployment and crime on the estate', says Kirby, 'there are also the mental health problems caused by deprivation. Our aim is to address physical, environmental and social issues, and also health issues'.

Forget old-fashioned welfare to help alleviate poverty—today's councillors and housing officers seem to be more interested in how people feel than in how they might pay the rent. The regeneration of the Aylesbury Estate is part of New Labour's 'neighbourhood renewal' strategy, which addresses how living in a deprived area 'directly diminishes people's quality of life and leads to a range of physical and mental health problems' (*Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*). The government wants to make life 'more positive' for those in Britain's most deprived areas, by 'extending educational opportunities', 'improving the environment', and 'addressing physical and mental health'. But will the shift from welfare to healthcare really improve estate life?

There is no question that some estates

could do with an overhaul. The Aylesbury Estate has 2800 dwellings, most of which were built in the late 1960s when planners obviously thought poor people would enjoy living on top of each other in ghastly grey blocks. Ten thousand people live on the estate, a third of whom receive income support, and over 50 percent of school-age children from the estate are on their schools' free meals register (compared to 16 percent nationally). During my visit in February, a group of children told me they hung around on the streets because there was 'nothing else to do' and even if there was they 'wouldn't be able to afford it'.

But while some residents were willing to give the door-to-door therapy a chance, others were sceptical about whether it would improve their 'quality of life'. Julie, a single mother-of-two, found the idea insulting: 'Are they saying we're mad? I cope fine as it happens. I'm not saying life is easy on this estate because it isn't, but you get on with it as best you can.' Marcus, an unemployed 20-year old, was clear about what he needed: 'not some quack knocking on my door', but a job. 'I've been looking for work for a few months, and that's what I need to get sorted. There's nothing wrong with my head.' Asked what might improve her quality of life, Julie replied, 'maybe a bit more money'.

Yet the tag of needing help with the 'psychological problems' caused by poverty is unavoidable, whether people like Julie like it or not. Even those measures aimed at helping people financially are couched in terms of boosting their self-confidence. So on the Aylesbury Estate, the Home and Dry project will give the poorest households new furniture and appliances. But according to Neil Kirby, the main aim is to 'help with mental health problems by improving the quality of people's homes. It could be things like decorating or refurbishment or buying equipment. Improving a person's home has psychological benefits'. Kirby explained to me that the reason Aylesbury got £56 million from the New Deal for Communities scheme (the largest payout to date) is because he convinced the government that 'health impacts on everything and everything impacts on health': 'Our approach is now being held up as a model, because we demonstrated how all the problems on our estate affect health: crime affects health, unemployment affects health, poor housing affects health. Our strategy of not only addressing the traditional problems, but also health and psychological problems, is the way forward.'

Dressed up in the language of 'improving health' and 'boosting community spirit', the



redefinition of deprivation as a health issue presents residents of housing estates as basket cases who are not even aware of the detrimental impact that living in poverty can have on their mental wellbeing, who need door-to-door psychiatrists and gifts for their home to make them that little bit happier. Poverty is being turned from a practical problem that some families have to struggle with—the problem of having too little income—into something approaching a state of mind.

The emphasis on personal, emotional wellbeing, rather than on the objective problem of poverty, not only detracts the focus of welfare away from much-needed cash. It also gives the authorities more clout in intervening in the lives of their tenants, telling them what to do and counselling them later about how to think. Launching its study *An Environment for Everyone: social exclusion, poverty and environmental action*, an attempt to understand why 'poorer communities care less about the environment', the Community





PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

## 'ARE THEY SAYING WE'RE MAD?' ASKED JULIE, A SINGLE MOTHER-OF-TWO

Development Foundation (CDF) called for a 'wider focus than merely looking at poverty'. Its aim was to involve deprived communities in the improvement of their local environments, by tackling problems such as 'noise, litter and dog-fouling' which 'are part of a constant morale-sapping assault on [people's] lives'. How being rounded up to pick up dog crap is likely to boost a resident's morale is anybody's guess. No wonder they are depressed.

CDF's 'Back Alley Project' on the Birkin Patch Estate in Nottingham is a case in point. The project was an attempt to clean up another of 'Britain's most deprived estates'.

In the late 1990s, residents on the estate complained that their back alleys were infested with rats feeding on strewn rubbish which had not been cleared away. CDF and the local council organised a team of 20 local residents to get rid of the rats and keep them away, in a project which 'has not only created physical improvements in the local areas, but also enabled residents to tackle social issues and helped develop their confidence'. Even something as bottom-line as getting rid of rats—which you might consider to be an absolute necessity in allowing people to live their lives with some measure of dignity—is now presented as a way of 'getting the

community together'. But surely, when something like the Back Alley Project is held up as a success story, any genuine ambition to improve your life—maybe even by moving off the estate to somewhere better—becomes more difficult to realise. The notion that your problems are largely in the mind is enough to dash anybody's dreams of a truly better life.

It was on the Aylesbury Estate in south London that Tony Blair made his first post-election speech about social exclusion in 1997—promising to help deprived communities not only with their hardships but also with creating a sense of fulfilment in their lives. So it is fitting that the same estate should now be at the forefront of New Labour's therapeutic approach to poverty, where those designated as poor are increasingly seen as damaged goods in need of counselling rather than as independent people trying to make the most of their lives. I wouldn't want Tony Blair as my landlord—would you? ●



# KICKED ABOUT

Today's footballers can't do right for doing wrong, says Carlton Brick

**N**o Ferraris for Stanley, he trudged 16 miles a day to go training.' So read the *Sun's* headline on 24 February. The death of the former England, Stoke City and Blackpool footballer Sir Stanley Matthews, at the age of 85, came at a time of increasing concern about the high-profile antics of the modern footballer, and presented yet another opportunity to bemoan how far down the moral league table the game has slid.

*Sun* sports columnist John Sadler said of Matthews, 'Sir Stanley was of the old school. When you played for love not money, for the honour and the glory'. Other tributes were equally effusive. According to former England captain Jimmy Armfield, 'You could kick him and do anything with him and he would never retaliate. He was the perfect example of self-discipline. I don't remember a referee speaking to him once, and he didn't speak to them either'. Sports minister Kate Hoey said of the great player, 'More than any player, Stanley Matthews represented all that was great about the beautiful game' (*Guardian*, 24 February).

Our Stanleys of today are seen as quite different animals: overpaid, arrogant, petulant and violent. Some of the players' recent behaviour has had the football authorities, the media and politicians hanging their heads in despair. 'Shaming the beautiful game' read the *Sunday Times'* bold headline of 20 February, above an article listing example after example of what Kate Hoey has called the 'behavioural crisis' in the modern English game. Dissent towards referees, coupled with violent and abusive conduct towards fellow players, has provoked the government to float the idea that footballers could face prosecution for abusive behaviour on the pitch. High-profile events off the field have done nothing to relieve the impending sense of shame in which football apparently finds itself. Lee Bowyer and Jonathan Woodgate of Leeds United have been charged with violent assault on an Asian student outside a Leeds nightclub. Manchester United's David Beckham would rather stay at home and look after the baby than turn up for a morning's work. And of course there are the stories of Leicester City being sent home in shame from a Spanish hotel after its recent signing, the 'troublesome' Stan Collymore, and his new team mates ran amok with fire extinguishers. So where did it all go wrong?

Many point to the excesses of commercialisation and, consequently, the wages that elite players can now command. Such excesses, it is argued, lead to aggressive

and morally deviant behaviour. According to football historian James Walvin, author of the 1986 book *Football and the Decline of Britain*, the 1960s was the start of the big slide. The abolition of the maximum wage in 1960 enabled players to demand more than the paltry £30 a week they had hitherto been paid—which to Walvin marked the beginning of the end. First to go were sartorial standards. Walvin writes, 'Long hair became the first fashion, later joined by beards. This slowly gave way to the footballers' "perm", as ever-more professionals followed the vogue of having their hair curled; the end result was often more like a Pear's soap advertisement than the traditional short-back-and-sides of earlier players'. Terrible. And if that wasn't enough, they began to behave, well, like those effeminate foreigners. 'Certain forms of exaggerated behaviour have become *de rigueur* among most professionals. A generation ago, the more excessive forms of players' exuberance—players mobbed for scoring, feigned and utterly deceptive injuries—were widely thought to be an alien expression; more suited to the "hot" temperaments of Latin America and southern Europe.'

Football's current moralisers echo many of Walvin's misgivings—but with some startling contradictions. Stan Collymore, a diagnosed depressive, has been derided and castigated by the media and managers

throughout much of his career, as a loner, not one of the lads, and a player who has an unsettling influence on team morale. But when Collymore actually mucks in with his team mates' japes in a Spanish hotel (letting off a fire extinguisher—sixth-form stuff, surely?), he gets even more stick. It seems the modern professional cannot win. They are damned if they do and they are damned if they don't. Regardless

of his actual behaviour,

Collymore is seen as a bad role model: a bad role model for being one of the lads,





and a bad role model for *not* being one of the lads.

What has changed about modern football is not so much the behaviour of the players, but the expectation that soccer stars should be good role models for the young. This notion presupposes, quite wrongly, that children are unable to distinguish between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The idea that little Johnny and Jane will be messing with fire equipment at school, or swearing at each other in the playground, as a result of watching *Match Of The Day* is ridiculous. Bad behaviour is the one thing kids know how to do without any teaching at all. But the notion that footballers should act as appropriate role models is so widespread now that it has led to never-ending demands for increased control of players' behaviour, and has exacerbated the perception of football's moral decline.

The eulogies that followed Sir Stanley Matthews' death implied a stark contrast between the worlds of today's and yesterday's players. Sir Stanley has been held up as a paragon of an age of footballing innocence: an age of cloth caps, Brylcreem and demob suits. But presenting him as this archetypal

## SIR STANLEY MATTHEWS WAS NO PARAGON OF FOOTBALLING INNOCENCE

sportsman who played simply for the privilege of being allowed to play is an insult to his memory. Matthews was well aware of what he was worth as a footballing star and let those who paid his wages know about it, often refusing to play unless managers topped up his wage packet with a 'bonus'. When it came to looking after his economic future, Matthews was as cut-throat and as hardnosed as any of today's so called 'greedy' players. He had to be: Sir Stanley played at a time when footballers were paid a pittance, often less than those that came to see them week in, week out. An age of innocence and high moral standing? I think not.

For James Walvin, 'The modern professional player—all of whom have grown up in a footballing world increasingly dominated by commercial interests—is unlikely even to be *familiar* with the concept of gentlemanly conduct'. But so what? Surely his job is to play football. ●

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# Italy's banners

by Dominic Standish

THE MATCH BETWEEN LAZIO AND Bari on 30 January seemed like a fairly ordinary Serie A game. There were the usual kinds of rivalries between the fans but no significant reports of violence. Yet two banners displayed by Lazio fans caused uproar in the government, media and football worlds. One proclaimed 'Honour to Tiger Arkan', referring to the slain Serbian war crime suspect. The other was a portrait of the former fascist leader of Italy, Benito Mussolini. Despite the fact that neither banner provoked violence at the game, the government issued a decree that matches should be stopped to remove racist or threatening banners.

The disruption this could bring for fans, media broadcasters and the football clubs themselves is immense. Yet the football authorities have largely supported the government's initiative. The Lazio president, Sergio Cagnotti, stated, 'Our club will offer maximum collaboration with the forces of order', and the only debate among the football authorities seems to be how best to remove the banners. Roma coach Fabio Capello wants to take them away as fans enter the stadium but also senses the potential problems with the ban: 'It is difficult to determine the right moment to stop a match. We don't want either side to benefit from it.'

Why the sudden concern? Fascist symbols are not rare at football matches in Italy, the country that was under Mussolini's rule for much of the interwar period. (Near to where I live there is even a village called Mussolini—although there is no campaign to change its name.) But this anti-fascist measure happened at the same time as the *furor* surrounding the election of Jörg Haider and the Freedom Party in Austria. As in other European countries, Italian politicians reacted by distancing themselves from Austria, and using the opportunity to contrast their own democratic, tolerant values to those espoused by Haider's party. And the football authorities, it seems, are as keen as politicians to play this game. As the Lazio president Cagnotti said: 'We have to stop football grounds becoming a breeding ground for extremist political groups.'

Now the prime minister, Massimo D'Alema, has broadened the ban. 'All banners that are offensive to other Italians should simply be removed', he declared. But surely using such a subjective definition can mean that any banner can be seen as offensive? I could argue that a banner with 'AC Milan' or 'Chelsea FC' would be offensive to me as an Inter Milan and QPR fan. Indeed, the week after the Italian government brought the ban into law, some fans had a banner confiscated by police which was merely a tribute to a recently deceased friend of theirs. And watch out for how the referees will interpret this law. In 1996 the referee Pierluigi Collina stopped the match between Sampdoria and Torino when a slogan attacking a soccer official was displayed. Two months later, he delayed the start of Piacenza against Vicenza after spotting a banner insulting AC Milan captain Franco Baresi. The new law gives them more power to take such actions.

The Italian government's anti-fascist campaign has more to do with political opportunism than problems at football matches. Nonetheless, it is the fans who will suffer. At present only the perimeters of sections of fans are heavily policed at Italian football matches, leaving fans to jump around, let off fireworks and shout whatever they want within these areas. I now struggle to exercise the required self-control needed at British matches, as a decent Italian goal celebration would cause arrest or ejection in a match governed by the strict British codes of conduct. The banner ban seems set to change this in Italy, as it makes policing the behaviour of fans more acceptable. But as we approach Euro 2000 it could have wider European implications. After all, if all you need to do to be labelled some kind of hooligan is wave a banner, how much crowd control will be needed in the heat of the summer? ●



# Austria-cised

The truly chilling lesson of Austria's elections is the anti-democratic impulse of political radicals, argues Linda Ryan

The inclusion of Jörg Haider's right-wing Freedom Party in Austria's coalition government in February caused outrage among the European Union, with European politicians announcing that they could no longer do 'business as usual' with Austria. Just a few weeks later Haider, the epicentre of the controversy, had resigned as the party's leader, in what has been acknowledged as a clever tactical move to improve the possibility of his standing for the chancellorship in the future. But the damage has already been done—and not only to Haider's future political career.

What was it about Haider that caused such a vehement reaction among Europe's leaders? Haider and his party were seen to stand for a set of values that were at odds with the tolerance and pluralism which characterise contemporary Europe; values which were therefore unacceptable. The particular focus of Europe's disgust was Haider's stance on immigration. The Freedom Party's openly anti-immigrant approach is indeed in need of criticism, and it does seem shocking that obviously xenophobic views did not stop 1.2 million Austrians from casting their vote for Haider. But in fact, while the Freedom Party might be more openly hostile to immigrants than other European governments, its immigration policies contain remarkable similarities. In recent years, the leaders of 'Fortress Europe' have fallen over each other in their scramble to repel immigration. And when you look at the recent campaigns waged by some British newspapers against 'welfare-scrouring' Eastern European asylum seekers, who apparently manage to go on the dole, beg on the Tube and hold down well-paid jobs all at the same time, the notion that Austria's anti-immigration stance is peculiarly repugnant seems somewhat unconvincing.

Another concern that brought Austria's election to the attention of the world was the spectre of a fascist revival, fuelled by the fact that Haider's party won a substantial proportion—around 27 percent—of the vote in last October's elections. But the support for Austria's Freedom Party does not necessarily even represent the birth of a 'new right', let alone a return to the Third Reich. Voters themselves have repeatedly declared little interest in the specifics of Haider's policies, and claimed an identification principally with his posturing against the traditional parties of Austrian politics. And the Freedom Party's constituency is not simply—even primarily—old blokes in leather shorts who get misty-eyed at the thought of Adolf and the goosestep. His support has come particularly



## ACADEMICS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT WE SHOULD SIMPLY ABOLISH DEMOCRACY

from a younger generation, for whom the carving up of social and political life between the 'red and black' of the Social Democrats and the People's Party simply makes no sense. Haider's support can best be understood, not as a new wave of racism, but as a reaction against the stagnation of Austrian politics and society.

Much of postwar European politics has been dominated by a corrupt brand of centrist politics, often in the form of Christian Democracy, as in Italy and Germany. More than just the squeezing out of all political rivals, this Cold War system meant that a job in a university, for example, would only be possible for those with good connections to the relevant party machine. Where these arrangements have largely come to an end elsewhere in Europe, Austria has remained mired in this system of party patronage. But these parties' hold on power has become increasingly tenuous, as they have experienced a long-term erosion of the underpinnings of their control. The Social Democrats have experienced the general

collapse of radical statism, while the (Catholic) People's Party has been undermined by increasing secularisation. It has proven very difficult for these parties to resort to a more populist stance, as they were built in the aftermath of the war around little more than their rejection of the very recent past and anything which smacked of populism.

Consequently, there is a widespread sense that Austria has fallen behind and stagnated, left as the last remaining outpost of postwar European politics—rather like Cuba is left as a decaying reminder of communism's collapse. It so happens that the Freedom Party has first managed to monopolise this reaction. But in many ways the Freedom Party betrays the rather quaint preoccupations of old-fashioned European politics, and certainly it is in no position to be anything like Blair's 'post-politics' New Labour. Ultimately, the significance of the Freedom Party is likely to be little different to the passing role that comparable populist and far-right parties have played elsewhere in Europe. It will act as a catalyst to the realignment of Austrian politics, in the first instance creating splits and new groupings in the old conservative and socialist parties. In time, a more modernised version of the old politics will displace Haider's temporary appeal.

The truly chilling lesson of Austria's elections is the extent to which Haider's opponents are more openly anti-democratic than the Freedom Party itself. It is striking how casually the votes of more than a quarter of the Austrian electorate can be brushed aside. Radicals dismiss Haider's constituency as reactionary idiots—presumably all 1.2 million of them. Academics have gone so far as to suggest that the result means we should simply abolish democracy. There is no suggestion that perhaps the alternatives to Haider on offer in the elections were not particularly enticing. Any general dissatisfaction with the state of politics, which evidently provided the basis for Haider's appeal, is forgotten.

Contemporary radical politics seems to have come to the stage where using argument or the presentation of an alternative as a way to undermine objectionable political forces has been abandoned. Instead, the mindset is either simply to leave the 'sort of people' who vote for Haider to rot, or alternatively to suggest that good, pure, anti-racist Austrians go and set up shop somewhere else. To top it all, the European radicals demanding strong measures against Haider are oblivious to the irony that they want to ban, or at least undermine, democracy...all in the name of challenging an anti-democrat.



## OPINION

Ann Bradley

# Ill-conceived advice



A pregnant colleague of mine returned to the office bristling with outrage. Her lunchtime shopping mission had been to purchase a new bra to accommodate her expanding maternal shape, and her preference, being just a few months along the road to motherhood, was simply a larger size of her usual style. But on requesting a fitting from a gaggle of matronly shop assistants she was told that this was strictly forbidden. Pregnant women must have maternity bras. Normal bra construction, she was told, risks compromising the health of the baby-to-be. A variety of justifications was offered, including the claim that under-wired bras constrict fetal movement, and the

Healthy Parents, Better Babies—a preconception care manual that has achieved bestseller status in Australia. As the title suggests, the book advocates the notion that by ensuring you are in good health before you conceive, you can maximise your child's chances. Would that it were so easy. While it is true that parental illness may, in some circumstances, compromise the future of a pregnancy, there is no evidence to support claims that the fitter you are, the fitter your baby will be. But why let mere evidence stand in the way of a best-selling ruse? This book contains some gems. The main message is that, four months before pregnancy, you need to start preparation for parenthood by

of newborns are affected with an abnormality—most parents scrutinise their lives to discover if they could have 'done anything' to cause the problem.

But in truth, fetuses are pretty resilient and take from 'mum' what they need for healthy development. If a pregnant woman's diet is deficient, she will suffer from it before the fetus, as the whole pregnant-body system is designed to give priority to the developing baby-to-be.

Even drug abuse in pregnancy seems not to be the problem it is often cracked up to be. For the past decade, researchers in America have tracked the neurological development of 200 children from some of Philadelphia's poorest neighbourhoods; half were exposed to cocaine during their mother's pregnancy, and half were not. But despite fears in the late 1980s that a surge in 'crack babies'—one in six born in city nurseries in 1989 had cocaine-using mothers—would lead to a whole class of children destined for neurological problems, the study turned up no evidence of a devastating cocaine effect. What it did find was that all the kids at aged four, in both the crack and the control group, had underdeveloped intellectual performance compared to the US average. The project concluded that social deprivation is the key indicator of children's performance—and that is not something that parents can resolve through good behaviour and a pregnancy preparation plan.

Arguably the best advice anybody could give a couple trying for a child would be to chill out and enjoy lots of sex. Fortunately, it seems as though this is the approach that most couples take anyway. A survey for *Pregnancy and Birth* magazine horrified health correspondents by discovering that 73 percent of couples make no effort to get healthy before trying to conceive, and that almost half of all babies are conceived while both parents have a blood alcohol level that, if they were breathalised, would probably win them a driving ban. Healthy babies, it seems, are born despite our behaviour rather than because of it. ●

## In truth, fetuses are pretty resilient

assertion that they increase the risk of stretchmarks. Accordingly, my colleague was persuaded to change immediately into 'Doreen'—a sturdy contraption that looks as though it was designed in the 1940s by somebody more accustomed to creating body armour than underwear and who refers to a bra as a 'woman's undergarment'.

The pregnancy-related health risks of the alluring bra are, of course, complete nonsense. Good support of heavy breasts helps prevent later sagging, and that is about the limit of the health advice that can be given about bras. There is certainly no need for shop assistants to turn into pregnancy police. Not that this is likely to stop them: when it comes to the health of mums-to-be, everybody has advice. The absence of evidence to support claims and counter claims does not discourage them. Rather, it makes everybody who wants to claim the status of an expert into an expert.

Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* recently ran a discussion with one of the authors of

avoiding all potential hazards to your health. The list of 'hazards' includes not just the predictable, such as drinking alcohol, but eating non-organic food, sitting too close to the TV, using conventional washing powder and having an air freshener in your loo. Non-referenced studies are used to give weight to bizarre allegations, such as the claim that contraceptive pill use makes it more difficult to conceive when you want: a 'fact' that will amaze the thousands of women who conceive unplanned pregnancies each year despite still being on the pill.

One insidious effect of this type of publication is that, even if they reject the more bizarre lifestyle instructions, many women take to heart the message that they are responsible for the healthy outcome of a pregnancy. Few women feel sufficiently confident to shrug it all off. Most, during those endless, uncomfortable wakeful nights, worry about whether the baby will be all right, and when a child arrives that is less than perfect—and around two percent



# TRIVIAL PURSUITS?



## The petty nature of politics reflects a more profound contempt for the electorate, explains Frank Furedi

How could anybody fail to be bored by politics today? Passions that were once focused on competing visions of what might constitute a good society are now devoted to furious rows about train safety, NHS waiting lists and teenage pregnancy. So the findings of *The Big Turn-Off*, a survey of 15- to 24-year olds published by the Adam Smith Institute and Mori in February, come as little surprise. *The Big Turn-Off* confirms an alarming trend towards political disengagement and cynicism, with 51 percent of 24-year olds claiming that they have no interest in politics. More than half of those under 24 'rarely or never' vote in elections. This view is not confined to young people. *The Big Turn-Off* reflects a more widespread suspicion of politicians, and of the very idea of politics.

Contrary to the diagnosis offered by numerous experts, the evident exhaustion of political life has little to do with any specific conjunctural factor: the role of the media, the rise of political corruption or the aloof character of a highly centralised and bureaucratised form of governance. What has changed during the past two decades is the meaning of politics itself. Ever since the early 1980s, the electorate has been consistently exposed to the idea that There is No Alternative (TINA). Margaret Thatcher's famous TINA has now been succeeded by

Tony Blair's Third Way. Both approaches are underpinned by the assumption that the big questions facing society have been resolved, and that the competing ideologies of the past have been trumped by the worldview of technical and managerial realism. Of course, if indeed there is no alternative to the status quo, politics can have little meaning. Without alternatives, debate becomes empty posturing about trivial matters and clashes of personality. Such pointless enterprise not only stimulates disenchantment—it encourages an outlook that is positively anti-politician and anti-political.

The most consistent criticism levelled against New Labour politicians actually amounts to the charge that they are...politicians. Unable to offer a coherent alternative to what the government offers, its critics make do with the demagogic argument that Blair and his coterie are 'control freaks'. Yet on closer inspection, being a control freak means little more than that the New Labour government does not want to leave matters to chance. Shock, horror—the government wants to control the media! Commentators are astonished that party fixers work hard to get loyal followers into positions of influence, and opponents of the government are amazed to discover that wheeling and dealing, political favouritism, pressure and cajoling are routinely practised in Westminster.

But serious politicians have always done what they felt necessary for effective government. What is new is that, at a time when style is continually elevated over substance, these normal features of political life are portrayed as the actions of a control freak.

There is no better symbol of the spirit of our times than the London mayoral contest. The main appeal of Ken Livingstone is his image as



a maverick, and that he appears as his own man, uncowed by party whips. In the classical tradition of American populism, he is a politician that masquerades as an outsider untainted by vested party interests. New Labour's response to this challenge is first to panic, and then to adopt Livingstone's style. Accordingly, poor Frank Dobson is packaged as a man who thinks for himself, while the Dobson team insists that its candidate is not in Blair's pocket, and that he will do his best for London regardless of party pressure. In a bizarre bid to improve his image, Dobson was even encouraged to shave off his beard. The need to portray the government's own candidate as a rebel is testimony to the pervasive climate of political disenchantment.

The highly personal character of this contest is bad enough. The lack of debate over matters of substance is even worse. But worst of all is the implicit assumption that party politics can have only a minor role in a democratic election. By giving the issue of character so much significance, politics becomes trivialised, making it an even bigger turn-off for the public.

Whether the New Labour government is peculiarly attached to controlling the minutiae of administrative detail is far from clear. But if New Labour politicians are control freaks, they are not very good at the job. As the government's incandescent reaction to Livingstone indicates, the fiasco over the London election is more symptomatic of a failure of nerve than of a unique ability to control the political process. Similar developments in Wales and Scotland indicate that the image of the omnipotent spindoctor is just that—an image. The assessment that the Blair government is obsessed with the issue of control contains a grain of truth, but this does not come from a perverse commitment to

## ANYBODY WITH AN AGENDA STANDS ACCUSED OF BEING A CONTROL FREAK

control for its own sake. Rather, it is a response to pressures that threaten to transform relatively minor matters into a crisis.

The decline of politics with a capital P is paralleled by the tendency to inflate issues of little broader significance. The removal of a healthy kidney by a surgeon in a Welsh hospital in February, which led to the tragic death of his patient, became the subject of political debate. Instead of the tragedy being viewed as just that, an accidental misfortune, it was immediately politicised and the reputation of the government put at stake. When political debate is starved of competing ideals, anything can turn into an issue requiring the attention of politicians; and the question 'what is the government going to do about it?' is now regularly posed in relation to clinical and other technical matters.

This unpredictable dimension of public life creates a minefield for politicians, as the most trivial matter can constitute a potential source of embarrassment. So a photograph of deputy prime minister John Prescott chauffeured in his new second car can be seized upon to claim that he has no moral authority to encourage the use of public transport, while the revelation that a Labour politician's children are enrolled in public school can blow up into a debate about the education policy of the government. No wonder politicians feel beleaguered.

The way in which politicians respond to the arbitrary and unpredictable consequences of this trivialisation of politics is what encourages sections of the media to characterise them as control freaks. But in fact, the outlook of officialdom is influenced precisely by an intense sense of being out of control. When just about any untoward incident can blow up into a major public controversy, what takes hold

is the politics of permanent crisis management. Increasingly, the survival of the government depends on its ability to prevent political trivia turning into a challenge to its authority.

The petty nature of politics today shows that it has little in common with the passions and conflicts that have shaped people's commitments and hatreds over the past century. Even the one potentially serious contemporary controversy—Britain's relationship to Europe and the Euro—has failed to engage the emotions of the public. Since this issue tends to be treated by all sides in a highly technical and pragmatic manner, interest in Europe is mainly confined to the political class. This has led some commentators to argue that we live in a time without any ideology at all—which on the surface seems like a plausible argument. There is little doubt that the clash of views between the robust advocate of socialism and the ardent promoter of the free market has little salience for our times. At least for now, the big questions raised about the nature of capitalism, the plausibility of other more enlightened alternatives and the ability of society to manipulate and control its future have lost their practical relevance. But does this really mean that we live in an ideology-free world?

Today, politics is influenced not only by the suspension of the ideological controversies of the past, but also by a worldview that has emerged in the past two decades. One characteristic feature of this worldview is that it self-consciously presents itself as non- or post-ideological. In contrast to the ideologies of the nineteenth century, today's version seems incoherent and unsystematic, and is discussed in the amorphous term 'values' rather than in the traditional language of principles. Yet although there is little systematic presentation of the new ideology, it forms the basis of political life today.

The values that influence society today are most clearly expressed in the outlooks of three late twentieth-century movements: feminism, environmentalism and therapeutic politics. Although these movements contain great diversity with distinct agendas, they are nevertheless grounded on a surprisingly similar view of the world. The single most important core value that inspires these movements is a profoundly anti-modernist definition of human potential, which is based on a one-sided preoccupation with the negative and destructive side of humanity.

Environmental activism, for example, is motivated by the belief that people tend to be destructive, polluting and toxic, and human progress is perceived as a threat to nature. The more systematic expositions of the environmentalist outlook contend that humans are just a species like all the others, with no special claim to taking control over the world. Feminism originally contained profound humanistic and egalitarian impulses, but it has tended to survive in a form that contradicts many of its early principles. In recent decades, feminism's emphasis on male violence and its stigmatisation of masculinity reflect a preoccupation with the dark side of the human enterprise. Many feminist contributors offer a worldview where men are presented as degraded, dangerous creatures and where human relationships are continually subject to destructive impulses. The therapeutic outlook has the emotionally weak and damaged individual as its main protagonist. From this standpoint, people are not expected to cope with life on their own, and are depicted as constantly in need of therapeutic intervention and counselling.

The pessimistic view of human nature embedded in the values of these three movements provides the point of departure for an ideology of individual and social limitations, which affirms at every stage the political imagination of contemporary Britain. At its core, the mistrust of politics and politicians represents a suspicion of human motives, where anybody with an agenda stands accused of being a control freak. That is why apathy and social disengagement are not, as many would like to believe, temporary fads that will soon give way to a new cycle of political involvement. Meanwhile, the celebration of the banal and the trivial is part of a political style that self-consciously expects very little from the electorate. For its part, the electorate has given its verdict by treating this kind of politics with the contempt that it deserves. ●



# A QUEER PLATFORM

Peter Tatchell talks to Sandy Starr

If the media cannot get enough of Red Ken, just wait until they get a load of Pink Pete. Veteran queer rights activist Peter Tatchell has resigned from the party he joined 'to help create a democratic socialist society', because New Labour 'long ago ceased to be socialist, and now it has abandoned democracy as well'. He is now standing as an 'Independent Green Left and Libertarian' candidate for the Greater London Authority (GLA).

Tatchell's prospective support, he says, 'includes lesbians and gay men, radical greens, left-wingers inside and outside the Labour Party, and libertarians who may not always agree with me, but who admire my gutsy, independent-minded style of politics'. But despite his independent-mindedness, he has no intention of being a loner in the GLA. 'Ken Livingstone is likely to win the mayorship, and I get on well with him. By persuading him to adopt my proposals, I could have a very significant influence on GLA policy.'

So what are Tatchell's proposals? On most key issues, he says, 'Ken and I agree: a four-year fares freeze, no Tube privatisation, action against police corruption and prejudice, and so on'. But 'my own distinctive ideas' include 'planting a million new trees to cut pollution,



PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

free nursery places for all two- to five-year olds, switching the focus of the NHS from curing illness to sickness prevention, and a GLA-sponsored Domestic Partnership Register to give recognition to unwed couples—gay or straight'.

Tatchell's election manifesto calls on people to 'VOTE TACHELL to give Tony Blair nightmares!'. And I have sympathy with his desire to provide 'a rebuff to the suffocating authoritarianism and conservatism of New Labour'. But when he says that the GLA is a 'very exciting project' because it has 'huge potential to promote social justice, ecological sustainability, and democratic sustainability' this sounds less like a breeding ground for New Labour nightmares than a focus group for government-friendly ideas. A Livingstone-Tatchell victory will 'demonstrate that there is a credible democratic left alternative to Blairism', says Tatchell. That's his dream. ●

For more information about the 'Tatchell for London' campaign, email [info@tatchellforlondon.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:info@tatchellforlondon.freeserve.co.uk) or go to [www.tatchellforlondon.freeserve.co.uk](http://www.tatchellforlondon.freeserve.co.uk)

# LONDON'S MAYOR—WHO CARES?

Whoever wins the contest, the 'voice of London' can only be a whisper in the government's ear, says Bruno Waterfield

Ken Livingstone's decision to stand as an independent candidate in the London mayoral election generated a flurry of media excitement, with headlines proclaiming 'row', 'fury' and 'crisis'. But back on the ground, the forthcoming election of London's mayor continues to generate about as much buzz as a bluebottle.

When the government's project for the creation of a London mayor and a Greater London Authority (GLA) kicked off with a referendum two years ago, even its enthusiasts had to admit that this was one of the most low-key political events ever witnessed. Three days before the vote, only one in 10 Londoners knew when the referendum was taking place, while returning officers were advised to deal with voter apathy by counting as valid 'as many ballot papers as possible', including those marked with smiley faces, games of noughts and crosses or the words 'I agree' or 'okay'. In February, as the Livingstone/Dobson personality clash raged in the newspapers, a major conference organised by Greater London Enterprise to examine the impact of the mayoral authority on London's future—which aimed to be a high-profile affair addressed by government ministers, candidates, mayors from Chicago, Miami, San Francisco and Toronto, senior politicians from Europe, and leaders of industry and government in London—was cancelled due to a lack of interest.

Why the lack of enthusiasm? Despite the government's spin, it is painfully obvious that everything about the mayoral contest is a sham. The mayor and the authority have virtually no fundraising or spending powers independent of those set by central government. The legislation that sets up the GLA 'specifies the services in respect of which the GLA cannot incur expenditure... including housing, education, social services or health services', and 'contains a reserve power to impose limits on the expenditure that can be incurred using the general power' (Greater London Authority Bill, Explanatory Notes). The mayor and the GLA will control a budget of nearly £4 billion, but only in the sense that they administer it. Central government continues to decide how much is spent and on what.

The only area in which the GLA has fundraising powers is that of transport—which is why the Tube has become just about the only issue around which there has been a semblance of debate between the candidates. But even here the legislation is prescriptive: 'this strategy will be prepared within the context of the national integrated transport policy as expressed in the government white paper *A New Deal for Transport: better for everyone*, published in July 1998.' And if Londoners beg to differ? 'Clause 125 gives the secretary of state power to direct the mayor to change the transport strategy...where the strategy would be inconsistent with national policy and have an adverse effect outside Greater London.' (Explanatory Notes) Far from being a voice for Londoners, the GLA will be little more than the means of implementing policy already decided centrally.

Of course, this was New Labour's intention all along. From the outset, the mayoral election has been less about any genuine attempts to revitalise local democracy than about consensus-building and PR, presenting a positive face of London to the world. As deputy prime minister John Prescott explained in his foreword to the government white paper *A Mayor and Assembly for London*: 'We hope to create a new style of politics for our capital city—more inclusive, less confrontational, and focusing on the issues that matter and with the powers and resources to bring about change.' Nowhere is the consensual nature of this set-up more starkly demonstrated than by the degree to which all the mayoral candidates are happy to agree not only with the government, but with each other. In January





Frank Dobson, Glenda Jackson, Ken Livingstone, the Tories' Stephen Norris and the Liberal Democrats' Susan Kramer even issued a joint statement in support of government policy on Section 28, when all five signed a letter to the *Times* condemning this legislation as a licence for 'homophobic bullying'.

As for the battle between 'Red Ken' and New Labour's Dobson, what does this clash of opinion actually amount to? Livingstone's proposals on funding the London Underground by issuing public bonds might be presented as one of the most radical political proposals of recent years—but it is an idea that he borrowed from New York

## THERE IS NO UPRISING OF THE RADICAL LEFT

City, and which is broadly supported by that well-known subversive, the Tory John Redwood. Even as he announced his intention to stand as an independent candidate, in direct opposition to the government's wishes, Livingstone was keen to stress that once elected, he would be more a friend of the government than a thorn in its side. As he told *Newsnight* in March, comparisons between the future of the GLA and the Greater London Council, where he became a bitter opponent to Thatcher, are not appropriate because 'this is my own government'.

When all this is taken into account, the notion that Livingstone's stance, and his

apparent popularity, represents an uprising of the radical Labour left looks increasingly bizarre. Even if the London mayor had the authority to do anything of significance, the fact that Livingstone is so keen to present himself as the government's mate, yet another friendly critic hovering outside the party, shows just how little revolutionary fervour is waiting in the wings. Livingstone may be popular, but this is hardly due to a groundswell of support for traditional Old Labour ideas within Blair's party. While recent ICM polls have demonstrated Livingstone's appeal across all the traditional party divides, even among Tories, Arthur Scargill of the Socialist Labour Party denounces Livingstone for being too right wing. Whatever conclusions you can draw from this, a resurgence of the radical left in the smiley face of Livingstone is surely not one of them.

In fact, Livingstone's support comes from two sources, both of which are a product of our post-political times. He has won the personality contest—which is hardly difficult when lined up against Dobson, Norris and...who? And his candidacy has provided an opportunity for all those others of Tony's friendly critics to have a gentle pop at the government, without risking any adverse consequences for the Blair administration. Livingstone says 'boo', and it brings New Labour out in goosebumps. But that's as far as this radical opposition goes.

# In next month's **LM**

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# A COUP FROM WITHIN

Mark Seddon, editor of *Tribune*, on New Labour's perversion

**W**e still have some 'Harry Perkins for prime minister' badges knocking around our offices in Grays Inn Road. Some readers may recognise this name as belonging to one of the central characters in Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup*, later serialised by the BBC during the mid-1980s. Perkins was the Labour leader and prime minister that Britain never had. He had the perfect combination—working-class son of Sheffield steel worker and left-wing socialist-come-nuclear-disarmer—but he was to be undermined and finally destroyed by the well-honed ways of the British establishment.

Chris Mullin is now a nearly respectable junior transport minister. I say nearly because even if he tried, he could never, thank goodness, be truly respectable. Unlike many of his colleagues who have happily committed themselves to a life of political apostasy, Chris still thinks that Tony Benn would have made an excellent prime minister and never fails to turn up to our *Tribune* rallies. It is just that even the idea of a left-wing Labour prime minister seems so implausible now that *A Very British Coup* has become seriously dated.

Perhaps there could be a sequel, because in other respects there has been a very curious coup that has come from within, not without. For Labour became 'New' Labour, to media acclaim. Over a 10-year period, a process of inversion—some might say perversion—transformed a rather ramshackle but reasonably democratic institution of some venerability into a shiny, sleekly efficient machine that brooked little dissent, and which as time passed showed every sign of becoming a narrow personality cult.

This very curious coup was not matched to any great extent in Labour's sister parties elsewhere in Continental Europe, although latterly an attempt to export it to the German SPD encountered fierce resistance and at one stage even threatened an early end to the Schröder government. But in Britain it could only have any real chance if the already enfeebled forces that lay in its path were weakened even further. How it has been possible for a small group of business-friendly technocrats to assume control over an entity rooted in the collective and in solidarity is perhaps a question for the trades unions. But it could not have happened without the rolling back of representative democracy within the Labour Party, and its replacement with a system based upon 'managed consensus'.

Late in the day, many of the same commentators who lauded the New Labour project for imposing smart professional people (not dissimilar to themselves) upon reluctant constituency Labour parties have



## A LEFT-WING PRIME MINISTER SEEMS IMPLAUSIBLE NOW

woken up to the wider potential threat to democracy. The checks and balances within Britain's still unwritten constitution are few and far between and British prime ministers traditionally enjoy huge powers of patronage, which continue to grow with the quango state. Few eyebrows are raised as long-serving councillors in near-forgotten Labour fiefdoms are quietly dropped, or candidates for parliament are obliged to go through a central register. For these are minnows, and scarcely worth the interest of the Metropolitan media. The imposition of something approaching 'democratic centralism' is of interest to political anoraks only.

Almost unanimously the British establishment and the fourth estate agreed that the 'modernisation' of Labour, largely by excising much that was Labour about it, was a 'good thing'. Negotiating its passage was Tony Blair's passport to acceptability and

media acclaim. Days before the general election, Margaret Thatcher passed her baton to him, pronouncing to friends in the Carlton Club that 'Britain was safe in his hands'. Shortly after the election he returned the compliment by inviting her around to Number 10, where in return for tea he listened to her advice. If the British establishment had got what it wanted from the Tories and Labour had to have its turn, then at least the latter could get away with cutting the welfare state, in the same way that the Tories could once have cut defence spending.

While others now begin to wrestle with the conundrum of a government happy to devolve administration, yet which all the while centralises power in Downing Street, they miss the manifestations of the anti-democratic project at work. 'New' Labour was not simply a public relations device designed to help win the election: it was also a mechanism to prevent the re-emergence of real Labour, and the unleashing of social forces pent up and frustrated by 20 years of the free market. 'Project 2000' helped winnow out the unwanted Old Labour councillors, 'Partnership in Power' took away the ability of constituency Labour parties to exert pressure to change policy. The quaintly named 'Twenty-first century party project' is but the final stage in a long process to change members into inactive supporters and make the structures of the party at a local level largely redundant. All of this is preparation for a piecemeal import of ideology-free, pom-pom-girl, American-style primaries. This is beginning in Britain's local authorities, where the emergence of a new salariat of party apparatchiks is under way. If all goes to plan, the great stay-away from British general elections will shortly begin, but because the new British political class has demonstrated what it really thinks about parliamentary democracy, neither of the likely future parties will much mind.

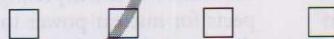
So is it any surprise when representatives of real Labour who threaten the project, albeit from different traditions, first in Wales, then in London, are stymied by the machine? Curiously both Rhodri Morgan and Ken Livingstone showed that in spite of everything, they could still command the support of the great mass of the members. Now much of the same fourth estate comes almost too late to their aid. Their advice? That the propagators of this most curious yet audacious coup should be allowed to walk off with the collateral, while the real victors are supposed to chance it against the machine—but as independents, without their party supporters. It doesn't really stack up. ●



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# Nuclear reaction

What generated the latest Sellafield scare? asks Joe Kaplinsky

Yet again, the nuclear plant at Sellafield finds itself dogged by controversy. The scandal that hit the headlines in February was a result of events last year, in which British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) discovered that quality control data in the manufacture of fuel at Sellafield had been falsified. Apparently workers got bored double checking measurements on fuel pellets and simply copied down the first measurement. Kansai Electric, BNFL's Japanese customers, announced that the fuel would be sent back to Britain, while the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) sent its inspectors to Sellafield.

The inspectors produced a triple whammy of reports condemning management at Sellafield. BNFL's contracts, first with Germany and then with Sweden, were cancelled. Iceland's environment minister used the opportunity of a visit to London to protest about radioactive pollution from Sellafield reaching Scandinavian shores. BNFL chief executive John Taylor resigned. All this looks like the latest installment in the slow disintegration of the nuclear industry.

But what exactly did the damning reports from the NII say? The report on *Control and Supervision of Operations* stated that 'Sellafield is not unsafe, but strong management action is needed to ensure that it remains safe into the future and that BNFL makes the practicable improvements which can reasonably be expected'. The *Investigation into the Falsification of Pellet Diameter Data* concluded that 'data had indeed been falsified but that this would not affect the safety performance of the fuel, given the automated primary diameter check on 100 percent of the pellets used in each fuel rod. NII believes the failure to properly carry out the agreed manual checks of the pellet diameter to be a contractual issue between BNFL and its customer'. The third report, on storage of high-level waste, stated that NII's inquiries 'enabled the inspectorate to make the judgement that the current and future operations... are acceptably safe'.

The NII did identify a host of minor shortcomings, as well as explaining the true scale of the more serious issue of falsification of data. But the response to the latest problems reveals more about an ongoing hostility to the nuclear industry than about any specific problem with nuclear power.

At the centre of the ongoing controversies at Sellafield is the reprocessing of fuel.

Reprocessing involves extracting unused uranium and plutonium from spent fuel so that it can be recycled and can, in principle, make use of 100 percent of the fuel. Without reprocessing, 98 percent of fuel is thrown away unused as high-level nuclear waste. One reason the process is so controversial is because the technology involves separating weapons-usable plutonium, heightening fears



about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Another, less sexy, problem is economic. Reprocessing of fuel was intended to cater for demand in an expanding market, and in the postwar decades the prospects for nuclear power looked promising. But high growth rates turned out to be an anomaly and the undeveloped world never developed. Demand for electricity is an indicator of the overall level of economic activity, and even in our supposedly post-material age it is 'old-fashioned' technologies like coal burning and nuclear power which put the 'e' into e-commerce. Unsurprisingly then, the prospects for nuclear power today are brightest in the dynamic markets of East Asia. Without such large-scale demand or economies of scale, and with old reactors not purpose-built to use reprocessed fuel, reprocessing increasingly looks like a pointless activity.

While business managers worry over cancelled contracts and lack of business, the public is more concerned about safety issues and releases of radioactivity into the environment. Like all industries, Sellafield produces some pollution. However, despite the

complaints from Iceland and others, pollution from Sellafield is far lower than it was in the 1970s and 80s. The recent rise in pollution, which has upset Iceland, is actually a consequence of the decision made in the mid-1980s to stop dumping relatively untreated waste into the Irish Sea. A new treatment plant had to be constructed, and while this was happening the untreated waste was stored. Now that the new system is in operation there is a backlog of waste to be treated. But although this has meant a small rise in pollution, it has not reached anything like the old levels, or levels at which there are likely to be significant effects on human health. And while all reductions in pollution can be welcomed, it has to be remembered that there is no such thing as a free lunch. In the course of bringing about insignificantly small reductions in exposure to the public, nuclear workers may face relatively larger exposures to harmful waste.

Those who emphasise the risks and dangers of nuclear power often seem to forget or downplay the contribution the nuclear industry makes to modern society. Nuclear power is used to generate 20 percent of electricity in the industrialised nations of the OECD and over a quarter in the UK. Critics of the nuclear industry rarely condemn the numerous uses its

products find in medicine, for treatment, imaging, and sterilisation of instruments. They are likely to criticise uses in manufacturing processes, preservation of food, or in household products like smoke detectors, but just as unlikely to suggest plausible alternatives. In the long term it is possible that nuclear power will become our most important source of energy. Alternatively, that role might go to some form of solar power or even nuclear fusion. Whatever happens in the future, the development of nuclear power has already brought tangible benefits to society, and opened up new possibilities.

'Time and again we have been duped about the potential of the nuclear industry', complained one newspaper after the latest scandal. But in fact it is the scientists and engineers who have been let down, by a society which can find no use for their talents. Some see any hope of a rational debate about nuclear power as lost for at least a generation, and have tended to retreat from public debate. Given both the problems and potential of nuclear power, the retreat of scientific discussion is the last thing we need. ●



# Fudging Frankenfood

There is no scientific reason behind Tony Blair's modified stance on GM food, argues Tony Gilland

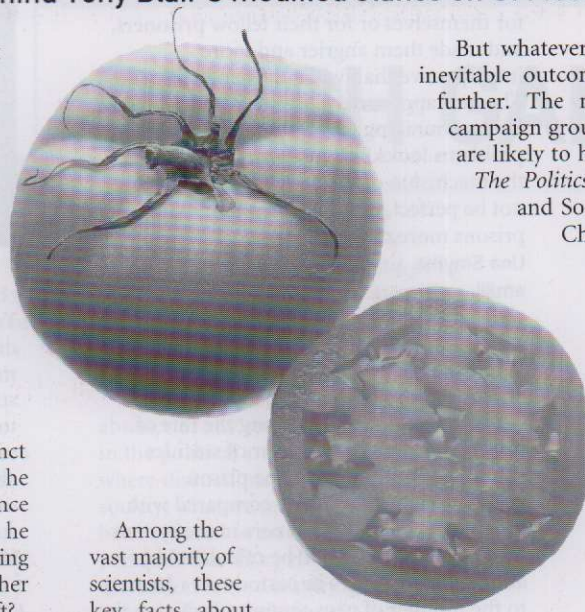
The New Labour government is 'not pro- nor anti-GM food'. This statement, delivered by Tony Blair on the eve of an influential OECD conference at the end of February, underlined a fresh start to the GM debate. Blair highlighted the participation of Dr Arpad Pusztai in the conference, 'whose research helped fuel the controversy over GM foods', as well as the important role to be played by consumer and environmental groups 'in ensuring we reach the right answers' (*Independent on Sunday*, 27 February).

Blair's comments amount to a distinct change of tone. Whereas in the past he proudly proclaimed his support for science and technology, including biotechnology, he now seeks to present the government as being above the fray—a facilitator of debate rather than an advocate for one side. Why the shift?

Blair states that GM is a 'new technology' and that 'there is no doubt' that 'there is potential for harm'. But the best evidence we have suggests otherwise. The technology is not so new. Recombinant DNA technology (the characteristic feature of GM that allows DNA from different sources to be joined or 'recombined') has a 30-year history. The first field trials of GM crops began in 1987 and some 15 000 field trials were conducted in the following nine years before they were eventually grown commercially in 1996.

Experience and science suggest that GM foods pose no greater danger to human health than do conventional ones. As the OECD conference rapporteurs noted, 'many consumers eat GM foods and no significant effects have been detected on human health'. The work of Dr Pusztai, which apparently supported the idea that there might be something inherent in the process of genetic modification that could generate undetectable and dangerous new substances, has been discredited.

The notion that genetically modified crops pose a specific threat to the environment is not based on any scientifically grounded fact. Rather, this notion reflects how sensitive we have become to the possibility of having a detrimental impact on any other organism. For example, last year one isolated laboratory study suggesting that maize genetically engineered to produce Bt toxin (a naturally occurring toxin used by organic farmers to control insect pests) might be harmful to the Monarch butterfly was enough to generate front-page headlines about the dangers of GM crops. A similar anxiety, with little scientific basis, has surrounded the potential impact of GM crops on UK 'farmland birds' (see 'Strictly for the birds', *LM*, December 1999/January 2000).



Among the vast majority of scientists, these key facts about GM food are not in dispute. But the government's shift in attitude towards GM crops does not come from any new evidence about the dangers of GM, or even a wilful attempt to ignore the evidence that exists. Tony Blair's comments mark a shift in political tactics, away from strong statements of leadership and towards the more obsequious strategy of inclusion.

A *Financial Times* editorial during the OECD conference argued that supporters of GM 'must reach an accommodation with their more moderate critics'. Otherwise 'the tide of opposition will sweep away even the chance of carrying out research into GM crops' ('Engineering a genetic consensus', 29 February). This seems to be exactly the approach Blair is pursuing. Having failed to win the political arguments for the benefits of human innovation in the form of GM food, it appears that the government now believes the only way forward is negotiation with all sides of the debate. The hope is that negotiation will be a more successful strategy than confrontation, eventually allowing the application of GM technology to proceed with the approval of influential interest groups.

**FACED WITH A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE THE GOVERNMENT SITS ON THE FENCE**

But whatever the intention of the inclusion strategy, the inevitable outcome will be to marginalise scientific evidence further. The more that the unsubstantiated anxieties of campaign groups are taken into account, the more sway they are likely to hold. For example, take the high-profile report *The Politics of GM Food*, published by the Economic and Social Research Council's Global Environmental Change Programme in October 1999. According to the report, 'Many "ordinary" people demonstrate a thorough grasp of issues such as uncertainty: if anything, the public are ahead of many scientists and policy advisers in their instinctive feeling for a need to act in a precautionary way'. The inference is that the instinctive views of the public are an equally, if not more, valid guide to policy decisions as thousands of years of research and careful evaluation.

Even at the pragmatic level of cooling the debate on GM food, this new inclusive strategy might not work. By not confronting directly the erroneous science upon which the complaints of GM's critics are founded, the critics' true concerns—which are often to do with broader societal issues, not GM food specifically—remain confused. This allows groups to negotiate with representatives of government and industry without having to argue coherently for what precisely their position is, and the consequences it might have. Meanwhile, those who accept that it is legitimate for the public to have concerns about GM technology but attempt to explain why the concerns are unfounded are all too easily dismissed as arrogant and elitist, for daring even to challenge the public's views.

Ultimately, what Tony Blair's comments reflect is an abdication of leadership by the government. Faced with a controversial issue, it chooses to sit on the fence and let matters take their course. As a result, the prime minister has marked out the debate about GM food as an argument it can never hope to win.

Sir John Krebs (chairman designate of the future Food Standards Agency and a well-respected scientist) concluded the OECD conference by promoting the need for continuing dialogue in the form of an 'International Consultative Panel on GM Foods'. The nature of the process requires him to continue the negotiation until an accommodation is eventually reached. This is likely to be a long and uncertain process, which will achieve a delicate and provisional consensus at best. Far better if the government had stuck to its guns on the science, facilitating a rational and open debate about its possible applications and about the social arrangements under which it might flourish. ●



# LM Mail

## WHAT BLOCKBUSTERS?

I am intrigued by the idea that the Holocaust has 'become the stuff of Hollywood blockbusters' ('Exploiting the Holocaust', Mick Hume, February 2000). Presumably you refer to *Schindler's List*—a film that cost a great deal less than the average Hollywood movie, ran for three hours and fifteen minutes, and was shot in black and white. Hardly blockbuster stuff. There was, incidentally, only one other movie from Hollywood on this subject: *Sophie's Choice*, and that was about 15 years ago. I presume you also refer to the fact that Steven Spielberg—who does have some association with blockbusters—is the founder of a major project to record the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. In three years, this organisation—the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation—has recorded more than 50 000 interviews with survivors, and these will be made available to a variety of institutions and schools around the world.

The foundation has now extended its activities to the area of education in tolerance, and deals with more recent genocidal activity both in Europe and Africa, with the extermination of the native American population, and with the systematic persecution and murder of gypsies and homosexuals during the Holocaust. It does not seek to equate more recent atrocities with the Nazi Holocaust.

I agree with many of the points you make in your piece, but it is a pity that you gladly dispose of a very worthwhile effort in what seems to me a thoughtless throwaway line.

Gerry Lewis

Shoah Foundation UK

## JAIL BAIT

Brendan O'Neill says 'hard labour would be better' than the new 'healthy' prisons ('Prisons of the mind', March 2000). While I can see that this was an attempt to close his article in a catchy way, I think it is an ignorant sentiment. Thousands and thousands of prisoners have suffered under hard labour over the past decades and we should recognise that, while not perfect, prison life has improved immeasurably since those times. Even to suggest a return to what can legitimately be called the 'bad old days' is irresponsible.

O'Neill cannot deny that the way in which prisoners were herded together in the past (and still are in some institutions) led to what reformers describe as a 'macho culture'. Men were made to share cells for whole days at a time and were often left to fend for themselves in a hostile environment. This meant that prisoners developed a hostility which was not useful either

for themselves or for their fellow prisoners, and made them angrier and more introspective than when they entered prison. The new approach of listening to prisoners and encouraging them to share their problems looks like an attempt to get over the machismo of the past. As I say, it might not be perfect, but it is a step to making prisons more civilised.

Una Smythe  
email

While I agree with the main thrust of the article 'Prisons of the mind' by Brendan O'Neill, even he is overstating the rate of prison suicides. The number of suicides should not be set against the prison population, but should be compared with the total number of prisoners in the system over a year. This should be calculated by adding the prisoners in custody on 1 January to the number of new committals during the subsequent 12 months.

S McNeill  
Belfast

## SMOKESCREEN

Brid Hehir's article on cot death ('Guilt-tripping parents', March 2000) is proof once more that when doctors have a problem they fall back on the tired formula: 'blame the smoker.' The *Lancet's* report on the national Confidential Enquiry into Stillbirths and Deaths in Infancy stated the following: 'Further multi-variate analysis showed that neither the sex of the infant nor maternal smoking had any significant effect on the odds ratio given in the table.' (18 March 1995)

But there does seem to be one reason for deaths in infancy: the practice of putting babies to sleep on their stomachs. This doesn't seem the normal thing to do, babies don't do it naturally, and it's not what our mothers or grandmothers did. But it was done because in 1970 doctors decided it was a good idea and for 20 years all the experts recommended it. A medical report published in March 1993 stated: 'Like bushfire the fashionable message spread that all babies were safest in this sleeping position even though the studies were on premature babies only....But through the 1970s and 80s most doctors and midwives rigidly advised sleeping on the front. "It would have been heresy not to", said one.'

For the 20-year period during which this advice was given, cot deaths ran at up to 1500 a year. After a widely publicised campaign against it, they have now dropped by 70 percent or more. How many of the former cot deaths were caused by expert advice?

## WE WELCOME READERS' VIEWS AND CRITICISMS

Write to The Editor, LM  
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Letters may be edited for clarity and length

Yet there has never been any official discussion of this, and medical writers never mention it. Instead the unproven risk of smoking is dragged up once more. Why try to blame parents for what at least some experts deny is a cause, and say nothing about the harm done on the advice of other experts not so long ago?

Judith Hatton, co-author, *Murder a Cigarette*  
Middlesex

## WHITE SPACES, GREY AREAS

Though I can find much to agree with in Mike Small's comments ('Imposing cultural white space', March 2000), especially given the apparent similarities between Scotland and Ireland (and I'm not just talking about Gaelic), I must respond to one of his ideas.

As a practising visual artist who places himself within the continuity of the modernist and humanist traditions, I am not sure that modernism can be accused of promoting cultural 'white space'. In fact, this seems to stem largely from postmodern (mis-) interpretations of the modernist project. If Small still aspires to a 'socialist universalism', he is more likely to find common ground in modernism (which, like Marxian socialism, derived from the Enlightenment) than from the competing vision—postmodernism, which in its blancmange-like relativism reduces all cultures to the same level. Postmodernity may pay lip service to 'multiculturalism', but the effect is nothing other than levelling down.

Jason Walsh  
Belfast

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Jennie Bristow

## BEACH GAMES

RICHARD, LEONARDO DICAPRIO'S character in *The Beach*, is a young backpacker travelling through Thailand like thousands of others, yet desperate to be unique. As Danny Boyle's film of Alex Garland's novel expertly brings out, Richard could be anybody. According to Tom Griffiths, founder of the Gap Year Travel Company, more than 30 000 British 18-year olds would have taken a year working or holidaying abroad in 1999. And that's not to mention the graduates who take gap years between university and work, the twenty- or thirtysomethings who take time out of their jobs to travel the world, or the Americans, Europeans and Antipodeans who join the trail to far-flung places. If you haven't 'been travelling' today, it seems, you haven't lived.

Why has the travelling bug become so infectious? A popular argument is simply that, nowadays, travelling is so easy to do. It's not just that there are more modes of transport to more places at ever-cheaper prices. Changes in people's work and family lives enable them to have experiences that previous generations could only ever have dreamed about. People start work later, settle down later, have kids later; and are more able to work their time around flexible employment patterns and portfolio careers. That these changes open up new opportunities is something to celebrate. But do these new opportunities mean wider horizons?

Richard's search for 'the beach' leads him to an inaccessible island of untouched, unparalleled beauty. He is welcomed into a small community of Western travellers who have settled there, jealously guarding it as a secret from the rest of the world. They fish, eat, and play football and cricket; and it is here, at first, that Richard finds his 'vocation'—the endless pursuit of fun. This is the vocation shared by all Richard's doppelgangers currently wandering around Thailand and India, Australia and South America. Whether they are hiking round Asia or waitressing their way from Sydney to the Great Barrier Reef, travelling seems to be less about broadening your horizons than keeping them constantly on the move.

So what? Surely nobody could be so priggish as to argue that an 18-year old should reject months of aimless fun abroad in order to settle down responsibly in a seminar or

stable job. But what the travelling bug indicates is not so much the attraction of exciting new opportunities abroad as the absence of many opportunities for finding fulfilment through your life at home.

As Frank Furedi explains on page 14, the absence of any competing visions or big ideas in the political arena has led to a situation where discussions of what might be good for society, what we might be able to change, has been reduced to an obsession with trivia and personalities. The petty character of this discussion fails to inspire even the most hardened political animal—let alone an idealistic teenager. But without politics, the only place you have to make a difference is in your own personal life. And even here,

### THE EXCITEMENT OF TRAVELLING IS PRETTY LOW-KEY

the search for fulfilment is arguably becoming more difficult to realise.

From work to family relationships, aspects of life that were once assumed to be taken for granted tend now to be seen as flexible, insecure and temporary. And when taking a long-term view on anything from your career to your lover is perceived as inadvisable—if indeed desirable—the allure of 'the beach' is not difficult to understand. Travelling provides the opportunity to meet as many different people as possible, have as many different experiences as possible and, through the thrill of immediate exploration, to push any desire for a longer-term sense of achievement to the back of the holiday album. The downside is that, in the scheme of things, the excitement of travelling is pretty low-key. And you have to come home at the end of it.

Of course, there are those who vehemently reject the notion that travelling is like playing,

and see 'tourist' as the biggest insult they ever might face. Sometimes known as *eco-tourists*, these are the travellers whose search is for the 'authentic experience' of nature untouched and unsullied by human hands; who despise the native populations they patronise no less than the other Western tourists they openly condemn. While Boyle's film *The Beach* ridicules Richard's childish vocation—the endless pursuit of fun—these more earnest travellers bear the brunt of its attacks.

As Richard's time in the community passes, the group's leader Sal—a despotic blonde who speaks the Queen's English—betrays the worst excesses of an idealist committed to a depopulated landscape. So strong is her determination to keep 'the beach' for the community alone, she refuses to summon medical help when one of the group's members is savaged in a shark attack. And so savage is her commitment to the myth of group harmony that she banishes the groaning, dying man to a tent in the woods, so that nobody will be forced to face the consequences of their inhumane behaviour.

This may be an extreme depiction of an eco-tourist—and it is no wonder *The Beach* has upset more than a few people. But you don't have to take Sal as your model to see the contradictions in the eco-tourist ideal. As Joe Cummings, author of the *Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand*, puts it: 'The contradiction: if you're a Westerner, and you're there, then your chosen spot is already "polluted". You're polluting it.' Too right. The very notion that the ideal travelling experience is one with no people in it not only displays a disturbingly contemptuous attitude to human society. It is also unrealisable. And as *The Beach* brings out, attempts to realise such an ideal can have some vicious, barbaric consequences.

Joe Cummings argues that 'if you're looking for authentic Thailand, and having a hard time locating it, don't blame your guidebook. Blame your own imagination'. It's a message worth taking on board. From work to play, from home to abroad, in many ways we have more opportunities than ever before to lead fulfilling, exciting lives. But if our motivation for engaging with these opportunities is a desire to escape—from the pressures of your own ambition or from the rest of human society—we are unlikely to gain more than snapshots and suntans. There is more to life than the endless pursuit of fun. ●



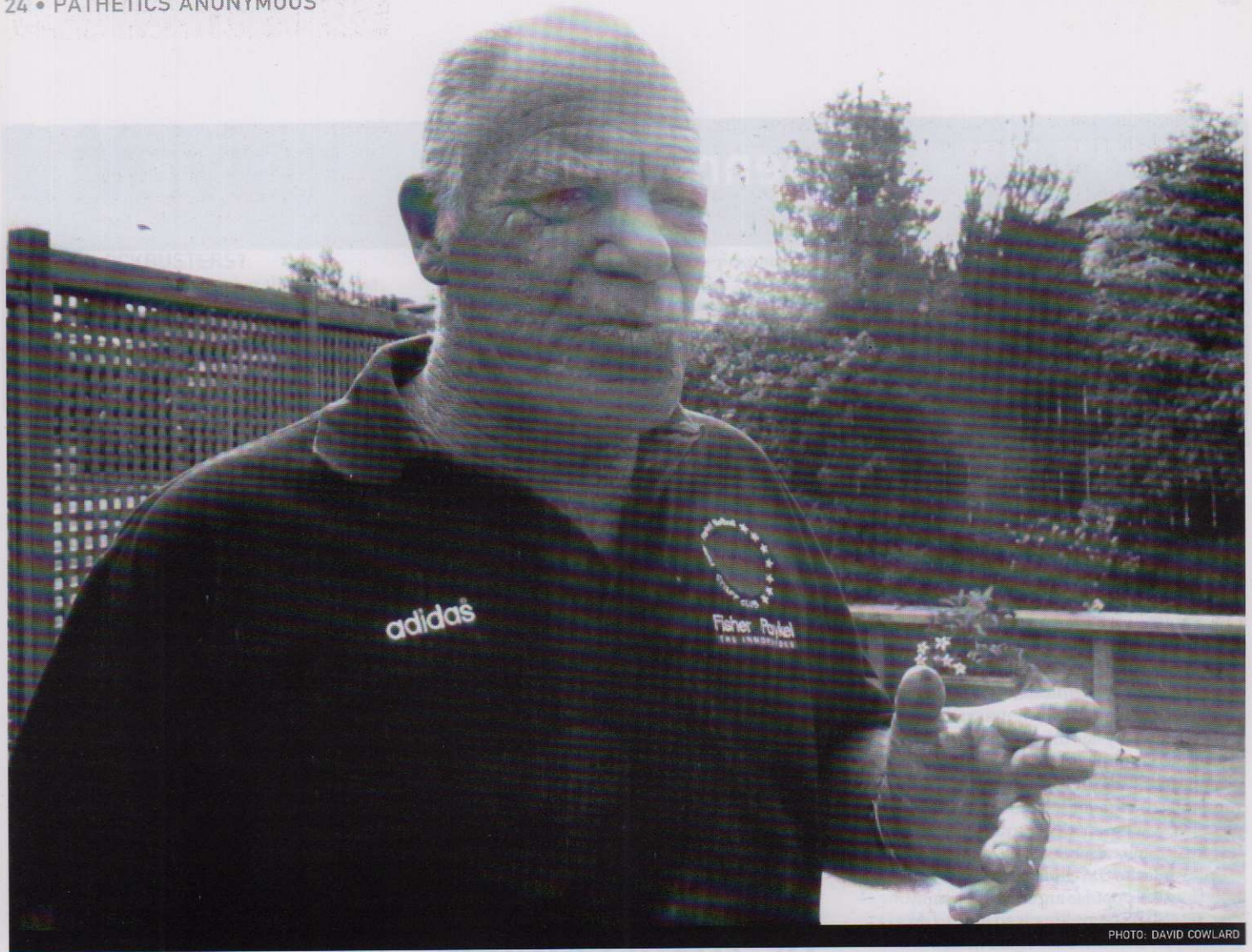


PHOTO: DAVID COWLARD

# ADDICTION ADDICTS

The tendency to see addiction in everything from smoking to shopping is a morbid social symptom, argues Dr Michael Fitzpatrick

**M**ost smokers do not continue to smoke out of choice, but because they are addicted to nicotine.' This statement appeared in the latest edition of *Smoking and Health*, the report by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) that launched the public campaign against smoking in the early 1960s. Whereas earlier editions had characterised smoking as a bad habit, the February 2000 version, bluntly titled *Nicotine Addiction in Britain*, claims that smokers are in the grip of a chemical dependency. The turnaround reflects a significant shift in the war against tobacco, and a confirmation of the current status of the concept of addiction.

According to the RCP report, its recognition of the addictive character of nicotine was a result of new researches in psychopharmacology, involving biochemical and behavioural studies in animals and

humans. It seems probable that a greater influence was the growing popularity of notions of addiction in society more generally. The report conducted a detailed comparison of nicotine with heroin, cocaine, alcohol and caffeine, and concluded that nicotine was a 'highly addictive drug'—by some criteria more so than some of these notorious drugs of abuse. Though this comparison was designed to reinforce the pernicious character of nicotine, it also implicitly undermined the wider concept of addiction. After all, if millions of people have managed to quit smoking and overcome the demon nicotine, perhaps the grip of heroin and cocaine is not quite the overwhelming compulsion it is often made out to be.

For anti-smoking campaigners, labelling nicotine as addictive is crucial to their challenge to the tobacco industry's insistence

on 'consumer sovereignty'—the freedom of the individual to choose whether or not to buy cigarettes. As the RCP put it, 'if smoking and nicotine are addictive, the argument that the individual adult consumer has the right to choose to purchase and use tobacco products, and that the tobacco industry has the right to continue to supply them, is difficult to sustain'. If the smoker is the victim of a chemical dependency, and cigarettes are delivery systems for this chemical, then the government should regulate the supply and distribution of cigarettes as it would any other dangerous drug.

But though the anti-smoking lobby plays up its offensive against the tobacco industry, its real threat is to the status of the individual and to civil liberties. If people who smoke—more than a quarter of the adult population—are defined as being in a state



of drug addiction and are considered, as a result, to be incapable of making rational decisions, then the state is justified in taking ever-greater control over their behaviour.

Over the past decade a sense of heightened individual vulnerability has fostered a climate in which people are more and more inclined to attribute responsibility for their behaviour to somebody—or something—outside themselves. Thus adults attribute their difficulties in relationships to emotional traumas inflicted on them in early childhood by their parents, students blame their teachers for their poor performance in exams, and everybody seeks compensation from somebody else for their misfortunes. In this climate, the concept of addiction—the idea that a substance or activity can produce a compulsion to act that is beyond the individual's self-control—has a powerful resonance. The notion of the individual as an independent person who decides his or her destiny has given way to a more diminished interpretation of autonomy, as the pathology of addiction provides a new standard for determining behaviour.

Alcoholism provides the model of a disease defined by uncontrollable behaviour, which can readily be adapted to other activities deemed to be compulsive. The American critic of addiction Stanton Peele observes that 'there are an awful lot of things that people do that they know they shouldn't, or that they regret doing more of than they want to'. However, 'once this pattern has been defined as a disease, almost anything can be treated as a medical problem'. Whereas the struggle to medicalise alcoholism raged for more than a century, the extension of the disease model of addiction, first from alcohol to heroin and tobacco, and then to gambling, shopping and sex, has taken place over only a few years.

Though there were attempts to advance a disease theory of alcoholism from the end of the eighteenth century, the medical model made little headway against the powerful forces of religion and temperance until after the Second World War. During this period the conception of excessive drinking as a moral problem, as a vice demanding punishment, remained ascendant over the notion of alcoholism as a disease requiring treatment. It was not until the 1950s and 60s, as the influence of religion declined and that of medicine increased, that the 'disease concept of alcoholism' gradually gained acceptance. In 1977 the World Health Organisation adopted the term 'alcohol dependence syndrome', reflecting the new emphasis on 'chemical dependency' as the underlying pathology. By the 1980s, programmes of 'detoxification' and 'rehabilitation' under the control of the medical and psychiatric professions became the established forms of treating the problems of alcoholism.

The establishment of medical jurisdiction over opiate, specifically heroin, addiction was more straightforward, for a number of

reasons. First, until the 1960s it was a marginal problem: according to one account, 'there were so few heroin addicts in Britain that nearly all of them were known personally to the Home Office Drugs Branch Inspectorate'. Second, most of these were 'anxious middle-aged professional people' (indeed many were doctors or nurses) who were not regarded as a threat to society. Third, heroin, a synthetic opiate first introduced (for its non-addictive qualities!) in 1895, was a prescription drug, with a 'medical' means of administration, the hypodermic syringe. Thus in 1926 the Rolleston report firmly defined heroin addiction as a disease and inaugurated the 'British system' of medical supervision. In the USA a more prohibitionist approach continued to criminalise heroin, with the effect, as in the sphere of alcohol, of encouraging illicit supply networks.

It was not until the 1970s and 80s that heroin abuse became identified as a significant social problem, now associated with an 'underclass' of alienated and marginalised youth. This resulted in some tension between the medical profession and the criminal justice system as the civil authorities insisted on tighter methods of regulation, as well as imposing harsher penalties on users and dealers. The penal and medical approaches subsequently converged in the methadone maintenance programmes of the 1990s.

The key factor in enabling the concept of addiction to extend beyond dependence on chemical substances was the emergence in the

dependence on a pathological relationship with another person, a substance, or any 'processes external to the individual'.

Co-dependants are believed to experience 'a pattern of painful dependence on compulsive behaviours and on approval from others in an attempt to find safety, self-worth and identity'. As Steadman Rice observes in *A Disease of One's Own*, this is a concept of 'virtually limitless applicability' and it was not surprising to find it extending to cover, not only familiar bad habits, but even fads about novelties such as the internet, mobile phones and the national lottery (all of which were linked with media scare stories about new forms of addiction in the late 1990s). The inevitable result was inflated estimates of the numbers of victims of various addictions: one (US) estimate reckoned that co-dependency afflicted 'approximately 96 percent of the population'. The British advocacy group Action on Addiction claims that 'almost every one of us has either experienced some form of addiction or knows someone who has'. With typically British modesty it settles for the assertion that 'in fact, one in three adults suffers from some form of addiction'.

While co-dependency expanded the concept of addiction to cover diverse personal and social problems, there was also a surge in the popularity of biological theories of addiction. Developments in genetics (not only a 'gene for alcoholism', but also a 'promiscuity gene'), advances in the study of neurotransmitters (endorphins, serotonin, dopamine) and the speculations of evolutionary psychologists have all been

## ONE AMERICAN ESTIMATE RECKONED THAT CO-DEPENDENCY AFFLICTED 'APPROXIMATELY 96 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION'

USA of the 'co-dependency' movement. The roots of this movement (the subject of a penetrating study by John Steadman Rice) lie in the 'Twelve Step' recovery programme popularised by Alcoholics Anonymous. (Founded in Ohio in 1935, AA became widely established in the USA and internationally in the postwar period.) Though groups concerned with the special problems of the spouses and families of alcoholics had long run in parallel with the mainstream AA meetings, in the 1980s there was a dramatic proliferation of such groups. They now rapidly expanded to include 'survivors' of other forms of victimisation (domestic violence, sexual abuse) and victims of other forms of addiction, such as gambling, shopping and sex. The central claim of this movement was that 'co-dependency' was a disease, an addiction, characterised by

recruited to explain the remarkable grip of compulsions and addictions on individuals in modern society. The crude biological determinism apparent in such attempts to establish a direct link of causality that extends from embryonic DNA, through the structure and function of the brain to the individual personality and social behaviour, reflects the profoundly fatalistic outlook that underlies the concept of addiction. If human behaviour is 'hard wired' into our genes and hormones, then the scope for individual autonomy and self-control is drastically curtailed.

Nowadays, the drug which has played a key role in the popularisation of the concept of addiction is one which was not considered addictive at all before the 1980s—tobacco. In a chapter devoted to 'the smoking habit', the second edition of the RCP report on *Smoking and Health* in 1971 acknowledged



discussion of 'pharmacological dependence' on nicotine. Its general tone was dismissive: 'evidence that the difficulty that many smokers find in giving up the habit is due to habituation to nicotine is scanty.' The view that smoking was a habit which could be broken was confirmed by the subsequent decline in smoking. However, a hard core of smokers remained and studies of various techniques to encourage them to quit, using everything from behavioural and psychodynamic therapies to hypnosis and acupuncture, showed disappointing results. In the course of the 1980s, the recognition of nicotine addiction offered an explanation of the difficulty experienced by some in breaking the smoking habit. It also allowed the convergence of different forms of dependence in the concept of 'substance abuse'.

If smokers were addicted to nicotine, then they needed treatment. Indeed they needed

'nicotine replacement therapy', a formulation paying ironic homage to the use of hormone replacement therapy in post-menopausal women. However, it was not until 1998 that an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* called for 'nicotine replacement therapy for a healthier nation'—and proposed that it should be made available on prescription. This demand was issued with the full authority of a 'systematic review' claiming to demonstrate its efficacy. But patients were only followed up for 6-12 months, so whether the effect is sustained remains unknown—as does whether this approach would also be effective when extended to a wider, and inevitably less motivated, population. Nevertheless, the nicotine replacement bandwagon was on the roll that brought it to the recent endorsement of the Royal College of Physicians, having overcome its scepticism of 30 years earlier.

Whether the discussion is about tobacco or drugs, sex or shopping, the inflation of addiction is a morbid social symptom, assiduously promoted by the therapeutic entrepreneurs of the worlds of counselling and therapy and by the cults of self-help, personal growth and victim support. It encourages people to regard themselves as passive victims of external forces, of demonised 'substances' or 'toxic' relationships, even of their own biology. The widespread acceptance of this outlook is all the more remarkable if you consider the extent to which it contradicts most people's experience. As Stanton Peele writes, 'people regularly quit smoking, cut back drinking, lose weight, improve their health, create healthy love relationships, raise strong and happy children and contribute to communities and combat wrong—all without expert intervention'.

# SAD AND MAD IN SCOTLAND

The biggest single supplier of drugs to addicts in Britain is the state. This does not happen through some fiendish scheme involving secret agents shuttling between Thailand and the streets of our inner cities, but through local GPs and specialist centres who supply addicts with methadone, a synthetic substitute for heroin. Many, if not most, of the people who die from drug overdoses have at least some methadone in their systems. And this is called drug treatment.

If you look at addiction as more than simply a chemical phenomenon, which it surely is, then it is arguable that methadone is even more addictive than heroin. It is certainly easier to be addicted to a substance that is provided legally, free of charge and at regular hours than it is to depend on an illegal and expensive drug supplied by dangerous criminals and unreliable fellow junkies. A methadone habit is addiction without the hard work. Drug treatment can take an occasional drugs dabbler and turn him into a fully fledged junky in a matter of weeks. So what ever happened to the idea that drug addicts simply have to stop taking drugs?

The current orthodoxy on drug addiction is that it is a problem that can never be solved, only managed. In 1998 the government published *Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain*, a 10-year strategy for tackling drugs misuse. One of the four aims of the strategy is 'treatment', with the key objective to 'increase participation of problem drug misusers, including prisoners, in drug treatment programmes which have a positive

by Dolan Cummings

impact on health and crime'. There is no mention of recovery or abstinence here. Moral condemnation of drug use is replaced by a pragmatic concern for the harmful consequences it has for everybody else. And even the most virulent spokespeople of the 'just say no' lobby now cave into this argument.

In the mid-1990s, the Conservative government won all-party backing for a high-profile anti-drugs campaign in Scotland, and as a figurehead, Scotland Against Drugs employed a straight-down-the-line abstentionist in David Macauley, an Edinburgh chemist with the looks and political convictions of a rugby player. Macauley soon fell out with the various agencies in direct contact with young drug users. This was at the time that ecstasy was a big news story, and most agencies were opting for a harm reduction approach—accepting that the kids would do the drug despite its illegality, but offering advice on how to reduce the risks. Macauley was having none of it. He accused the agencies of throwing the towel in on the nation's youth, and spent some time raging against harm reduction—before adding his own towel to the pile by resigning his commission. If Scotland Against Drugs finally lived up to its acronym, however, the softly-softly approach was by no means universally accepted.

On the streets of Cranhill, a fairly drug-

ravaged part of Glasgow, an equally unfortunately acronymed campaign was born. Mothers Against Drugs organised angry demonstrations demanding action against local drug dealers and also criticising the methadone programme. Henry McLeish, then a Scottish Office minister and now a leading member of the Scottish Executive, is a kind of Scottish Jack Straw, and accordingly he makes David Macauley look like a hippy. He was in Cranhill faster than it takes to score there, offering support and having his picture taken. Nobody could be tougher on drugs than McLeish, and yet soon after his visit, MAD dropped its opposition to methadone. It also began receiving government funding. Meanwhile, Calton Athletic, the celebrated drugs recovery group whose boss is a fierce critic of the methadone programme, lost its funding. That was pretty tough.

If you see drug addiction as a problem that can never be solved, and drugs as a habit that addicts can never kick, the methadone programmes make some sense. After all, at least a methadone junky is less likely to be a shoplifter as well. But whatever else methadone programmes achieve they will not help addicts get off drugs. And that, surely, should be the main concern of anybody worried about the wasted lives of addicts.

In some Islamic countries alcohol is available if you present yourself as an alcoholic in need of help. By consolidating a similar approach to drugs in Britain, the authorities rob users of that final grain of independence that, ultimately, is their only hope of regaining control of their lives.



## AN ENGLISHWOMAN IN WASHINGTON

Helen Searls

# Primary colours



The party faithful have selected their men, and the anointed sons—Al Gore and George W Bush—will go forward to the presidential election this November. But for the rest of America, it seems that the most lively part of the 2000 presidential race is already over.

This year's presidential primaries grabbed the attention of a surprising number of ordinary people. First Bill Bradley, running for the Democrat nomination, and then the Republican contender Senator John McCain generated some real interest in the selection process and support for the candidates. Rated as a rank outsider last year, Bill Bradley started to attract campaigners who were totally new to politics. Suddenly he was ahead of Al Gore

hard pushed to recall any of McCain's actual policies or proposals. Commentators explain the appeal as boiling down to 'McCain: the man and his story'. And yes, McCain is certainly a colourful character in the grey world of US politics. He is presented as a hero for the suffering he endured during his years in captivity during the Vietnam War, and is famous for letting rip and speaking his mind to all-comers. But it was only when McCain presented himself as the maverick outsider of US politics that his campaign for the Republican nomination really took off.

McCain's campaign unleashed an anti-political/anti-politician bandwagon that surprised even McCain himself. He rightly saw his support as bigger than himself, or

the Republican nomination. But this does not mean that the sentiment behind his popularity disappeared. George W Bush's triumph over McCain is simply a timely reminder that the Republican leadership is made up of an essentially conservative crowd who are living in the past. The Grand Old Party's selection of Bush as the 'chosen one' many months ago was about settling old battles with Clinton, rather than any attempt to address the present needs of a Republican Party that has lost its way.

Nonetheless, McCain: the man and his story will have a lasting impact on US politics. Despite his defeat some commentators are of the opinion that the McCain campaign was good for the democratic process in general, as he managed to engage and mobilise notoriously disinterested American voters—even those who have never even voted in a general election. But it is doubtful that McCain did much for democracy. His promise to take so-called special interests out of politics can only discredit all genuine political activism.

And as for McCain's impact on the Grand Old Party, some Republicans and a few Washington think tanks believe that the McCain candidacy was good for the Republicans. They argue that McCain injected new blood and some reforming zeal into the party. But even from a Republican perspective, it is hard to see McCain's candidacy in such a positive light. Before the primaries, Republicans in Washington used to boast that George W Bush was rich, unbeatable and unstoppable. But by scrapping with McCain, Bush has now significantly depleted his war chest and looks tarnished and sleazy. Far from boosting the Republican's fortunes, McCain's lasting legacy to the Republican Party might just be to have defeated or damaged all the candidates in the presidential race except Al Gore. The irony is that, by leaving Gore as the only man standing at the end of the scrap, McCain might have helped ensure that the next president of America is the biggest 'Washington insider' of them all. ●

## McCain was the favoured outsider

in polls of Democrat voters. Bradley's campaign only withered as McCain grabbed the political spotlight, and people looking for an outsider candidate flocked to his camp. In the nine states where McCain actively campaigned, voter turnout in the primaries reached record highs. McCain managed to appeal across the old political spectrum to Republicans, Democrats and independents (all of whom could vote in certain Republican primaries). Before Super Tuesday derailed his battle bus—the 'Straight Talk Express'—many voters and political commentators talked of a new political movement sweeping the nation.

What was this excitement all about? The McCain phenomenon was not a new political movement at all: if anything, it was the opposite. Before this election McCain was an unremarkable Republican senator with an unremarkable conservative voting record. Even recently, his campaign was not galvanised by any clear issues—indeed, when interviewed during the election most of his supporters were

than any candidate. Despite being a long-time Republican senator, McCain became the favoured outsider because of two significant moves he made during the election. His promise to take on the 'iron triangle', as he called it, of politics, money and special interests, singled him out as the anti-Washington/anti-sleaze candidate. His famous statement 'I will never lie to you' gave him the appearance of moral stature and virtue among his decadent political colleagues.

But the sentiment McCain unleashed could just as easily be attached to another candidate. For a short while last year it seemed that Bill Bradley, as a popular ex-basketball star and another champion of campaign finance reform, might assume the maverick mantle. It was really only his dodgy heart and his attachment to old-style welfare politics that let him down. In this sense McCain supporters were not really propelled by 'McCain: the man and his story'. Rather, they were repelled by politics, Washington and all that goes with it.

In the end, of course, McCain lost



# TABOOS

Ann Bradley is struck by the absurdity of the government's consultation on smacking

## A walloping bad idea

*PROTECTING CHILDREN, SUPPORTING Parents*, the recently issued consultation document on the physical punishment of children, is the government's long-awaited response to arguments for a law against smacking. Its coy title reflects the trepidation New Labour clearly feels about getting involved in this issue. Launching the consultation, health minister John Hutton proclaimed that the government 'must recognise the rights of parents to exercise their parental responsibility and bring up children safely, and as they think best, without undue interference from the state, while the rights of children are protected'. The profiling of support for parents is clearly intended to diffuse criticism that the government is preparing to ride roughshod over parents' rights to raise their children as they think fit.

One can understand the government's caution. It is caught between children's rights campaigners baying for more child protection, and public opinion. Opinion polls commissioned to inform policy suggest that the public is overwhelmingly in favour of parents' right to use physical punishment when they feel it to be necessary. Eighty-eight percent of respondents to an Omnibus Survey for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) thought that it was sometimes necessary to smack a naughty child, while only eight percent disagreed.

And the consultation on smacking was not entirely of the government's own volition. Rather, it was the result of a decision by the European Commission on Human Rights, following its 1998 ruling that UK law failed to provide adequate protection of children. The verdict had concerned a messy case in which a boy had been 'severely and repeatedly beaten' by his stepfather. The stepfather was acquitted by a jury, after he argued a common law defence of 'lawful correction' and 'reasonable chastisement'. An application was made on behalf of the child to the European Commission on Human Rights, on the basis that his injuries showed a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman degrading treatment.'

The government has been under some pressure from children's rights agencies like the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to introduce legislation banning corporal punishment by parents altogether. Since the European ruling, campaigners have repeatedly insisted that it is absurd for a man to be

arrested for smacking his wife but not for hitting his children. Furthermore, NCB argues that physical punishment is an ineffective means of teaching children good behaviour, serving instead to reinforce the notion that violence is acceptable. In January, the *Times* reported that support for a national ban on smacking is so strong that 200 organisations have formed an alliance to push it through.

The government has responded to this by indicating firmly that the way forward is not to make smacking and other forms of physical rebuke unlawful, and its consultation paper explicitly rules out this possibility. It seems that, on this issue, the government accepts that there is 'a commonsense distinction' to be made between 'the sort of mild physical rebuke which occurs in most families' and 'the beating of children'. Quite so! However, the government also believes that 'the law needs to be clarified to make sure that it properly reflects this commonsense distinction'. And this is where the trouble begins.

## DO WE REALLY NEED A LAW TO TELL US THAT CAUSING BRAIN DAMAGE TO CHILDREN IS UNREASONABLE?

'Are there any forms of physical punishment which should never be defended as "reasonable"?', the document asks. It then suggests that 'physical punishment which causes, or is likely to cause, injury to the head (including injuries to the brain, ears and eyes)' might be a sensible option. Or 'physical punishment using implements (eg, canes, slippers, belts)'. Convenient as these types of definitions may seem, in practical terms they are useless. We might all agree that it is unreasonable for parents to cause injury to the head—but should minor damage to a child's head count so much more than gross damage to his or her feet or hands? Once you start listing unacceptable injuries it is possible to go on forever. Do we really need a law to tell us that causing brain damage is unreasonable? Surely all but the most hopeless elements of society have a sense of what is unreasonable

physical punishment? And why the fascination with implements? It is possible to do as much harm with a fist as with a slipper.

The issue about physical punishment is not which part of the body is struck or with what, but the manner in which the 'chastisement' is conducted. Physical punishment cannot be examined or appraised separate from the context in which it occurs. This is why discussions of the abstract notion of whether this or that form of punishment is acceptable in principle seem so remote from daily life. There is any number of reasons why a parent might smack a child, from irritation to a concern for the child's welfare. How could you legislate for any of this?

Similarly, one could question why smacking comes under so much more scrutiny than other forms of 'chastisement'. The document suggests that sending a child to his or her room, keeping children 'grounded' in the house, or depriving them of something they like (such as watching TV) are more acceptable and appropriate means of disciplining

children. But says who? Many childcare books argue that a short, controlled slap is more effective and less 'damaging' than sending a child to his or her bedroom in circumstances when the child may come to associate being in bed with punishment. If we need the law to define clearly what is acceptable or not in terms of physical punishment, why not establish in law the boundaries of 'psychological punishment'? Should we next expect a consultation document on how many minutes Johnny can be confined to his room before it becomes unlawful imprisonment? This could be followed by a consultation on how many times Angela can be denied pudding before it becomes child neglect.

The argument that we need some form of legislation about smacking seems to build on two assumptions. The first is that there is a continuum between sensible smacking





and violent abuse. This betrays an insulting view of parents, implying that they are incapable of determining for themselves when punishment turns into abuse. The ONS survey showed that fewer than one percent of respondents thought it was reasonable to punish a child in such a way that leaves bruises or marks that last for a few days—even if there is no permanent injury. Only two percent thought that smacking on the head was acceptable. Does this really show a society that doesn't know how to treat its children with appropriate compassion, in need of government advice? One could assume that most people spontaneously understand the difference between appropriate, considered punishment and systematic abuse, without having to refer to a watertight legal definition. But that assumption depends on the view that people

are for the most part capable of making rational, sensible judgements—and this is a vision the government does not seem inclined to share.

The second assumption is the one voiced by children's rights campaigners: that smacking a child is like smacking a wife. But this is bizarre. It is hard to see how anybody can believe that, when a father smacks the hand of a child who reaches just one more time for the electric flex, it is a form of domestic violence. Many of the occasions on which a parent smacks a child are motivated by a desire to protect them, to teach them in no uncertain terms that running out in front of cars or knocking over a kettle of boiling water are dangerous actions, forbidden for the child's own good. The same obviously cannot be said for a man who slaps his wife to keep her in line.

In a refreshingly rare display of libertarian values, Tory backbencher Andrew Robathan brought the House of Commons to attention with a well-reasoned statement against government interference in the everyday turmoil of domestic life. To the ridicule of the *New Labour* members he argued: 'the state is **not** necessarily the best body to determine how to bring up children. A parent has more interest, cares more and loves a child more than the most dedicated social worker can.' What stops us from beating our children to within an inch of their lives is not a legal definition of 'reasonable chastisement', but our love for them and our instinctive sense of responsibility for them. The government's caution on 'smacking laws' is well founded. But even by trespassing into this domain, it demonstrates just how intrusive government interference in family life could be.



# Peer fear

Children need unsupervised time—even if this does put them at risk of playground bullying.  
says Simon Knight

Is it always 'good to talk'? Amie Salmon, a victim of several months' bullying at Glaisdale Comprehensive near Nottingham, may well not think so. After bringing her plight to the school's attention, the 13-year old was allowed to breach school rules and keep her mobile phone, so that she could summon her teacher if feeling threatened.

As you might expect, singling out an already isolated pupil for this kind of special treatment did not exactly improve Amie's situation. Can anybody spot the kid to pick on today? She'll be the one with the phone, and a teacher in tow. But as schools come under increasing pressure to stamp out bullying, school policies seem to be spinning off on increasingly bizarre trajectories. As Amie Salmon's story indicates, what look like innovative measures to tackle peer abuse can often backfire on to the victims. And for the majority of pupils, who do not suffer serious bullying, the social side of school life will be transformed.

Although bullying is as old as childhood itself, the issue of bullying is relatively new. The recommended reading list provided by the Anti-Bullying Network, an officially sponsored Scottish resource, can go back only as far as 1989, when the first British publication on bullying came out. But over this short space of time, bullying has become a central concern for schools. At the beginning of this year, the National Association of Head Teachers brought out a set of formal guidelines on how to define and deal with bullying, and schools are under pressure to demonstrate their anti-bullying credentials. When carrying out their recently introduced 'care and welfare' inspections, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools expect schools to have a policy statement which accurately describes how bullying is tackled.

But as the desire to define and wipe out bullying becomes more and more feverish, it is increasingly difficult to tell where normal childish behaviour ends and bullying begins. Kidscape, the child safety charity, includes sarcasm, teasing and spreading rumours in its definition. The Scottish Council for Research in Education says that 'bullying happens when one child tries to upset another'. Such 'everyday' actions, while potentially unpleasant, can hardly be considered problematic to the majority of school pupils. There is a danger that the focus on bullying defines problems for children where none existed before. Kilwinning Academy, near Glasgow, states in its model policy that 'bullying, no matter how apparently insignificant the incident, is serious'. Dumfries Academy, my old school, lines up name-calling and ignoring next to physical assault.

When children's squabbles are equated with serious acts of violence, normal peer relations become understood as something altogether more sinister. No longer are children 'out playing with their friends'—they are making themselves vulnerable to potential abuse. Yes, children can be cruel to each other and sometimes adults need to intervene to prevent systematic persecution. But such catchall definitions, which blur the distinction between persecution and play, risk warping all children's relationships with each other.

According to Alan Train, an expert on the subject of bullying: 'in essence, there should be no free time in school, whether in class or out of it.' The Anti-Bullying Network advocates improved supervision in 'known problem areas' and developing the playground as a 'learning environment'. If your concern is simply with eradicating bullying, such proposals seem quite sensible. But by invading the time and space that children used to have to themselves, teachers diminish the informal learning opportunities, essential for development, that existed in the past. Playtime is a space for children to engage in unstructured, self-generated activities, through which they gain independence.

Exploring, experimenting, taking decisions and developing relationships all contribute to the process of growing up.

Children's reasoning and motivation is very different when adults are around. The psychiatrist Harry Sullivan explains it like this: 'If you will look closely at one of your children when he finally finds a chum...you will discover something very different in the relationship; namely, that your child begins to develop a real sensitivity of what matters to another person...not... "what should I do to get what I want?", but instead "what should I do to contribute to the happiness or to support the prestige and feelings of worthwhileness of my chum?"' (Quoted in James Youniss, *Parents and Peers in Social Development*) Anti-bullying programmes that increase adult supervision remove the experience of unfettered conflict and kindness. Children may well act in a more civilised fashion towards one another, but 'acting' is precisely what they are doing. This is a bogus harmony, where deference and duty replace mutuality.

The current preoccupation with anti-gay bullying indicates how far the desire to create such a bogus harmony has gone. According to the *Scotsman*, Edinburgh children who taunt each other using 'homophobic' names will land themselves in 'serious trouble'. Edinburgh City Council plans to monitor and record such behaviour, in an effort to protect 'more vulnerable' pupils, and schools that are seen to be ignoring anti-gay bullying are accused of 'not helping young people to develop a concern for the welfare of minorities and a tolerance of difference'. But this kind of interference can only make playground relationships strained. How can children fail to be wary of interacting with pupils who have been identified as 'more vulnerable'? Their behaviour may well be more civil, but only because children fear the wrath of a nearby teacher. This artificial environment of wary, hammed-up courtesy can hardly be beneficial to a child with unanswered questions about his or her sexuality.

In its desperation to generate civil schools, where all the children act like responsible little adults, the anti-bullying lobby risks undermining the one route that can deliver what it dreams of. Children need their own space to develop themselves, their relationships and their attitudes. Otherwise they will only ever be playing at tolerance.

Simon Knight is a school link youth worker, working on the outskirts of Glasgow, and a researcher for Generation—Youth Issues ([www.generation.clara.net](http://www.generation.clara.net))



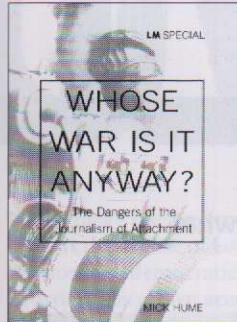


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# Culture Wars

# THE HOLL

**T**hey are what hold us back...the old elites, establishments, who have run our country too long.' When Tony Blair launched his infamous attack on the forces of conservatism at last year's Labour Party conference, you could not fail to be slightly baffled. Since Labour came to power, one of its major achievements has been the wholesale recruitment of a new political and cultural elite, which now wields more power than any number of hunters in barbour jackets or columnists for the right-wing press. And a read through Martin McElwee's *The Great and Good?: the rise of the New Class*, a new pamphlet from the Centre for Policy Studies, shows just how thoroughgoing this process of elite transition has been.

McElwee's analysis is fascinating, even just in terms of noting the sheer quantity of change. Look at the vast increase in the number of professional appointments from and into the New Class. The number of special advisers has doubled, from 38 to 74 since the last election, and the budget has doubled from £2 million to £3.9 million. Three hundred taskforces have been set up to form policy on everything from creativity to competitiveness in industry, and from literacy and numeracy to football. And that's without taking into account the number of appointments made possible through the creation of the Scottish parliament and the Welsh and regional assemblies.

But as McElwee points out, the shift from the old elite to the new is not simply, as many commentators have argued, the replacement of one brand of the establishment by another, or even just an increase in New Labour's numbers. Instead, we are witnessing something 'qualitatively different'. Take, for example, Blair's 'big tent approach', which has been one of the most successful recruitment grounds for swelling the ranks of the new elite. This new 'inclusive government' has led to many erstwhile government critics, experts and protest groups being coopted on to endless committees and working parties—'inside the tent pissing out'.

As Polly Toynbee explains, 'A large chunk of the voluntary sector and sympathisers from the professions of other organisations have been brought into the big tent, suborned and incorporated. Most are now directly in Labour's pay, sit on taskforces and think tanks or receive research funds from them' (*Guardian*, 11 February 2000). The big tent includes people despite their political affiliations. Whether it is Chris Woodhead, Chris Patten, Kenneth Clarke or Paddy Ashdown, Blair makes a virtue of implying that running Britain is above old party loyalties. When the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Holme was appointed by culture secretary Chris Smith to the Independent Television Commission, he was actively involved in party politics as the spokesman on Northern Ireland. Within a year he has been made the new chair of the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Why are they so keen to be in bed with their political opponents? McElwee usefully notes that 'in an age when it is hard to assert any moral principles as absolutes, the New Class is drawn to the next best thing: the certainty of being in agreement with others'.

According to McElwee, one of the most effective devices for Blair's 'bedding in his New Class' is through his programme of 'democratising

Claire Fox on the new elite: what's what, and what's not



ANTONY GORMLEY, FIELD (DETAIL), 1991

**THE NEW LABOUR BIG TENT  
INCLUDES PEOPLE  
DESPITE THEIR POLITICAL  
AFFILIATIONS**



# OWW MEN

democracy': the long march through the institutions. Reform of bodies such as the House of Lords has allowed the hereditary principle to be replaced by 'democratically' appointed place-men. The number of courtiers has grown accordingly. In two-and-a-half years, Blair has created 176 new peerages with up to 60 new creations promised soon. Between 1979 and 1990, Margaret Thatcher created only 210—and she was far more generous than her predecessors.

The Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life recommended that all public posts should be publicly advertised. This was a self-conscious attack on the way the old elite operated, well described by one of them in the London *Evening Standard* in September last year: 'If a candidate was needed for the board of a particular quango, the chairman would have a quiet word with his chums, the local captain of industry or retired judge, and in the spirit of *pro bono publico*, not to mention the occasional small remuneration, they would oblige. It wasn't democratic, but in the way of great British traditions, it worked.' Labour promised to sweep this system away and replace it with one based on merit, where more women, ethnic minorities and 'ordinary people' would be able to take part in public life from boards of museums and other cultural bodies to the local hospital. Shortly after taking office, Chris Smith wrote to hundreds of institutions, from English Heritage and the Royal Fine Arts Commission to trades unions and consumer groups, asking for names of people who might be interested in serving. Within weeks he was inundated with thousands of CVs. Around 5000 names are currently held by the Public Appointments Unit from which ministers elect candidates when vacancies arise. There are 35 000 public appointments in Britain today, of which 8000 per year are estimated to come up for appointment or reappointment in the space of two-and-a-half years. This gives New Labour an unprecedented opportunity proactively to put in place a new handpicked elite.

There is no doubt that a seismic change has taken place at the level of the political elite. But what drives these changes? Here, McElwee's explanations are far less convincing.

McElwee asserts that the new elite is constituted by 'a belief in, and public adherence to, its own dogma', and it demonstrates an unprecedented determination 'to spread those views across Britain'. He is convinced that 'a faith in social engineering' and a determination to force this faith on everybody are what give the new elite its political drive. But so what that the New Labour elite has shared views on such issues as regulation or state interference? Surely McElwee cannot seriously believe that the present thoroughgoing elite transition is simply a consequence of a dogmatic government attitude? To criticise New Labour for being determined to push its political outlook—however unpalatable this may be—merely flatters it.

The success of the elite transition is located less in the strength of New Labour than in the weakness of its opposition. The old guard may find some of the changes uncomfortable, and bemoan New Labour's evident intolerance of all those who dare criticise its project. But in truth, the new elite is kicking at an open door. The speed

and ease with which this elite transition has happened is largely a consequence of the vacation of the terrain by its predecessor. The former great and the good rarely put up a fight intellectually against the new ways or their embodiment in the new personnel. In the cultural sphere, the now-routine accusations that high art is elitist, inaccessible and old-fashioned are met with defensive bluster or silence. It is embarrassing to watch how effortlessly the erstwhile leaders of culture sing the praises of interactivity, or nod in enthusiastic agreement that drum'n'bass is as good as Beethoven, as soon as they are confronted with a fresh-faced adviser from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Why does McElwee avoid this conclusion? Today's changes have to be located in a more profound crisis of a twentieth-century establishment whose values and institutions have become discredited across the board. And the Tories—for whom the Centre for Policy Studies was a key think tank in its influential heyday—are as implicated in this process as much as any of Blair's newer cronies. It was Thatcher who rampaged through the old institutions, from higher education to the BBC, tearing up postwar certainties and relentlessly attacking a wide range of professions, from the academic elite to the medical establishment. The difference is that, while Tories were better at destroying institutions than rebuilding them, New Labour has proved a more appropriate vehicle for elite transition. It cannot do this through—as McElwee would like to believe—a firm statement of what it is. But it is enough for the new elite to define itself through a constant reassertion of what it is not.

Despite Thatcher's contribution to the destruction of the old elite, the maintenance of a coherent ruling-class outlook ensured that it survived most of her reign. The only group that could possibly be classed as a newly emerging elite of the 1980s were the yuppies, who came to symbolise the frivolous, morally empty character of the time. It didn't last: by the 1990s, the Blairites had learned the lessons of this failed transition, and defined themselves self-consciously against both the old elite of privilege and class interest and the Thatcherite elite of conspicuous consumption. By focusing on these twin evils of the past, the new elite can appear radical and modernising, while consolidating its position in the seat of power. For critics like McElwee, this missionary zeal can appear as the force of powerful ideas and dogmatic methods. In reality, the new elite is experiencing little more than the exhilaration of destruction, as it continues to aim its fire at that shadowy hallucination, the forces of conservatism.

This sense of moral purpose might be all New Labour has over the 1980s yuppies, but it is enough. The new Turks really do understand themselves as meritocratic, anti-elitist and forever fighting an old establishment. If the truth was out—that in fact the old establishment is quietly cowering in the corner of every major institution in Britain—the sense of leading a charge would be lost. But if the strongest moral drive of the new elite is a negative attack on the old great and the good, all we are left with are holograms. Even by New Labour's standards, how can there be anything great or good about that?



# Culture Wars

## YOUR GUIDE TO JOINING THE

by Claire Fox

### ■ ■ ■ EXPERIENCE?

If you're in your twenties, you're in luck. In the past, the twenties and thirties were considered a period of elite apprenticeship, and the *old boys'* network was just that—rewards and emergence into the elite were not expected before the age of 40. Now, the older generation of the elite is too closely associated with values that lie in tatters. Twenty years ago the average age of trustees in cultural institutions was 65. Today it is 42.

### ■ ■ ■ EXPERTISE?

The new elite is obsessed with replacing the old with the 'new'. So it is important to show a disdain for history or tradition. Dame Rennie Fritchie, the commissioner for public appointments, says that too often heads of institutions misunderstand what sort of people are required to sit on their boards: '...while a museum may want another expert in Ming-dynasty China on its board, the Culture Department might favour a marketing expert to help increase the number of visitors.' Of the 17 members of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, there is only one from a fine arts background.

### ■ ■ ■ LEADERSHIP?

Those who rise to the top will often be the ones who are most indifferent to the specific profession to which they have been assigned. One might even conclude that specific expertise (such as knowing your Ming vases) is a drawback when it comes to entry into the new elite. The National Art Collection Fund has complained that appointees do not always have the skill and experience in art that is needed for the job. Maurice Davies, deputy director of the Museums' Association, says, 'The Culture Department quite often turns down the museum or gallery's preferred expert candidate'.

### ■ ■ ■ FIT THE BILL:

Dr John Ashworth, chairman of the British Library, recalls that culture secretary Chris Smith 'complained the old board was too elderly and too male. The appointments made since then have been skewed towards young women'. There has been disquiet—but it is very quiet—that the DCMS appears to be selecting on such criteria as regional credibility rather than merit. Practise that Northern accent.

## CULTURE VULTURES

by Mark Ryan

**'We're there, we're doing it.** We haven't got a pub yet, but that's only a matter of time.' This was Simon Thurley, director of the Museum of London, reacting to the first speech given by Matthew Evans, head of the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission, after taking up his post. Evans, former chairman of publishers Faber & Faber, told a gathering of museum heads that unless they got rid of their fusty image, by putting their collections into shops, pubs and schools, they risked becoming a cultural equivalent of Marks & Spencer. Museums, he warned, might be more popular than funfairs, but they were well below discos in the league tables.

What prompted these comments—for which Evans was roundly criticised in the media? I can only speculate that what happened was something like this: Evans, who comes from a publishing background, with no experience of museums, is given the big job by Chris Smith. Smith assures him that his ignorance will in fact give him a 'fresh perspective' on a sector which is causing problems. With little or no time to research his new appointment—to visit museums—he instead reads about them. And what he reads all the time is museum officials eager to 'shake off the forces of conservatism', who talk as if they are a persecuted minority valiantly trying to give the public a look into this closed and hieratic world.

You might expect Evans, who by his own admission has no experience of museums (or presumably, libraries and archives) to be less precious about collections than a curator might be. Yet as Simon

Thurley's reply indicates, museum professionals reacted warmly to Evans' suggestion. First they agreed with him, and only later, once the backlash had started, were some professionals sufficiently emboldened to challenge Evans—on the much narrower issue of what control central bodies should have over arts institutions.

Museum directors and curators are in a difficult bind. Many have dedicated their working lives to their collections and many are scrupulous in their defence. For these officials, dealing with the stream of directives coming down from the barbarian nerve-centre at the DCMS must be truly demoralising. Some try to ignore the new order; others, I suspect, try the old trick of leapfrogging the DCMS with their own initiatives in the vain hope that the apparatchiks will ignore them. This is what it must have been like in Stalin's Russia—you denounce yourself in the hope that the system will then leave you alone. But there is another brand of museum official who has not only willingly embraced the new cultural order, but has been its architect from within. For many years now, advocates of what is grandly called the New Museology have argued that museums must cast off their remote and fusty image and start addressing themselves to the needs of their surrounding communities.

This is where New Labour's elevation of management techniques over expertise, of inclusion over content, meets the withered expectations of the arts world. When Evans says 'we need to demonstrate our relevance to local communities by taking collections out of museums and putting them into schools, shops and other locations', he puts himself on-message with the social inclusion project. And those who work in museums, desperate to be praised and appreciated for a change, fight to become the first to hawk their artefacts round the local primary school and supermarket, where they can at least boost their visitor numbers.



# THE NEW CULTURAL ELITE

## ■ ■ ■ FILL OUT FORMS:

As a would-be board member of any of the great institutions, you will be expected to fill out a lengthy application form that asks candidates to demonstrate competence in such areas as team working ('ability to contribute constructively to group discussions and decision making') and communication skills ('ability to communicate effectively at all levels, to listen to the views of others with sensitivity, to persuade, influence and negotiate'). Eminent experts of proven record are being forced to submit an application form, and to go through an interview procedure which requires them to provide a self-appraisal of their background and skills.

## ■ ■ ■ SOCIALLY INCLUDE:

The key new task for the arts is social inclusion, with all its attendant provisos such as multiculturalism, gender concerns and access. So turn the institution into an attractive family day out. If you don't quite get what the socially inclusive tasks are, they are codified by the myriad of committees that supervise and design these tasks. One of the stated aims of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural

Education reads: 'Young people are...faced with...disaffection and the breakdown of family structures. How should we educate children to face this uncertain future? We need creative individuals with a cultural understanding of this changing world to cope with these challenges.' So that's what art galleries and theatres are for.

## ■ ■ ■ LEARN THE LANGUAGE:

'Social inclusion, access, strategic awareness, inclusivity, self-esteem...repeat, social inclusion, access....' All you have to do is keep swapping key phrases around in different orders and everybody in the new elite will understand you.

## ■ ■ ■ DUMB DOWN:

One newly appointed cultural adviser was said to have 'no truck with the tedious false demarcation disputes between so-called high and low arts'.

## LM at the Bath Literature Festival

LM took the Culture Wars to the Bath Literature Festival in February, with three lively debates: 'Culture for the New Millennium—accessibility or excellence?', 'From Optimism to Pessimism: the public perception of science from the eighteenth to the twentieth century', and an online debate on internet censorship.

Discussing 'Culture for the New Millennium' were George Walden, writer and broadcaster, Roger Wright, controller of Radio 3, and *Telegraph* radio critic Gillian Reynolds. The panel exchanged mutual concerns about attempts to encourage everybody to take their daily dose of art and culture. Roger Wright explained that Radio 3 is the most accessible thing imaginable—'you just turn on the radio, it's very cheap'—but current thinking about accessibility to the arts tends to treat art as something which 'is done to people'. Gillian Reynolds grew up in an era when broadcasting created the idea that culture is 'accessible to all, if you just make the effort' to learn to appreciate it, and objected to the notion of 'market affordability' and the lack of funding for the high arts today. But as George Walden put it, 'you can't buy the cultural potential of the people', referring to the money thrown at the Dome and its uninspiring content, where you can feel 'the patronising attitudes of our times', and experience 'the crumbs of culture being thrown down from on high'.

Lord Puttnam, chair of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, kicked off the debate about perceptions of science by insisting that we recognise the great benefits science will

continue to bring us, with the prospect of cancer being 'curable in his lifetime'. For Puttnam, the constant emphasis on uncertainty is in danger of becoming a state of 'wilful unknowing', where we 'refuse to engage seriously with the possibilities of the future'. Sharing this concern, Professor Colin Blakemore said that although 'the pace of scientific discovery seems frighteningly fast', such discoveries are relative to the advanced state of modern science, so that 'the perception of change is greater than the actual pace'. For Frank Furedi, our reaction to science is a consequence of a more general sense of losing control over our lives. Science provides a 'sharp edge' to a contemporary 'fear of change'. Lord Puttnam's call for a greater amount of 'conviction' about our ability to achieve things, and Furedi's argument for an education system which excites young people about science by linking it to their 'intuitive desire for discovery', made this one of the less pessimistic current debates about science.

The online debate on internet regulation and censorship took place in the chatroom on the LM Online website (<http://www.informinc.co.uk/chat/index.html>). Ruth Dixon of Internet Watch Foundation, Nigel Williams of Childnet International, and Chris Evans of Internet Freedom thrashed out the question of whether the net needs more regulation. While Ruth Dixon and Nigel Williams called for restrictions on illegal material online and for increased self-regulation to 'protect children', Chris Evans argued for 'a completely free and unfettered net, where people can make up their own minds about content'.



# Culture Wars

## IN A 'TIS ABOUT LITERATURE

Irene Miller analyses the fiery reaction to *Angela's Ashes*

When I tried to persuade friends to accompany me to Alan Parker's film of *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt's bestselling memoir of his impoverished Irish childhood, I received two responses. Those who had not read the book claimed the film would be 'too depressing'. Those who had claimed the film would 'ruin the book'. There is a strength of loyalty to *Angela's Ashes* which is rare even to the literary classics. And everybody, everybody knows what it is about.

*Angela's Ashes* has become a literary phenomenon, selling five million copies, published in 20 languages, and winning a Pulitzer Prize. Its success has taken many, particularly McCourt, by surprise. But as well as the groupies, McCourt has provoked the kind of vitriolic reaction that has not greeted a personal memoir since Christina Crawford published *Mommie Dearest* in the early 1980s, accusing her mother Joan of abuse. The backlash to *Angela's Ashes* and its sequel *'Tis* was virtually instant, passionate and contemptuous.

In Limerick, where the memoir is based, there has been a book-burning atmosphere. Gerry Hannan, presenter on Limerick 95 radio station, has been one of the most vociferous and well-organised opponents, holding call-ins, attending chat shows and collating the public's accusations into a book of memories that contradicts McCourt's version of events. His obsession has led him to write two books, *Ashes* and *'Tis in Me Ass*. Earlier this year, in an article in the *Independent*, Hannan challenged McCourt to sue him (headline: 'See you in court, McCourt') so that the truth would be out that McCourt was a 'liar'. Hannan may be cranky, but he is by no means alone. The atmosphere in Limerick was strong enough to push out Alan Parker, who commented that 'it was obvious they didn't want us there', and felt forced to relocate to Cork and Dublin to continue filming.

So what's all the fuss about? McCourt's tale of deprivation in 1930s Ireland seems to be a fairly inoffensive personal memoir: a funny, charmingly written and tragic story of poverty, and hardly something you would expect a fatwa-style reaction to. Yet the response in Limerick shows that many people have taken this story as a personal insult. They interpret McCourt's contempt for the charities and Catholic Church of the time as an attack on the area and all its people. McCourt's struggle to leave Limerick for the American Dream, chronicled in *Angela's Ashes*, is treated as 'scabbing'. His account of the lack of assistance his family received is attacked for not showing the 'great spirit' of the place. He has created an 'illusion' of Limerick and its people which is undeserved.

Maybe he has. But why take it so personally? Does where you were born represent who you are? There is nothing wrong with feeling some affection for your childhood or the place you happened to be brought up—many of us have this. It is another thing altogether to have an orchestrated campaign against one man's criticisms of it. The truth is that the critics of McCourt have chosen to take offence. They have



chosen to take his story of rejection personally, and chosen to interpret his single experience as an insult to all. I am quite happy to believe that there was a 'great spirit' in the Limerick of the 1930s, but perhaps this spirit did not quite squeeze down the McCourts' chimney, or perhaps, more simply, a child does not experience or understand 'spirit' in the way it might understand hunger and wet feet. The critics seem to be so convinced that McCourt is out to get them that they ignore the most obvious explanations for his version of events. McCourt himself simply says that his books are 'memoir, not an exact history', and in a less tolerant moment he told the *Boston Globe*, 'Begrudgers—where would Ireland be without them?'.

The reaction against *Angela's Ashes* might strike its fans as peculiar. But ironically, it is the same aspects of McCourt's memoirs which motivate both

the critics and the supporters. Each side indulges the naivety and self-centredness of the child's perspective, from which the memoir is written. The critics hate it because they feel McCourt is left unaccountable for his perception. The supporters celebrate it for its effectiveness as a 'seen-through-the-eyes-of-a-child' account. The latter can fetishise the 'child' element so much that when McCourt wrote his sequel, *'Tis*, it was criticised for being 'self-serving'. The writing was just as clever and funny, the stories moving and tragic, yet it was less well-tolerated. Why?

The selfish and self-centred side of McCourt's character as a child had worked its way through as a young adult, yet the reaction was quite different—his innocence, and responsibility, had changed. Age should bring wisdom but did not do so for some time. As one critic summed up, 'exactly those qualities that made him a likeable child now make him an unbearable adult'. But McCourt was not a very likeable child at all—he hit his mother, stole from a dead woman, wrote threatening letters to his neighbours. The fact that he suffered a deprived childhood does not make him 'likeable', only pitiable.

Since the film of the book has come out, much of the stick has been reserved for director Alan Parker. He has been accused of being too sentimental in his dramatisation of *Angela's Ashes*, and of forgetting the humour. One critic went so far as to call the film 'flagrant rubbish'. This seems like an over-the-top reaction to what is an absolutely faithful and well-acted, if unimaginative, translation to the big screen. And in the heat of the discussion, it is easy to forget what is exceptional about both memoirs. They are angry, and very funny, pieces of work, which show irony, innocence, selfishness and, most poignantly, aspiration. McCourt's life is full of sadness, but what distinguishes it from some other memoirs is his belief that he deserves better—which mitigates against the sentimentality you might expect from such a tale. In short, however complicated the commentators make the phenomenon of *Angela's Ashes*, it will always be the writing that sold it. ●



## SECOND OPINION

### Dr Michael Fitzpatrick

# Screen test



'In the screening programme the author was assigned an "adviser" who would... monitor her progress towards "better health". The extensive questionnaire *Taking the First Step to Better Health...* included a "Women's section" of questions from the banal to the intrusively, impertinently and offensively intimate to "help her with her health". The author objected and was told that she was unusual in questioning the questions (most women apparently don't, because they trust doctors and have been brainwashed into believing that they need this nonsense). Suffice it to say, it was downhill after that.'

I hasten to reassure readers that this encounter did not take place in my surgery but in the course of a private medical check-up of the sort now routinely offered by many employers to their workers. The subject of this personal health assessment was Ruth Lea, head of the policy unit at the Institute of Directors (IoD), who includes this anecdote in her recent report *Healthcare in the UK: the need for reform*.

The IoD report indicates that the adviser made a serious mistake in trying to patronise Ms Lea. This experience encouraged her inquiries into the national screening programmes for cervical and breast cancer. As a former statistician in the civil service Ms Lea was well equipped for this task, and the results are comprehensively presented in her report. Though there were once so many radical statisticians in the health service that they had their own organisation, it is striking that one conservative statistician working for a right-wing think tank has produced a much more radical critique of these authoritarian programmes than anything the old left ever came up with.

I do not have the space here to do justice to the argument that leads Ms Lea, in my view persuasively, to the conclusion that both major screening programmes should be abandoned. Though breast cancer is relatively common, mammography is a very inefficient way of detecting it

at a stage that improves outcome. It is an uncomfortable, if not painful, procedure which yields a high rate of false positive results, causing great anxiety and distress and leading to further medical intervention. Cancer of the cervix, by contrast, is rare. The smear test, however, both misses cases of cancer and produces even more false positive results, again leading to more invasive procedures. Many women find the test embarrassing as well as uncomfortable and the discovery of incidental infections of dubious significance may cause further anxiety, and domestic strife. Many smears are technically unsatisfactory and a number of recent scandals have revealed problems of quality control in the national system.

Do these screening tests save lives? There are many complicated ways of answering this crucial question, but the only simple one is that nobody really knows. Though the organisers of the cervical cytology programme recently claimed that it saved 800 lives in 1997, critics commented that the same statistics could be used to claim that it caused a greater number of deaths. In 1995 Professor Michael Baum, a leading breast cancer specialist, resigned from the committee overseeing the mammography programme after dismissing its claim to have contributed to an 11 percent decline in the death rate from breast cancer as 'intellectually dishonest'. He has consistently argued that the money would be better spent on research or treatment.

A study published in the *Lancet* in January reviewed major trials of mammography involving half a million women in four countries, and concluded that there was no reliable evidence that screening decreases breast cancer mortality. In response Delyth Morgan of Breakthrough Breast Cancer insisted that 'we must not be deterred from continuing our screening programmes until we have seen categorically that they are ineffective'. This ethical imperative to prove a negative stands in marked contrast to the insistence by two

leading authorities 20 years ago that, before they initiate screening procedures, doctors should have 'conclusive evidence that screening can alter the natural history of the disease in a significant proportion of those screened'.

As Ms Lea observes, the current screening programmes are neither cost-effective nor ethical. Women who are not fully informed of the low predictive value of these tests, or of all the possible adverse consequences, cannot be considered to have given 'informed consent'. Furthermore, GPs are given substantial financial incentives to induce women to have smear tests, thus introducing an 'undoubted element of coercion'.

Though Ms Lea is inclined to attribute the pressures on women to undergo screening tests to the climate of 'political correctness', the two big programmes were first taken over by the government—one might say, 'nationalised'—in 1987/88. This was, of course, when Mrs Thatcher (not known for her commitment to either PC or nationalisation) was in command. The tendency for state intrusion into the private life of the individual, justified in the name of disease prevention or early detection, has advanced under governments of both parties over the past decade, though there can be little doubt that it has gathered momentum under New Labour. This process has found a ready response in a society in which anxieties about disease have become pervasive.

When Ms Lea's health adviser told her that it was unusual for women to question the impertinence, intrusiveness and downright silliness of much health promotion advice, I'm sorry to say that I think this is true. I only hope that more women will follow her lead and that doctors will acknowledge her judgement that the health promotion agenda 'distorts GPs' behaviour and wastes resources': 'People look to doctors for advice, help and comfort when they have problems. They do not expect (and do not deserve) "advice on healthy lifestyles" when so much of it is not based on sound science.'



# JOBS FOR LIFESTYLES

**H**aving a career, something you actually *do*, is far more important than I ever thought when I was younger.' Serena Mackesy's much-publicised novel *The Temp* is a fairly predictable tale of the horrors of temporary work. 'Week on week, month on month' a nameless recent graduate goes to another different workplace 'where I'm known, behind my back, as "The Temp" and, to my face, as "Um, hi"'. The book seethes with resentment about employers who use temping agencies: 'You may save a ton on National Insurance, but you can't expect people to stay loyal when they know you'll sack them whenever it's convenient', and only when the temp is en route to a permanent job does she gain a name—Sasha.

Contrast this depressing vision of temping life with the recent advertising campaign by Brook Street temping agency. 'The job for life is dead', pronounced one advert. 'Thank God. Who wants a predictable existence? You can do what you like, for as many hours as you like. All that counts is attitude.' Another version begins with the statement 'We're all temps now', and explains that 'what this brave new world lacks in security it makes up for in flexibility'. The implication of this campaign is that only losers want routine and security—the rest of us want excitement and stimulation from the world of work.

Is this just PR guff, designed to entice more unsuspecting Sashas into the grim world of stand-in secretarial work? Not exactly. Brook Street has noticed that increasingly, people are not taking temporary jobs just because they cannot get anything better, but because they want the flexibility temping provides. And it is milking this for all it is worth.

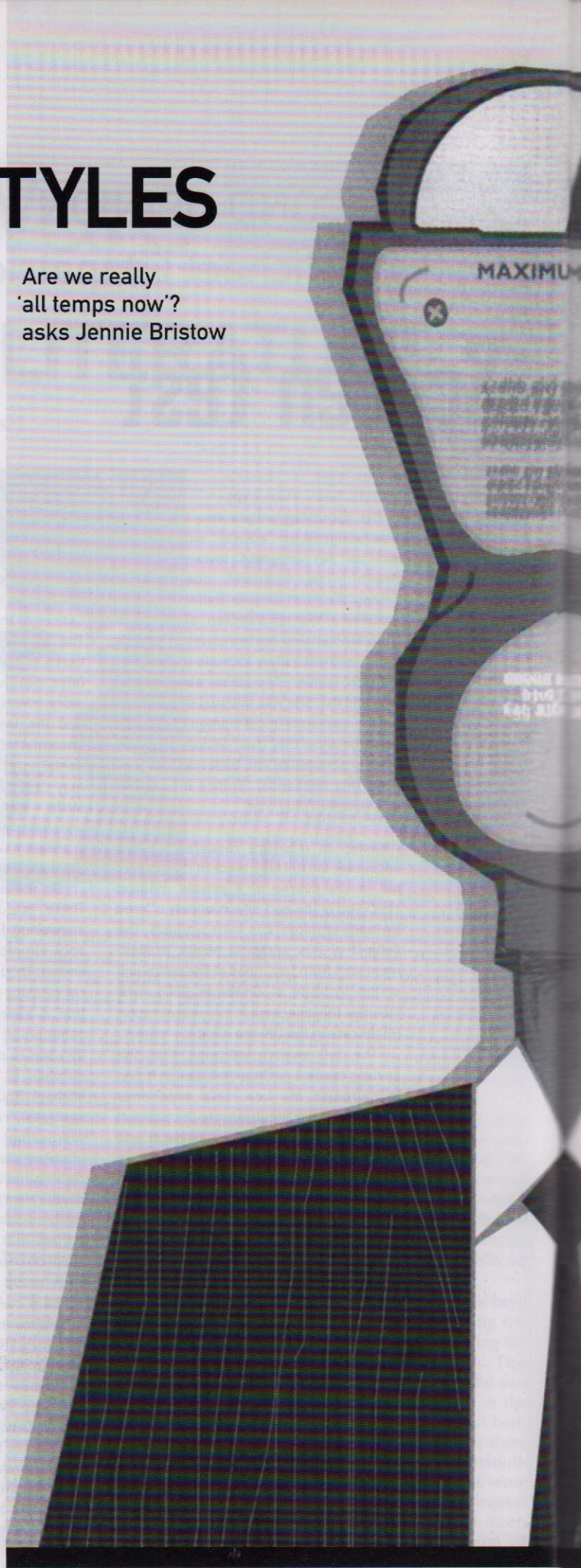
Even over the space of a few years, attitudes to temporary employment have undergone a subtle shift. In winter 1998/99, the *Labour Force Survey* found that the proportion of temporary employees who could not find a permanent job was almost exactly the same as the proportion who did not want a permanent job, at one third. By contrast, in winter 1994/95, over 40 percent could not find a permanent job, while about one quarter chose temporary work over a permanent contract. More women than men actively choose to do temporary work, but even so the proportion of male temps claiming not to want permanent jobs has risen, from 17.8 percent in 1994/95 to 25.9 percent in 1998/99. It seems that temporary workers are finding more and more positive reasons to avoid permanent contracts.

This was certainly the case for Chula and Alex, both temps registered with Office Angels Recruitment Consultants. Alex, aged 25, gave up a permanent job in Gloucestershire and started temping in London about a year ago. 'I am looking ultimately for a long-term, permanent contract, but I was unsure what career I wanted to go into', she explains. 'Temping has given me the opportunity to work in all sorts of different environments: I've worked in marketing departments, PR, advertising, sales. I have enjoyed temping so much that I will probably continue to do so until I am absolutely certain what I want to do.'

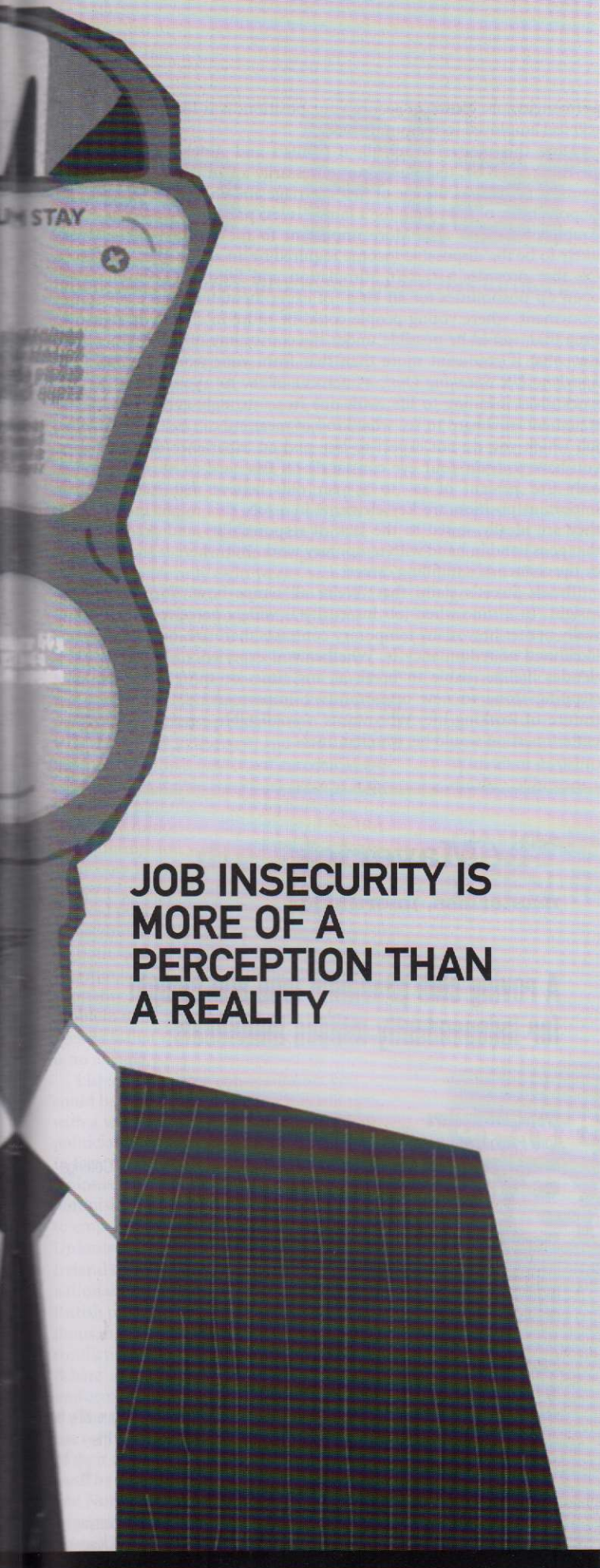
Chula, 27, was made redundant a year ago and started temping 'initially just to fill the gap and pay the bills'. But she found that she enjoyed it, 'because I have been able to be quite flexible, go off and travel a bit, and not be tied down'. She now says, 'I don't think I would go back to permanent work, because I've got used to the lifestyle, and I don't think I would be able to settle into something so long term'. Neither Chula nor Alex would admit to any downsides to temporary employment, and when asked about the reaction of her friends, Alex said: 'they probably envy the flexibility—the fact that the rates are very good and you can go off and do different things.' Very different to the reaction of Sasha's peer group in *The Temp* when she tells them what she does: 'In other people's eyes, I'm an "Oh".'

It seems logical that working for short periods of time in a variety of places, trading the security of a permanent job for the excitement of meeting new people and gaining new experiences, would suit some people and not others. But is there anything more to it than that? After all, it is not as though temporary work has become the reality of most people's lives. Brook Street might claim 'we're all temps now', but the truth is, we're not.

Are we really  
'all temps now'?  
asks Jennie Bristow







## JOB INSECURITY IS MORE OF A PERCEPTION THAN A REALITY

A popular myth, which Serena Mackesy's novel builds upon, is that Britain has become a society of temporary, insecure jobs, in which employers save money and commitment by refusing to provide their staff with the security they crave. But figures from the *Labour Force Survey* show that temporary employees make up only around seven percent of all employees. While the proportion of temporary workers has risen from just over five percent in 1984, this hardly indicates a massive change in employment practices, away from permanent jobs to temporary. And when Brook Street points to the end of the job for life, this is not a new phenomenon. As Paul Gregg and Jonathan Wadsworth point out, 'despite public perception to the contrary, average job tenure has remained relatively stable since 1975' (*The State of Working Britain*). For workers aged 50-64, average job tenure in 1998 was 10 years and nine months; for those aged 35-49 it was seven years, for those aged 25-34 it was three-and-a-half years, and for those aged 16-24 it was one year. The average job tenure for workers at the youngest and oldest end of the age range has dropped, but for employees aged 35-49 it has risen by eight months since 1975.

It seems that the significant shift is not in the numbers of people doing temporary work, but in the broader perception of what the world of work has to offer. It is assumed that insecure, short-term work is the main thing out there in the job market, and that people should build their expectations around this. Yet while job insecurity may be more of a perception than a reality, this perception makes a powerful impact on people's real experience of work—especially for the generation entering the job market now.

'I find it incredible that kids aren't more aware of the world of work and how it really is', said Sarah El-Doori at Office Angels. She cited research conducted by Office Angels showing that sixth-formers still expect to go into a permanent job, where they would be trained and promoted 'and then they would give them their gold clock and off they'd go and retire'. Now, says Sarah, 'as we know, it's not like that any more. It's all about portfolio careers and developing yourself and your own skills'. Yet at a time when school students are pushed into developing portfolio skills, in everything from work experience to keeping a Record of Achievement, it seems unlikely that this could be true. *Speaking Up, Speaking Out!*, a major survey of 12- to 25-year olds published by the Industrial Society in 1997, found that 'the majority of young people acknowledge that there are few "jobs for life" any more'. Half of 16- to 25-year olds expressed a strong interest in job security—surely indicating that they no longer take this for granted. And then there is the qualification mania among young people, which is hardly the hallmark of a generation confident about its ability to walk straight into a job and keep it.

Seventy percent of young people stay on in further education post-16, compared to less than half in the mid-1980s. One in three young people is now in higher education. As the popularity of vocational university courses over academic courses continues to rise, it is clear that many young people enter university not out of a desire to study and learn, so much as an interest in gaining qualifications to help with their careers.

But while from secondary to higher education the importance of career planning and gaining vocational skills is heavily emphasised, students are not being trained up to follow a particular career path. Rather, they are taught the need to build up the kinds of general experiences, skills and qualifications that will make them flexible and employable when faced with the choices of the labour market. So, for example, you might expect the explosion of vocational courses such as business studies to lead to a glut of graduates destined for careers in management and administration—but a recent study found that fewer than half of business studies graduates went into this line of work. *Moving On*, a study of graduate careers three years after graduation produced by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick, found that the remaining 60 percent of business studies graduates were split almost equally between the categories professional, associate professional, clerical and secretarial, and manual, routine service and operative. Even with vocational qualifications, it seems to matter less what kind of degree you do than the fact of having the qualification. And it doesn't stop there. According to the *Moving On* study, almost a fifth of graduates go on to postgraduate study, and over half had participated in further study since graduation. Why? The most



popular reasons for undertaking further study were expressly career-related, particularly among those undertaking Master's courses.' Life-long learning, the strategy pushed by the government to ensure people keep gaining skills and qualifications right up to retirement, indicates how much the emphasis on employability has been taken to heart.

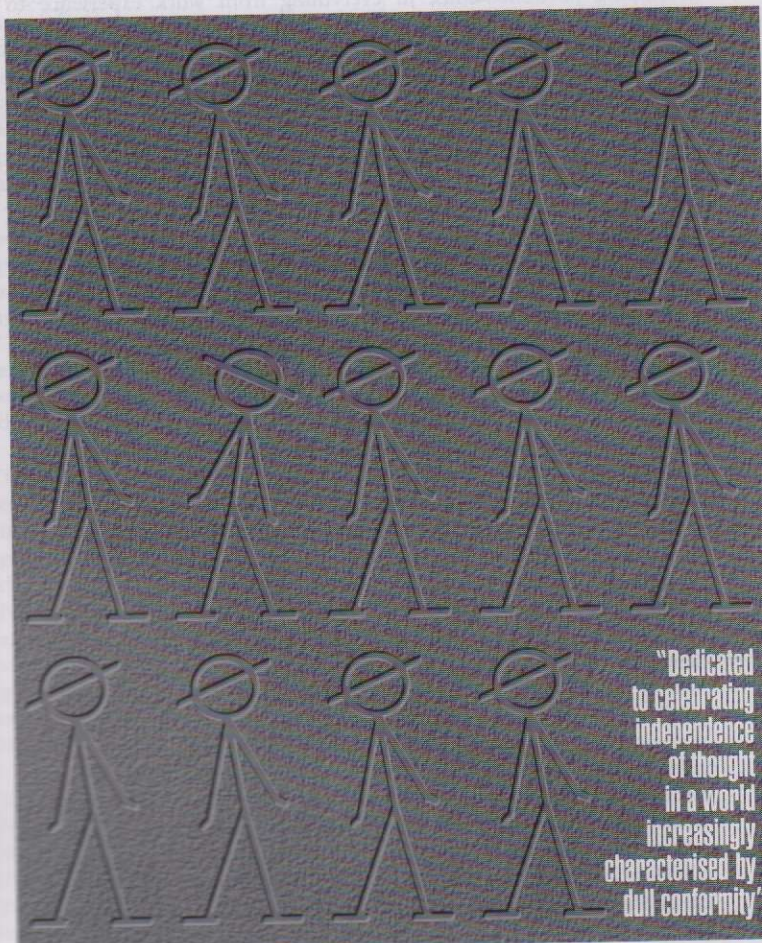
The desire for qualification gain is driven, in part, by the simple fact that more jobs demand a higher level of qualification than in previous years. The *Moving On* study celebrates the fact that only two percent of graduates are unemployed and 90 percent of those employed are in 'graduate jobs'. It also shows that graduates from new universities (former polytechnics) or higher education colleges are no more likely to be unemployed than those from traditional universities. But as the study points out, graduate jobs are 'impossible to define except in tautologies — "jobs in which graduates are employed" or "jobs for which a degree is required"'. From nursing to working in a bank, this definition now applies to a range of occupations that were not graduate jobs a decade ago. These are no different types of work to those in the past—you simply need a qualification to do them. And while graduates from new universities might be as successful at gaining employment as those from traditional universities, all graduates are obviously not doing the same kind of job.

More significantly, the drive to gain more and more qualifications, like the desire to 'CV-build' through gap years, community volunteering and work experience, indicates how little it is assumed that you can take your job for granted. Far from anticipating the gold clock, young people enter the labour market prepared to be constantly on the move. And against this backdrop of assumed insecurity, even a permanent, professional career demands a short-term outlook. If you expect not to stay in a job for any length of time, and are constantly aware of the need to keep yourself qualified and flexible and looking around for new opportunities, a permanent contract is not necessarily experienced as a

permanent job. However secure your position, it is likely that you will still feel employed in temporary work.

Does this matter? After all, if Chula's and Alex's experiences are anything to go by, temping is not necessarily a bad thing, especially for younger people. As the age of first marriage and childbirth nears 30, the responsibility of providing for a family is less pressing than it was even a couple of decades ago. More important to the young professional is likely to be the disposable income required by an active social life, and a job that provides a certain stimulation and lifestyle. Temping could open up possibilities for all kinds of experimentation and even simply enjoyment, where young people could be more in charge of their own time than would be possible under the constraints of a permanent job. But what if you want more than that from your work? According to *Speaking Up, Speaking Out!*, 45 percent of 16- to 25-year olds say that work gives meaning to life, with one in 10 strongly agreeing with this statement. It is hard to see what kind of meaning can be derived from a job which you do not expect to last, and an experience of work where you have to train your eye constantly on the need to move on. When only five percent of 16- to 25-year olds believe that status and an important position are key elements in a job, this might indicate that they are ideally suited to the lack of responsibility and accountability that goes hand in hand with temporary work. But where is the ambition, or the chance of a fulfilling career?

Brook Street's claim that 'We're all temps now' does contain an insight. In a time when job insecurity is widely perceived, it does not really matter how many temporary contracts there are, or how great the likelihood of redundancy is. Whether you experience your career as a slender lifeline, liable to break at any time, or more positively as a stepping stone to new opportunities, impermanence becomes a key feature of working life. Who wants a predictable existence? Perhaps a better question would be, who has one? ●



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■ Thursday 27 April *Genetic Engineering: Miracle or Menace?*  
 Matt Ridley, one of Britain's most well-respected science writers, will argue why he thinks genetic engineering is good for people, good for plants, good for the environment and good for society.

■ Thursday 18 May *Forget About Nostalgia*  
 Jonathan Meades, author and columnist, writer and presenter of a forthcoming television essay on Victorian architecture and society, will make the case against nostalgia.



# No Plan B

Northern Ireland's processed peace has turned politics into a squabble about nothing, says Brendan O'Neill

**T**hey don't seem to have an agenda. This is more of a listening exercise.' So said Monica McWilliams, leader of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, following the 'last-ditch, last-minute' talks between the British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland's political parties in Belfast on 8 March. She has a point. For all the hand-wringing and gnashing of teeth over Northern Ireland being (yet again) on the 'edge of the abyss', with the new government suspended after only eight weeks, stand-offs between uppity politicians, and no movement on IRA decommissioning, nobody seems to have any idea of what to do next.

What is behind this stasis in Northern Irish politics? Many see the current crisis as a result of traditional Unionists and traditional nationalists puffing up their chests, keeping their feet firmly in the past, and refusing to accommodate to a new era of agreement and compromise. It can sometimes seem as if the politics of yesterday is holding back the politics of tomorrow. The refusal of the IRA to decommission weapons until the British army does likewise, and the disgust of Unionist politicians at the reform of their beloved police force the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), give the impression that on both sides of the political divide there is an unwillingness to break with the siege mentality of the past. But ultimately, the real problem with Northern Ireland's political agenda is that there is no politics, and there is no agenda.

Listening to some commentators you could be forgiven for thinking it is still 1972, with a war over Northern Ireland raging in politicians' rhetoric, if not on the ground. In fact, the once-great movements of Unionism and nationalism have been diminished by the peace process and reduced to empty positions. The clash between Unionists, who were convinced that Northern Ireland should remain part of Britain, and the nationalists' determination to get rid of the British presence and unite Ireland, mobilised thousands of people in passionate support of conflicting political agendas. Today's 'heated debate' about the colour of the RUC's uniform is pretty anaemic by comparison.

The forward march of the peace process has robbed both Unionism and nationalism of their rationale. Unionist parties cut their teeth by defending the link between Britain and Northern Ireland against the threat posed by republicans. Now that no such threat exists, Unionists often seem to lack a sense of purpose and direction. And what place is

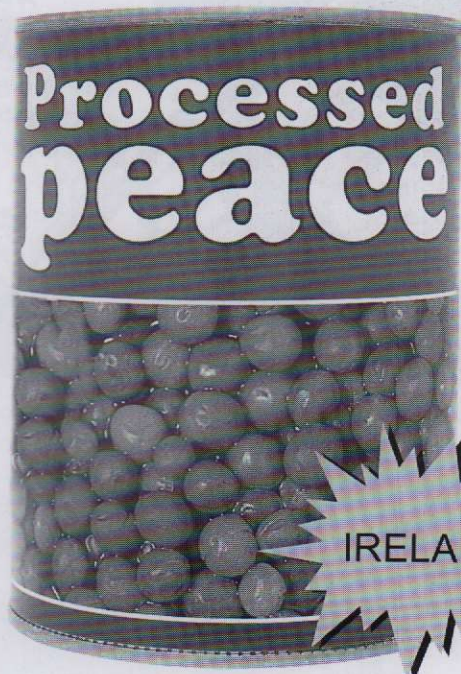
there for Unionism at a time when New Labour is dismantling Unions all over the place? When Scotland, Wales and even some British cities all want to opt out of the 'outdated' United Kingdom and set up their own assemblies, Unionism can look like a movement from another century.

On the other side, republicans have ditched the principles on which their movement has been based since the early 1900s. The movement which was born with the aim of getting Britain out of Ireland and governing the country for itself now accepts its position as a minority party within the six counties of Northern Ireland—to the extent that Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams increasingly couches his demands in terms of minority rights and protecting vulnerable nationalists from nasty loyalists. Small wonder that the IRA holds on to its weapons. With all of its principles consigned to the dustbin of history, guns are the only

bargaining chip it has left.

The orators and combatants of the past have had a hard time adjusting to ordinary politics. There was much sniggering when it was revealed that Sinn Fein deputy leader Martin McGuinness would be minister for education in the new Northern Ireland government—what would he teach kids, asked some commentators: how to make petrol bombs? Similarly, what kind of health policy would the smaller, paramilitary-linked loyalist parties have? Keep the hospitals busy—by filling them with Catholics? But a look at what ordinary politics represents shows that, with the demise of the old political framework, both sides are making up politics as they go along, desperately grabbing hold of anything that can define their positions as distinct. Nationalists demand that their street signs be in Irish and that their past suffering receive the 'recognition' it deserves—and Unionists demand the

## UNIONISM AND NATIONALISM HAVE BEEN ROBBED OF THEIR RATIONALE



recognition of Ulster Scots as an official language and talk about their 'cultural heritage' as opposed to their 'majority rights'.

Such 'clashes' are more like shadow boxing than the real thing, with the consequence that nothing of political substance is ever properly thrashed out or resolved. And the end result is not a 'new, remade Ireland', as envisaged by Tony Blair and Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern, but a petty Ireland where even ordinary politics becomes difficult to pursue.

This is not the battle of the past haunting the present. It is more like two sets of stubborn schoolchildren playing up to get as much attention as they can. But amid all this disorientation, one thing is crystal clear. There is no solution to Northern Ireland's problems in the terms of either Unionism or nationalism, and nobody has thought of anything which can replace them. As Northern Ireland secretary Peter Mandelson said, 'there is no Plan B'.



# Spaced out?

Dr Robert Zubrin, founder of the Mars Society, talked to Helen Searls about the final frontier

It is important to go to Mars because we need to open up a new frontier where the rules are not written. We need a place where we can create in a way that is unconstrained by the forms that we have inherited from the past. At this point on Earth there is no such place.' Dr Robert Zubrin, founder of the Mars Society and author of *The Case for Mars: the plan to settle the Red Planet and why we must*, is dedicated to the task of organising a manned mission to Mars sometime in the near future. He claims that we are constrained on Earth 'because almost everywhere is subject to some kind of government administration', and that we need to cross a remote and unearthly frontier to 'open up a vast vista of freedom for humanity'.

But if you are concerned about the constraints placed on creativity on Earth, is the temptation of Mars anything more than escapism? No doubt it could be; but Dr Zubrin's mission extends beyond the desire simply to boldly go where no man has gone before. He also wants to push against the restrictions that hold back modern society, and in fact it is this passion for human progress here on Earth that drives his dream to go to Mars.

Again and again, Dr Zubrin's speeches and writings come back to the theme of reinvigorating society. As he explained in a recent article: 'we see around us now an ever-more apparent loss of vigour of American society; increasing fixity of the power structure and bureaucratisation of all levels of society; impotence of political institutions to carry off great projects; the cancerous proliferation of regulations affecting all aspects of public, private and commercial life; the spread of irrationalism; the banalisation of popular culture; the loss of willingness by individuals to take risks, to fend or think for themselves; economic stagnation and decline; the deceleration of the rate of technological innovation and a loss of belief in the idea of progress itself.' It's a pretty damning critique. But while Dr Zubrin is all too aware of the stagnant character of modern society, he refuses to confuse the current stasis with humanity's endpoint. He has contempt for writers like Francis Fukuyama who

believe that man has reached the end of history. 'Such ideas are the ultimate form of conceit from those who are satisfied with the status quo', he argues. Rather, Dr Zubrin attributes society's loss of dynamism to the lack of a new frontier. 'Without a frontier from which to breathe life, the spirit that gave rise to the progressive humanistic culture that America has offered to the world for the past several centuries is fading. The issue is not just one of national loss—human progress needs a vanguard, and no replacement is in sight.'

I do not find Dr Zubrin's frontier thesis, borrowed and updated from the noted nineteenth-century US historian Frederick Jackson Turner, a particularly convincing explanation as to why society seems to have reached such a dire impasse. But his passion for freedom and human progress is inspiring—particularly in these downbeat times. For Dr Zubrin, 'there can be no freedom without progress'—if mankind isn't moving forward, he muses, then what will we be free to do? If a passion for space travel encourages people to ask these kind of questions, it can be no bad thing.

Dr Zubrin's mission to put man on Mars seems far-fetched, but he claims that

whenever he addresses audiences in America people react extremely positively. This was certainly the case when I heard him speak at the *Dynamic Visions* conference organised by the US magazine *Reason*. He told me that "How come we're not doing this already?" is the most common question I get asked', and he argues that while governments show little signs at present of funding such a mission, ordinary scientists and others have enough enthusiasm for the idea at least to get the ball rolling. He believes that with enough financial backing a manned mission to Mars is eminently feasible. 'From a technical point of view, we are much closer to being able to send a manned mission to Mars today than we were close to sending a manned mission to the Moon when President Kennedy declared, back in the 1960s, that we would put a man on the Moon within the decade.'

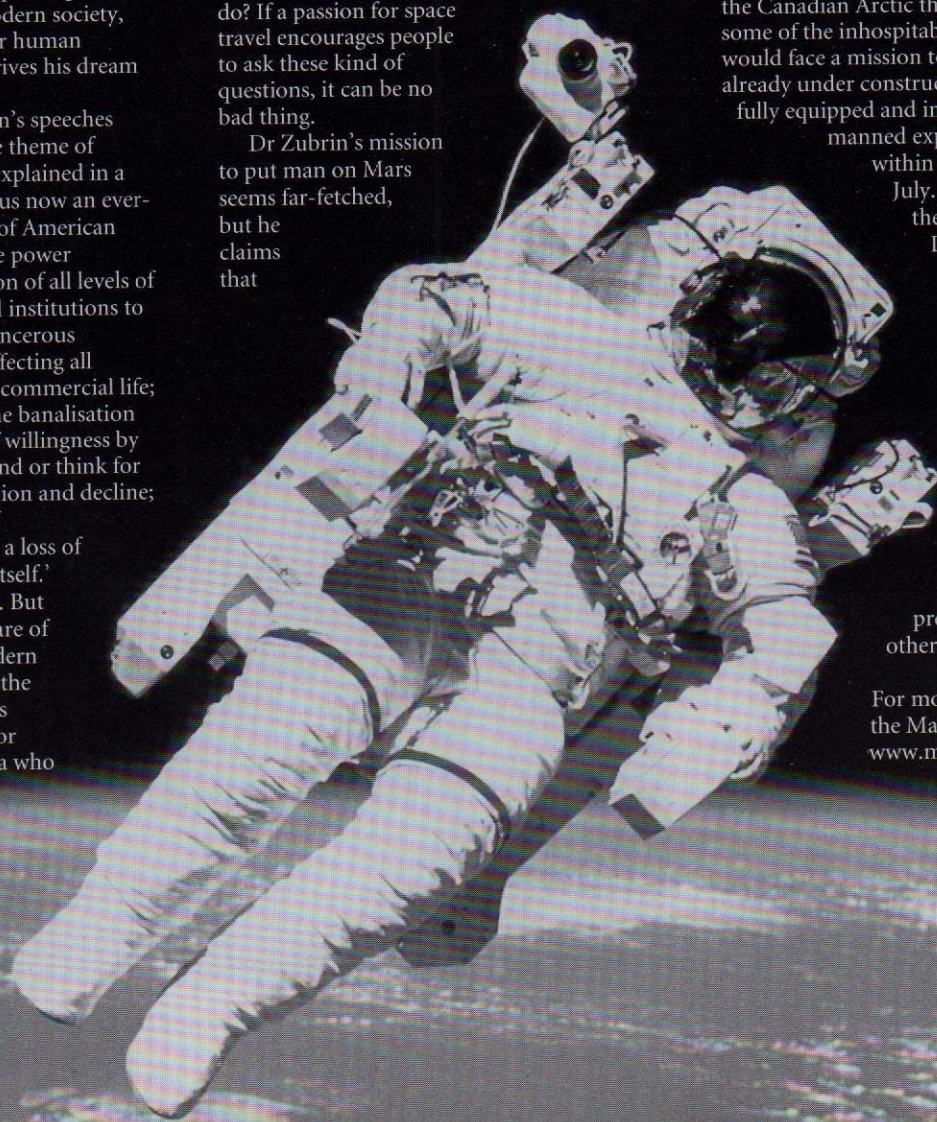
This summer the Mars Society plans to take the first step in putting its ideas into action. Dr Zubrin has raised \$400 000 to build and operate a simulated Mars research station on Devon Island—an island within the Canadian Arctic that apparently resembles some of the inhospitable conditions that would face a mission to Mars. The station is already under construction and is hoped to be fully equipped and in place ready for

manned experiments to take place within a two-week period this July. Broadcasters including the BBC and the Discovery Channel have bought some of the rights to the event.

I am no rocket scientist, and I have absolutely no idea whether Dr Zubrin's plans are feasible.

But I have to say I hope that they are. In such cynical and pessimistic times it is refreshing to meet a man who is prepared to give such an otherworldly idea a try.

For more information about the Mars Society go to [www.marssociety.org](http://www.marssociety.org)





# READING

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Is demographic ageing the problem it is made out to be? asks David Metz

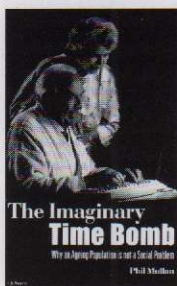
## OLD ON

### THE IMAGINARY TIME BOMB: WHY AN AGEING POPULATION IS NOT A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Phil Mullan. IB Tauris. £24.50 hbk

THE NOTION THAT AN AGEING POPULATION will create major societal problems—for the funding of pensions, for the provision of health and social care, for economic growth—has become part of the conventional wisdom of our times. There have been numerous books published in recent years warning us of this 'time bomb' that is waiting to blow up in our faces. Phil Mullan's is the first to develop a sustained argument to the contrary, and is a welcome contribution to the debate.

Population ageing is certainly taking place. For the OECD countries, the proportion of people aged 65 and over was 15 percent in 1960 and is projected to reach 35 percent by 2030, with particularly strong growth after 2010. Over the past 25 years the number of people of pensionable age in these countries rose by 45 million, while the number of those of working age rose by 120 million. It is expected that over the next 25 years the number of pensioners will increase by a further 70 million while the working-age population will only increase by five million. There are three reasons for this. The baby boom generation—which in the UK peaked in 1964—is getting older. We are all living longer—life expectancy at birth for men is currently 75 years and for women it is 80, up from less than 50 a century ago. In addition to this, life expectancy in old age has been increasing quite rapidly in recent years. And fertility has been falling, with family size in Britain now below the level needed to maintain population size in the long term.



On the face of it, demographic changes of this scale would be expected to bring big problems. How will we sustain pension schemes when the number of pensioners is due to increase so markedly in relation to the numbers in employment? Given that the need for health and social care increases with age, are we going to be able to afford our ageing population, when health service provision is already so stretched? Will economic growth at the rate to which we have become accustomed be sustainable in the face of the decline in the size of the younger part of the workforce?

In response to these questions, Mullan points out that, historically, modern societies double their wealth about every 25 years. This kind of growth, projected across the next half century, would dwarf the extra pension and other costs to society of more elderly dependants. Moreover, it is far from certain that extra years of life mean extra years of ill-health and dependency. Serious disease tends to be concentrated towards the end of life, so living longer may simply postpone the point of onset, without increasing the amount.

Why then all the anxiety? Mullan argues that demographic ageing began its newfound prominence about two decades ago as a scapegoat for changes in society and the economy that have non-demographic causes, in particular the generalised slowdown in all Western economies after the oil price rises of the 1970s and difficulties in financing public expenditure. Those on



PHIL MULLAN RECOGNISES THAT DEMOGRAPHIC AGEING, A CONSEQUENCE OF THE CONQUEST OF DISEASE, IS A POSITIVE EXPRESSION OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS

the political right used the threat of the ageing population to justify attempts to narrow the state's economic role and to reform and curb welfare expenditure. Mullan goes on to suggest that the more recent obsession with ageing is a reflection of the current state of Western thought, widely perceived as dominated by a mood of nervousness, heightened risk awareness, and pessimism for the future.

So, with this insight, can we now relax in the expectation that society will take in its stride the implications of population ageing? In my view, that would be premature. There is much that needs to be done to counter the decline in health, independence, autonomy and in quality of life generally that is a characteristic feature of old age, and that will be exacerbated for society as a whole by the demographic changes in prospect. Beyond that, we need to rethink the roles and status of the post-middle aged—our future selves.

The current paradox is that while we are living longer, and generally healthier, lives, employment is running out earlier. This means lack of personal fulfilment, failure by society to take advantage of accumulated skills and experience, as well as problems for the funding of pensions. We need to achieve more flexible modes of working in later life, to abandon traditional notions of retirement, and to counter ageism in employment. Phil Mullan recognises that demographic ageing, a consequence of the conquest of disease, is a positive expression of human development and progress. His book is a worthwhile riposte to the pessimists, but should not deflect us from planning the changes necessary to cope with a society in which the average age approaches 50.

David Metz is director of AgeNet  
(www.agenet.ac.uk)

Phil Mullan's *The Imaginary Time Bomb* is available to Friends of LM at a reduced price. Phone (020) 7269 9224 for details



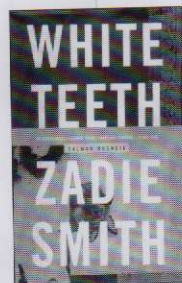
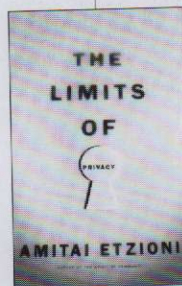
## COMMUNITY CARES

### THE LIMITS OF PRIVACY

Amitai Etzioni, Basic Books. £22.50 hbk

Review by Tessa Mayes

ARE WE TOO PRECIOUS ABOUT OUR RIGHT TO privacy? Amitai Etzioni would seem to think so. Using his theory of communitarianism to examine what he perceives as 'the limits of privacy', Etzioni argues that individual rights are not absolute, but require balancing with community values and are open to constant reconsideration. Thus we should challenge the contemporary privileging of privacy rights and



question how far they harm the common good.

He concludes that privacy should be open to intervention by the state (or community, as he puts it) to allow the promotion of community concerns such as public health and safety. For example, if we support the use of encryption (the technology which keeps our emails secure from prying eyes) we are not safe from terrorists using the technology to threaten the community. This might be true. But does this risk warrant living in a society in which it is impossible to send a private email?

Etzioni's view of communitarianism seems to rest on the idea that the state should be seen less as Big Brother and more as a Matey Mother, the benign protector of our rights and values. This idea has a great deal of resonance today, to the extent that sometimes the concept of privacy itself is redefined, as something quite different to its original conception. Traditionally, the idea of privacy was understood as the freedom of the individual from control of the state: summed up in the phrase 'an Englishman's home is his castle'. Today, however, even those who campaign for privacy rights sometimes use this language to demand control over other people's behaviour. For instance, concern about the invasive techniques involved in how local councils monitor tenants' private activities on housing estates has been overshadowed by concern about whether individual neighbours respect each others' privacy, through playing loud music or fixing their cars in the front garden. In this way privacy has become a notion associated with the right to be left alone from everybody else, rather than with the idea of being left alone from the state.

Etzioni is right to point out some of the problems with the arguments advanced by privacy rights campaigners, who often tend to see the right to privacy as something we are born with, rather than a right recognised and allowed for by society. Yet despite the flaws, at least such campaigners recognise that privacy is not something that can be easily done away with. Without a distinct private life individuals have no place to develop their own thoughts, make their own decisions and communicate freely with others. Yes, there are limits to our privacy—but isn't the problem that there are too many limits?

## FANG-TASTIC?

### WHITE TEETH

Zadie Smith, Hamish Hamilton. £9.99 hbk

Review by Gerry Feehily

I FIRST CAME ACROSS ZADIE SMITH'S DEBUT novel *White Teeth* at the end of 1997, while working as a reader for a French publishing house. At that time it stood at 70 pages, and although its author was only 21



FORMAL EDUCATION IN ACADEMIC SUBJECTS CONTINUES TO BE THE BEST MECHANISM FOR DEVELOPING A PUPIL'S CREATIVITY, PROVIDING THEM WITH THE SKILLS ON WHICH ALL OTHER ACTIVITIES DEPEND

and the rest of the book—400 pages of it—had yet to be written, it had generated sufficient buzz to justify a six-figure advance in London. In its original inception *White Teeth* promised much. In a world where 95 per cent of manuscripts fall from the lap with a dull thud, it was a joy, full of funny, beautifully carved sentences, surprising in their reach and depth.

Over two years later *White Teeth* arrives. But while being a generous and spirited achievement, loaded with insights on the state of modern Britain, it lacks the daring and drive of its earlier fragment. I wonder whether it has suffered from a problem common to many of today's young authors—that of too many expectations.

Archie Jones forms the moral core of the story, and in a novel wary of isms, his muddling, prolix decency is an antidote to the shrillness of fixed ideas and those caught in their warp. Recently divorced and going nowhere, having failed to commit suicide in front of a halal butcher on Cricklewood Broadway in London, he runs into the beautiful, Jamaican, 18-year-old Clara Bowles at the aftermath of a new year's party at a hippy commune. Archie is 47 and bald. Incredibly the two marry, settling eventually in Willesden, and are soon joined in the area by Archie's old wartime friend, Samad Iqbal, newly arrived from Bangladesh, and his young wife Alsana. Neither marriage is particularly happy. Their offspring—twins Magid and Millat on the Iqbal side, daughter Irie at the Jones'—grow up torn between the pull of modern Britain and their parents' immigrant anxieties. When Samad, increasingly obsessed with his boys' spiritual health, decides to send Magid to Bangladesh, all hell breaks loose. It is Millat however, the tearaway bane of his father's existence, who eventually turns to Islam. When Magid returns home nine years later, Samad's nightmares have all come true. A nerd in tweeds, Magid is now protégé of Marcus Chalfen, a godless genetic scientist.

The plot only really kicks in here, and is resolved in the escape of a genetically engineered mouse from a press conference. And while the author draws back from some obvious conclusions, a clear parallel is expressed between the work of the morally blind Chalfen and that of a Nazi doctor who Archie killed (or didn't) in an earlier wartime episode.

To ask whether rationality has limits, whether the dream of reason breeds monsters, is a pertinent question. But while *White Teeth* bounces around its fair share of engaging issues, it lacks sufficiently fleshed-out characters to engage them. Chalfen is too much of a two-dimensional idiot to be taken seriously, and while we sympathise with the other characters' predicaments, the characters themselves are too narrow, too schematic to allow us to relate to them plausibly. The author herself seems to sense this, padding out the unlikely plot with increasingly essayistic digressions on identity, race and culture.

Such shortcomings, one feels, are more a result of haste than authorial limitations. Novels gestate slowly, need time to develop, while publishing houses have deadlines to keep, investments to make good on. The two are not always compatible. Although Zadie Smith has a bright and distinct voice, and her novel has splendours, it seems to suffer from having had to gratify the buzz it so prematurely generated. It ought to have been an extraordinary novel. Hopefully the next one will be. ●

READONREADONREADONREADONREADONREADON

**THE CREATIVE AGE: KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FOR THE NEW ECONOMY**

Tom Bentley and Kimberley Seltzer. Demos. £9.95 pbk

Review by Toby Marshall

ACCORDING TO TOM BENTLEY AND KIMBERLEY Seltzer of Demos, Britain's schools are failing to prepare pupils for the challenges of the 'creative age' in which we live. The root of the problem, they suggest, is an outdated, and overly prescriptive, national curriculum. Schooling should account for the emergence of the 'weightless', knowledge-based economy and flexible, or 'weightless', working practices; and to address all this levity, Bentley and Seltzer propose that we radically rethink the curriculum.

Instead of concentrating on delivering a fixed body of knowledge—much of which will apparently be of little use in our fast-changing world—Bentley and Seltzer argue that schools should provide pupils with more opportunities to develop independent learning skills. To make all this possible, they propose that the prescribed element of the national curriculum be halved, freeing up time for students to pursue practical projects in the outside world. This would ensure that pupils become more independent and creative, developing a broader base of skills than those that are currently fostered by the traditional, subject-orientated curriculum.

*The Creative Age* is a provocative text. And Bentley and Seltzer probably have a point when they argue that the weight of the national curriculum—the most recent incarnation of which weighs in at over 135 000 words—inhibits effective teaching practice. But their central argument, that a more practical school curriculum would make pupils more creative, is deeply flawed. Formal education in academic subjects continues to be the best mechanism for developing a pupil's creativity, in that it provides them with the general intellectual skills on which all other activities depend. What is so creative, after all, about learning office skills or internet surfing—even in a genuine workplace environment? History, maths, English and all the other 'impractical' subjects at least provide pupils with the ability to think, analyse, count and spell, which make using a





COETZEE DRAMATISES THE INDIVIDUAL'S STRUGGLE, NOT ONLY AGAINST THE HARSH DIFFICULTIES OF OUR PHYSICAL REALITY, BUT AGAINST HIS OWN DEGRADED SENSE OF SELF

computer relatively unchallenging. Teaching them computer skills provides them with the ability to...do computer skills. Is this the most creativity we expect from our students?

For evidence of the role of formal education in developing the creative potential of individuals, we in fact need look no further than to one of the authors of *The Creative Age*: for the youthful Mr Bentley has achieved rather a lot at less than 30 years old. He has recently been appointed director of Demos, has been an adviser to education secretary David Blunkett, and has published a number of well-received books on youth and education. And Bentley is, not coincidentally, an alumnus of the very formal Oxford University (politics, philosophy and economics), not a graduate of the University of Life.

### DISGRACE

JM Coetzee. Secker & Warburg. £14.99 hbk

Review by Munira Mirza

SET IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA, COETZEE'S Booker-prize winner *Disgrace* is a highly perceptive novel, which questions what hopes for peace and reconciliation have come to mean in the contemporary climate. David Lurie, a middle-aged English literature academic at the University of Cape Town, embarks on a scandalous affair which ruins him publicly. While he admits his guilt, David refuses to produce a public statement of apology or promise a reformation of his character at the bequest of numerous college advisory boards and committees. He visits his adult daughter, Lucy, at her isolated smallholding in the country, only to find his sanctuary shattered when they are intruded upon by a gang of black youths. Echoing his own experiences of being a social pariah, David learns that his daughter is the victim of hostile racial and sexual treatment in the area. With tragic resonance, he discovers how disgrace is used as an instrument of coercion, forcing the individual to comply with the social norm.

Coetzee's novel expertly portrays the South African countryside as a savage and violent territory, which is unable to overcome the racial hangover of the past. His landscape is populated by isolated and defeated individuals, such as Lucy, the vegetarian, man-hating daughter who is so awash with guilt for humanity's wrongdoings that she actively consents to the loss of her property and rights to her black neighbours. It is against this backdrop that the struggling protagonist David Lurie captures our sympathies, despite all his failings as a tutor, father, husband and lover. In his protagonist, Coetzee dramatises a passionate struggle of the individual character, not only against the harsh and concrete difficulties of our physical reality, but against his own degraded sense of self, imposed through the power of disgrace. Although Lurie eventually makes his peace with reality

and reconciles himself to the lonesome life, the reader is left to feel that the struggle was over too quickly.

### THEORY OF FLESH

John Binias. Macmillan. £10 pbk

Review by Brendan O'Neill

AFTER A VIOLENT ATTACK BY AN UNKNOWN assailant, the narrator of *Theory of Flesh* comes round in hospital, suffering from psychogenic amnesia. Hospital staff tell him he is René Quite, philosophy lecturer, a name and profession which ring no bells with a man whose only flickering memory from his 'previous life' is of somebody trying to kill him. But the narrator accepts this false identity so that he can discharge himself from hospital and track down his unknown assailant, hoping it will give him some clues. His adventure takes him to the falling-down seaside resort of Scarby-at-Sea, where he meets Eugenia Quite, who claims to be his wife. She arranges for an array of characters from 'René's' previous life to attend a dinner party, where each will tell a story to help the narrator piece his life back together.

*Theory of Flesh* is described as a 'philosophical thriller'. John Binias uses the narrator's search for his identity as an exploration of what it means to be a 'storyteller' and to create human identity. The cast of characters—from the permanently unhappy Irishman in hospital who yells 'Could somebody not turn that fucking sun out once and for all? It gets me in the gut', to my favourite, Brian Smith, a writer who deals 'not in delicately honed fictions, but in brute, ill-mannered facts'—provide the perfect backdrop to the narrator's search for his own identity in a confusing world. This is a fast-paced, thrilling book, with a refreshing psychological twist.

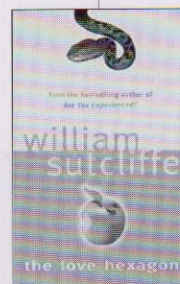
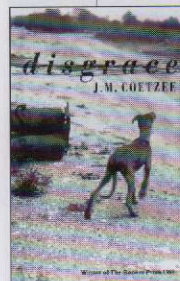
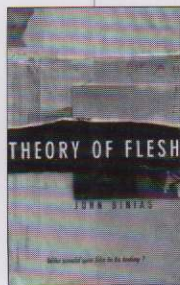
### THE LOVE HEXAGON

William Sutcliffe. Hamish Hamilton. £9.99 hbk

Review by Joanna Williams

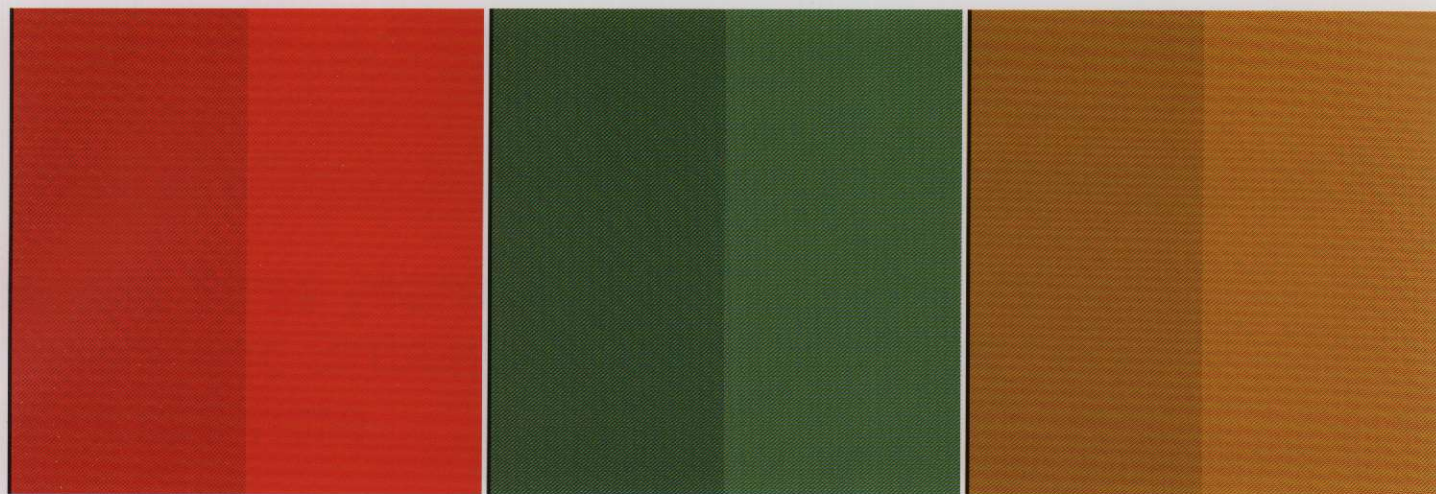
*THE LOVE HEXAGON* IS A STORY OF SIX TWENTY-something Londoners, three men and three women. The plot revolves around the testing of their friendship as the unspoken rules that governed their behaviour towards each other slowly begin to crumble. The characters fall into and out of bed with each other until, finally, the relationships have been reshuffled into a new order. Although this has been achieved at the cost of the group's cohesion, by the time the plot has unravelled we wonder how much friendship there ever was.

This book is perfect for a light read. It is highly entertaining; at times extremely funny, occasionally moving but never sentimental. From the blurb, I dreaded a *Friends*-like display of nauseating self-obsession acted out by overgrown adolescents. But the aimlessness of the characters adds to the book's realism, and William Sutcliffe avoids the trap of introspection through his lively and witty use of dialogue.





# An Intellectual Map for the Twenty-First Century



## The Institute of Ideas **LM**

16 JUNE – 16 JULY 2000

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#### SUNDAY 25 JUNE 2000—LM AND TATE MODERN PRESENT:

Beyond the Culture Wars—Social Responsibility and the Cultural Elite

■ Democratising art? ■ Politics, ethics and the arts ■ The cultural responsibilities of the political elite

VENUE: Tate Modern, Bankside, London

#### WEDNESDAY 12 JULY 2000—LM, IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE UNION CHAPEL PROJECT (SPONSORS INCLUDE THE JOHN S COHEN FOUNDATION AND GLOBAL FUTURES), PRESENT:

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#### 8PM WEDNESDAY 12 JULY

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■ KEYNOTE DEBATE What is knowledge?

VENUE: The Union Chapel

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■ The impact of caution on the development of science ■ Modern cautionary tales—GM foods, economics, business

■ Risk consciousness and progress—cowards in a brave new world?

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A complementary evening party FREE for all those who attend or participate in The Institute of Ideas

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Freedom and its Limits

■ Policing our minds? ■ Rights or responsibilities? ■ On liberty—visions of freedom

VENUE: The British Library, Euston Road, London

#### 8PM SATURDAY 15 JULY

A complementary evening debate FREE for all those who attend or participate in The Institute of Ideas

■ KEYNOTE DEBATE—What is it to be human?

VENUE: The Union Chapel

#### SUNDAY 16 JULY 2000—LM AND THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY PRESENT:

The New Culture Wars

■ Identity and culture ■ Access to what? ■ Genius in the era of cultural democracy

VENUE: The Young Vic, London

TICKETS: £25/£20 a day



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