

Mendacity

It's Saturday night. I've just finished John Grisham's "The Last Juror", set in 1960's and 1970's Mississippi. Looking for something different to listen to, I come across a CD from the period by Max Roach, the Jazz drummer. Roach was one of those who drove the bebop revolution in the late 1940's. Instead of killing himself with heroin he was a prominent participant in the civil rights movement, writing the famous 'We Insist! Freedom Now Suite'. There's a track on this 1961 recording called Mendacity, with lyrics sung by Roach's wife Abbey Lincoln. Its first verse runs:

*Mendacity, mendacity, it makes the world go round.
A politician makes a speech and never hears the sound.
The campaign trail winds on and on in towns from coast to coast.
The winner ain't the one who's straight, but he who lies the most.*

Listening to it brought to mind Blair's love affair with America's myths about itself. You can understand admiration of some things American (the tremendous history of struggle by US workers, the civil rights movement, Jazz, Arthur Miller, Joni Mitchell, Steve Earle). However, Blair actually seems to admire all that is worst about the USA and its political system. Does he not know that more than 40 million people have no health insurance, that more than 2 million people are incarcerated in prison, the majority of them Afro-Americans? Less than 40 years ago people were being killed for fighting for democratic rights in a system which masqueraded as a democracy. Roach's lyric continues:

*Yes voting rights in this fair land we know are not denied.
But if I tried in certain states, from tree tops I'd be tied.
Mendacity, mendacity, it seems its everywhere.*

It was only in 1964 that civil rights legislation was introduced giving black American's formal equality: the real thing was another matter. Yet when Blair makes speeches about "the values we share", it is difficult to believe he has ever read a history book on the USA. Can he be so ignorant? Does he really believe that Bush is a supporter of "freedom"? That American "democracy" dates back to the revolution against the British? "All men are equal" said the founders of the US constitution, but slaves were not counted as men, of course.

'Holy trinity'

One of the paradoxes of the USA is that although separation of religion and the state is inscribed in the constitution many more people consider themselves to be Christians than in most European countries. But historically it was a religion which considered Native Americans and Afro-Americans as sub-human. The real American holy trinity comprised the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, and the apartheid system which was introduced after the slaves were declared to be free. Abraham Lincoln who 'freed the slaves', according to US myth, actually said that if he had to free the slaves to win the civil war, he would do it, but if he had to keep slavery to win, he would do that.

America is a country whose riches are the product of mass murder and oppression, resting on a mountain of hypocrisy and lies. Mendacity. The reality is as much the inverse of the propaganda as it is possible to be. Whereas British imperialism had a more genteel 'civilising mission' combined with occasional blood-letting when the 'natives' needed to be taught a lesson, the rising US imperialism simply wiped out the native Americans, driving them off the land. Apparently, God didn't mind them killing the 'savages'. Their Christianity accommodated their rapacious acquisition of land and its resources.

Likewise many Americans in the South could combine their weekly visit to the church with donning the garb of the Klu Klux Klan, and burning out blacks or hanging them from trees. Has Blair not listened to Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit"? The racism in the North was more genteel but none the less real, as shown in the film Far from Heaven where the central character feels the outrage of her friends at the mere suggestion of a relationship with a black man, even though none was taking place.

When American troops came to Britain after Pearl Harbour, many of the locals were shocked by the segregated army and the way that black troops were treated by the whites. Neville Shute's book, "The Chequer Board" tells the story of the barbarism of this segregation, and British people who did not accept this inhumanity. And the war-time experience of black US troops was a salutary one. How could they fight a

war for “freedom” and return to Jim Crow? In his Book “What Now?” Walter Moseley recounts his father telling him that it was only when German troops were trying to kill him that he realised he was an American! Like many southern Blacks he left the south to find work and escape Jim Crow.

Perhaps if Blair had read any Arthur Miller, Bush’s witch-hunting talk of “you are with us, or you are with the evil-doers”, might have called to mind the words of the witch-hunting Judge Danforth in the Crucible:

“But you must understand, sir that a person is either with this court or he shall be counted against it, there be no road in between.”

And woe betide anybody not ‘with us’.

Blair has supported the new McCarthyism which Bush has instituted with his Homeland Security Act and the imprisonment of foreign nationals, many of whom were kidnapped, and then deliberately incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay (illegally occupied Cuban territory) in order to avoid constraints imposed by the US constitution. Nor has his government challenged the US policy of sending prisoners to other countries where they are tortured by other governments to extract information for the Americans. Indeed Home Secretary Jack Straw indicated that the government would use the ‘information’ extracted from such torture, without, of course, supporting such methods. This is a government which allowed British citizens to be illegally held without trial for 3 years.

Strange Liberation

Dave Douglas, a US trumpeter, released a CD, “Strange Liberation”. The title was taken from the words of Martin Luther King in relation to Vietnam. “The Vietnamese must look upon us as strange liberators.” Douglas was touching on the parallel with Iraq today. Bush and Blair are indeed strange liberators. Neither freedom nor democracy can be given to a people, they must win it themselves.

Blair has sought to emulate the conditions which operate in the US economy. The great ‘success’ of its economy is something which Blair and Brown have long spoken of emulating. But behind the propaganda lies an industrial dictatorship far worse even than the one which was gradually introduced here in the Thatcher years. The growth of fabulous riches at the top of US society has been at the expense of the majority of the population. John Gray, writing in “False Dawn” informs that:

“Declining incomes in America affect the working majority, especially the majority of poor people who are in work. The US is the only advanced society in which productivity has been steadily rising over the past two decades while the incomes of the majority – 8 out of 10 – have stagnated or fallen. Such a growth in economic inequality is historically unprecedented.”

*Some get the gravy
Some get the gristle
Some get the marrow bone
Some get nothing
Though there’s plenty to spare*
(Joni Mitchell)

The job creation which New Labour’s ideologues point to has been in jobs with poverty wages. It is called the ‘Walmartisation’ of the economy in the USA: combining poverty wages with a dictatorial regime, and a pathological hatred of unions. Walmart, of course, has destroyed hundreds of local communities, driving small stores out of business, destroying town centres.

'Two party dictatorship'

The Americanisation of British politics is something which Blair and his ideological guides like Peter Mandelson and the SDP ‘intellectuals’ like Roger Liddle consciously sought to introduce. It is based on the concept of the voter as a consumer, with a candidate sold like a bar of soap. It is all froth and no substance. It is the product of what prominent Green Party member Peter Camejo has called the ‘two party dictatorship’. It is the political equivalent of the contest between the big US brands, fighting to increase their share in the market place. It is profoundly undemocratic, designed to block the emergence of another political force, lacking the finances to challenge the two party advertising juggernaut.

Any radical force which threatens the two party system is subject to every conceivable attempt to stop its growth. The Democratic Party is currently involved in an attempt to subvert the Green Party in the USA,

funding forces within it which are abandoning the struggle for a break with the two party system. "There is no alternative" to the Democrats, is the message. Ralph Nader was demonized as the man responsible for the election of Bush, though the Democrats failed to explain how they could be beaten by an imbecile.

Likewise in Britain, we are told there is 'no alternative' to New Labour. But it is the undemocratic first past the post electoral system which blocks the emergence of organisations to the left of New Labour. Many sections of the electorate are not represented in Parliament. Yet with the introduction of an element of proportional representation, as has been introduced in Scotland and Wales, we have seen the emergence of the Scottish Socialist Party and Forward Wales.

The party which was going to 'transform' politics has failed to ask why the last general election produced the lowest electoral turn-out for nearly 100 years. It was not disinterest, but the (correct) perception that people were not being offered alternatives. Even with the introduction of the unrestricted right to a postal vote, the turn out only increased by 2%.

Ideologically there is very little difference between the major parties. And no amount of mendacity by trade union leaders who portray the Blair government in glowing terms, can disguise the reality. For instance the GMB's Debbie Coulter announced that the Blair government was the only one which was 'protecting' Education and Health, at the very time when news emerged that the government was abandoning the 8% target for private companies carrying out elective surgery. They can now have a crack at 100%. When French President Chirac complains of the 'anglo-saxon' model threatening Europe, he misses the point. Blair is no innovator. He has swallowed the American model of the world. Blair is a follower not an equal partner with "the only super-power in the world". He has given their imperial ambitions cover. There could have been no pretense of a "coalition of the willing" without British support.

The US is known for its cult of success. After all, the American Dream paints a picture that anybody can 'succeed' if only they have the will to do so. Individuals can, of course. But the fact that Colin Powell climbed up the ladder does not change the reality that Afro-Americans, as a whole, are at the bottom of the social heap, that they live in geographical ghettos and so on.

"A party of aspiration"

Alan Milburn has expressed the New Labour equivalent of this cult of 'success'. We are, he said, "a party of aspiration". What he meant was a party of personal aspiration. Historically, of course, the Labour Party was a product of a collective movement of the working class. The ambition of the labour movement was originally to organise a struggle to improve the lives of the working class as a whole. Its history is full of people who 'got on' and abandoned the movement and any collective outlook. In the old days British social democracy used to speak of striving for equality as opposed to the Tory party's conception of "equality of opportunity". But New Labour, as with much else, has appropriated this Tory ideological baggage.

Mendacity, mendacity, it seems it's everywhere.

The 'freedom' which Bush speaks of, the 'values' which Blair says we share with the USA, is the freedom of the US 'military-industrial complex' (of which even a Republican like Eisenhower famously warned against when he left office) to impose its will across the globe; to impose its model of 'democracy' and to justify it with lies. The America to look to for inspiration is not that which Blair admires. It is the America which struggles against the witch hunt launched by Bush. It is the America which struggles for trade union rights under very difficult conditions. It is the America where trades union activists struggle against trade union leaders who identify their interests with US big business. It is artists who have the courage to challenge the with-hunting atmosphere, epitomised by Steve Earle, writing sympathetically about John Walker Lind in the wake of 9/11.

It is only possible for Blair and his sycophants to support Bush because they share the same 'vision' of a world in which the Darwinism of the 'free market' has reduced billions to poverty and degradation.

In the run up to the British General Election, revelations emerged over the advice of the Attorney General on whether or not the Iraq war would be 'legal'. It was clear from this and other releases that the government was seeking justification for a decision already taken rather than examining 'evidence'. Blair was labeled 'Bliar' by the anti-war movement. The insistent denials have made him more culpable in the eyes of millions of people. He is today a hated figure, arguably nearly as hated as Margaret Thatcher.

Asked by a US journalist whether the US could have gone to war without British support, Blair said, "I don't know. I think the United States, in the end, would do whatever was necessary for its own security. But it was important that we did not leave this up to the United States alone. I also profoundly believe that September

11th was an attack on the free world...It was an attack on America, because America is the leading power of the free world."

The mendacity of Blair is staggering, though, of course, no surprise. British social democracy from the end of the second world war supported the 'special relationship' between British capitalism and the US regime. It supported the cold war. But even Harold Wilson did not send British troops to Vietnam.

Meanwhile, in the USA, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is in trouble as a result of the campaign of the California Nurses Association against his efforts to scrap a law which sets a minimum patient/nurse ratio in hospitals. Such a law is anathema to Arnold's neo-liberal big business backers, the very ones that Blair is inviting into the British NHS. At the same time Bush's proposal to privatise Social Security is proving very unpopular.

On election night in Britain one of the most striking images was that of Blair standing behind Reg Keys, an anti-war candidate whose son died in Iraq. He secured more than 4,000 votes in Blair's constituency. He said he hoped that Blair could find it in his heart to apologise and maybe even visit some of the soldiers injured in Iraq. The Prime Minister stood there, frozen in the spotlight, empty eyed, but visibly squirming. His victory speech, on the success of his "historic third term", gave the impression of a bruised and battered man rather than someone who had won his third General Election in a row. There was no elation. He paid a heavy price for his alliance with Bush. He should remember the way that the Tory Party unceremoniously ditched Thatcher when they thought she was a liability.

Martin Wicks