

LABOURS WALTERGATE



Of course anyone could have mistaken Walter Wolfgang for Muqtada al-Sadr. They would probably have had to have been on an alcoholic bender for the preceding 5 days, but technically, the confusion of identity is possible. After all, the 82 year old, lifetime peace campaigner was acting suspiciously during the foreign policy debate at Labour's Annual Conference.

For a start, he was actually listening to what the Foreign Secretary was saying; listening enough to know that the pious statements about Britain's ongoing involvement in the occupation of Iraq were a load of duplicitous twaddle.

Military intelligence would later confirm there were warning signs coming from Walter of an imminent insurgent attack. His eyes fired.

His silver hair began to shake. Finally, Walter could contain himself no longer and the revolutionary utterance, "Nonsense" poured from his mouth; a single defiant comment to a Labour gathering now more accustomed to prozac speeches than serious politics.

It was Walter's only comment before the 'shock and awe' response of conference stewards brusquely removed him and had him questioned under anti-terrorism legislation. Walter wasn't the only person this happened to, but he was the only one whose treatment was shown on every television in the land. The obsequious apologies that followed were not because of what happened but because it was caught on camera.

At the beginning of Conference there was an anti-war protest rally in Brighton and an anti-war fringe meeting that we held in the evening. People were already giving first hand accounts of being arrested and cautioned, under terrorist legislation, for wearing 'offensive' T-shirts. The offence, it seems, was to be anti-war or anti-Blair.

Inside and outside the Conference a new spirit of social intolerance runs through every part of Britain's social fabric. The war on terror has become a war on ourselves. The defence of democracy becomes a pretext for destroying it.

Tony Blair did not have to instruct the stewards to be brutal with Walter. Nor did he have to tell the police to get tough on offending T-shirts. All that Blair and other ministers have had to do was bang the anti-terrorist drum and let the fear factor do the rest. Almost any form of pre-emptive, first strike intervention can be justified, now, on security grounds.

For the record, between the time of its introduction and October 2005, 895 people had been arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000. Of these, 496 were released without charge (with or without their T-shirts). Of the rest, 138 were charged under the Terrorism Act and 23 were convicted of offences within it. This is a conviction rate of 2.5%. With over 55% of those arrested walking away without any charge at

all, it is clear that the legislation is being used as a hoovering up mechanism, with little or no protection against abuse.

Those hoping that al-Sadr might get caught up in the sweep are going to be sadly disappointed. The Home Office are very shy about any breakdown of the conviction figures but I understand that few having any connection to al-Qaida and the Middle East. "Still," say Ministers "better safe than sorry".

The same thinking presumably ran through the presentation of a new list of 15 proscribed organisations just rushed through parliament in a single week. MP's were told that the organisations to be banned had a history of violence and needed urgent action against them. The trouble was that parliament had little scope for checking out either the claims or the urgency.

Some groups originated in the 1980s and barely existed beyond the 1990s. Some had committed the crime of changing sides – an Afghan resistance movement who were 'heroes' when fighting against the Russians, but terrorists when attempting to throw us out too.

Some have been overtaken by diplomacy (the group trying to overthrow Colonel Gaddafi). Some appeared stranded in time; described only as having the 'potential' or 'capacity' to commit a terrorist act. In many cases there was little evidence of groups doing anything active apart from continuing to hold anti-western or anti-US beliefs.

Some groups were clearly barking mad and dangerous, but in pragmatic terms there is a more compelling case for keeping them visible and open to surveillance. What worried me most was the moral ambiguity of who we decide to ban and who we don't.

One group in Uzbekistan openly stands for the overthrow of the current regime and the holding of democratic elections. Pretty revolutionary stuff. They see themselves locked in a militant struggle with the Karimov regime. But, given that Karimov has a record of brutality and torture of his own citizens it is hard to see what other sort of struggle would avoid being boiled in oil.

What line should Britain take on organisations demanding regime change by militant means? How do you draw a different line between resistance movements in Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe, or between state brutality in Iran and Israel? Start to divide the world between good tyrannies and bad – ours and theirs – and all you end up with is tyrannies.

Unfortunately parliament was denied the right to explore such difficult issues. MPs were presented with an un-amendable list of the Home Secretary's least favourite international movements. I tried, unsuccessfully, to make the case for adding America's Christian Coalition to the list. After all, its leader (Revd Pat Robertson) openly calls for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. There are, though, clearly different criteria for removal of Dubya's enemies than of his friends. Karimov delivers the oil supply line, Chavez 'obstructs US oil interests'.

How simple the world looks when viewed down the barrel of a barrel. How distant become the rights of citizens when priorities become the protection of corporations. Rough-housing dissenters like Walter Wolfgang just becomes an everyday feature of the post-democratic consensus.

At one level, though, the stewards were right about Walter. A cursory glance through everything he has ever written or spoken about in the peace movement identifies him as a current and present danger; a weapon of mass instruction. Nothing threatens the hype of New Labour like a member with a mind of their own.

Ultimately, organisations can be banned but ideas and injustices will not go away. The culture of authoritarianism that seeks to bury, ban and bomb, eventually destroys itself.

This is not just about war. Labour's Waltergate affair goes into something much deeper. From pensions, to privatisation; from climate change to current energy markets; from means-testing and market-testing to nuclear weapons testing, Walter's 'nonsense' test should be the new baseline of political scrutiny that the Labour Party reinstates. Use it, but watch out for the stewards.

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