

THE QUEENS SPEECH



With all the benefits that only hindsight from the Eurovision song contest can bring, we can now measure the full disappointment of the Queen's Speech. What an opportunity missed.

I never expected much at the most serious and structural level. 'Climate change' appeared as a phrase, but with nothing substantial attached to it. Lots of mention of public sector 'reform', but with no recognition that the simplest way of taking bureaucracy out of the system is to drop the obsession with means-testing that creates the bureaucracy in the first place.

At an international level there was the vaguest of references to Britain playing its full part in the United Nations, but specific commitments were made to Afghanistan and Iraq. It means that Britain gets tied into mopping up after Bush's adventurist wars rather than rebuilding the

UN. Downing St quietly sidelined any commitment to re-connect ourselves to the rule of law and the judgment of the international body set up for the avoidance of war.

Whatever messages Tony Blair received (and understood) from the public in the election he clearly missed the one the rest of us were getting. The single biggest reason people turned away from Labour was the war on Iraq. The duplicity, the absence of threat, the scapegoating of critics in the press, the refusal to recognise that we are trapped as an army of occupation, defending a puppet administration in a war that cannot be won; these were the criticisms on the doorstep.

So much for the big stuff. These are the things New Labour has never been good at. But I did think they were better at choreography.

The Queen's Speech was littered with references to 'respect', though whether you can bring this about by legislation is a much bigger issue. This is New Labour's lurch into the micro-management of other people's lives. I happen to believe it is both a misguided and deeply flawed view of the big challenges we face, but as the speech progressed it became closer to Aretha Franklin and Ali G than to Aneurin Bevan and a vision of socialism.

Given the derisory vote the official British entry later received in the Eurovision song contest, it struck me that a musical rendering of the Queen's Speech might have fared much better. Why hadn't Andrew (now Lord) Lloyd-Webber been asked to turn it into a musical? Much of it is pageant anyway.

Picture the scene: the benches of the Lords, clad in their robes and ermine, rise as one in an 'a capella' rendering of R-E-S-P-E-C-T. To show the modernity and focus of the government programme the aging Lords could then be backed by new, younger, benches of recently ennobled 'Hoodies'. They too could rise into the chorus line of "give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me..." And just to demonstrate that the speech engaged with the multi-racial, multi-cultural society that she presides over, the Queen herself could have finished with a rousing

flourish of high fives and the rallying cry of “Nuff respec fi di bredren.”

The mood would have been up-beat, ebullient. A glowing Prime Minister would turn triumphantly and lead his Cabinet and Ministers from the House of Lords, into the Commons, to their own chorus of “...all I’m askin’ is for a little respect when you come home”.

The press would have been stunned, the nation uplifted, the Prime Minister re-vitalised. Even the Eurovision Song Contest judges would have lifted us above the third-from-bottom spot our official entry was consigned to only a few days later.

Excuse me if this sounds disrespectful of respect. It’s just that a little levity might help in exploring what we really mean by ‘respect’, where we think it has gone and what we are looking for.

It is easy to run with caricatures about the disappearance of respect; a society living in fear of its own children; streets terrorised by generations of young people, respectful of nothing but their own right to self-indulgence. The caricature, however, does no justice to the young, and not much more to the rest of us.

Of course there are serious issues of crime and anti-social behaviour on our estates. But you have to ask where they come from and what they connect to. The kids who steal your car commit a crime that is wayward, selfish and frequently destructive. How different is it, though, from the actions of those who stole your railways, your water, your air, your utilities and public services?

We all condemn criminals who rob banks and post offices. But what of those who steal banks and post offices themselves? Royal Mail has just announced corporate profits and generous dividends, partly on the back of wholesale closure of village and neighbourhood post offices. Where is the condemnation of daylight robbery from society itself?

We live in a political economy that has been told repeatedly we must respect the market – even where the market steals your lifetime pension savings. Within this commodity culture, corporations acquire rights while citizens are given duties. Light-touch regulation means that those who steal from today have no duty to respect (ie. repair) what they contaminate and damage for tomorrow.

In today’s ‘marketised’ view of a service sector, citizens have become customers. You cease to be a passenger on a train, a patient in the NHS, a student in education, an apprentice seeking skill-training. We have all become customers.

The big difference between a citizen and a customer, however, is the ability to pay. Choice of services, comes to mean market choices. And market choices play to divisions in wealth. The more you go down this path, the more you move from a respect for what we hold in common – what we steward from one generation to another – to a respect for what we can purchase individually. For those who lack the power to purchase, ‘respect’ becomes the power to take.

On many of our city streets, respect is already a big issue. Its meaning has been transformed by Thatcher’s children into a respect for power and wealth; respect for brand-name goods, respect for power. Often the violence of young on young, black on black, comes on a justification that the aggressor

was 'diss-ed' by the victim. The disrespect itself need not have amounted to much; a look, a casual phrase. What matters is that respect is a matter of what can be enforced rather than what is earned or shared. This is New Labour's approach too.

Over the years, I have been involved in a host of programmes working with young people. All aimed at deflecting their energies from destructive activities into constructive ones. The most successful schemes reconnected young people to other generations in their own communities. They also involved building up the self-respect of the young as a basis of respecting others and the environment around them. Moreover, the work sought to build a respect for standing up for something better, in the face of the power/bullying of those who would prefer a culture of fear.

Beyond the sceptred shores of parliament, a different, spontaneous, expression of respect overwhelmed all the references in the Queen's Speech. It was the respect given to George Galloway's appearance before the Senate Investigation Sub-committee hearings into sanctions-busting in Iraq. Everyone knew that the hearings have been the pre-text for a McCarthyite witch-hunt of George Bush's enemies, but no one had ever seen a Senate Committee taken on and trashed (without notes) in such a remarkable way.

Every broadcasting station in the land went onto autopilot while staff hung, riveted, to the proceedings. For days, it was the only topic of conversation. Most people are well aware of George's immense talents and weaknesses, but the overwhelming reaction was 'Respect'. No... 'RESPECT'.

There, in the belly of the beast, was a voice unafraid to challenge its power and its duplicity. Without a gun or a single power of law enforcement to call upon, Galloway challenged the Inquisition over its right to bomb people's lives into ruins because a tyrant, who was once the President's friend, had 'dissed' the President's dad.

In the springtime of Labour's first term, we talked about a willingness to stand up to the bullies in the playground. In the best sense of doing this, it is about discovering that if we stand together to protect what we hold in common, we can overcome the selfishness of those who are individually more powerful.

In today's world, the powerful, the exploitative and the destructive are those who treat life merely as a commodity with a rapidly approaching sell-by date. Ultimately we will be judged differently; as much by our willingness to respect the global estate as the local one.