

Joe has something to say!

Note from the Editor – *David Whettingsteel: I hope your f*****g happy now. Most of the article was written in January, but some amendments were made in February, followed by the editing process. We have had to publish it in PDF to minimize the possibility of copyright infringement.*

I was asked to write something for the site before Christmas. I squealed and protested. Admin insisted - one thousand words, two at the most. It occurred to me that it was a long time since I had written anything for the website. So I wrote something. It took rather longer than planned. It is over twenty five thousand words long. By my calculation that means I have between twelve and twenty-five years off from writing anything again for the website. The delay was because we were waiting to see whether I would be allowed back into the USA. That is a lie. The delay was because it was 26,000 words long.... Sorry.

If you are a right wing, reactionary Christian I would go read something else. If you are an extremist, fundamentalist Muslim perhaps you should do the same. If you are a very sensitive American who cannot take criticism then turn away now, as well as British Muslims, most of New Labour, Blair, Bush, Blunkett, in fact all politicians and anyone fond of furry animals and stories with happy endings. This has been quite an eye opening year from my point of view. If you don't like my point of view I would go somewhere else because it's the only view I have.

It might make for an interesting read. Then again, it could be mind numbingly boring. It might infuriate you, make you laugh, spit with anger, or fall asleep. It should not offend you. If this offends you there is treatment available. However it will not necessarily cheer you up. If it engenders discussion, splits opinions, causes schisms, and creates debate, then all well and good. If it bores you silly and sends you to sleep then at least I may have found a cure for insomnia. It may even be an exercise into getting me back into the swing of writing. It will be political, hopefully interesting, maybe intelligent, possibly perceptive and leavened with a little light humour. I may make enemies by it – but then they would never have been my friends. I may make friends – but then I will never meet them. Am I bovered? Nah! Not much... Hopefully it will stop some of you gossiping about my sexuality, my apparent penchant for high heels and the likelihood of ever writing a novel, although somehow I doubt it.

Last year (like this one) started with a manic spell of talks and travel taking in Atlanta, San Francisco, Rhodes, London, Paris, Salt Lake City and Birmingham. It then ran into the startling barrier of US Immigration and the ludicrously named Department of Homeland Security in Atlanta on the 21st of March. Despite cogent arguments and reasoned explanation I was held in detention for four hours on arrival in Atlanta airport and enjoyed being questioned about my VISA status. My experience of US Immigrations, and that of most non-American fellow travellers that I have talked to, is one of brusque, arrogant rudeness, the like of which would astonish most of that country's own citizens if routinely treated that way. Naturally I and everyone else aware of this

tend to be on our best behaviour and accept the treatment without complaint since they have such a huge amount of power over the arriving traveller. I have always thought that they represent the worst advert possible for the country they serve. For arriving outsiders who, wrongly or rightly, may not regard American culture as the best thing since sliced bread, the first people they encounter (after the extraordinarily rude and disdainful cabin staff on American carriers) are people who seem unable to understand that efficiency does not have to come at the expense of courteousness and good manners. From then on visitors are constantly amazed by the hospitable and generous nature of the people they meet on their visit, since up until then they had assumed that everyone was like the Immigrations and cabin staff folk.

Anyway I digress. On arrival I was asked why I was entering the country for the 2nd time inside a week and only staying for three days. I said that I was on business and on being asked whether I was being paid informed the officer that I was being paid by a British company. I was told that if I was being paid by an American company I was subject to tax payable to the IRS and therefore required a work visa. I again pointed out that I was a British citizen subject to British Income tax, Corporation tax, and value added tax and that I had nothing to do with the IRS. I therefore believed that I was not required to have a work visa and could enter on the Visa waiver rule. He informed me that everyone is subject to the IRS. I said, no, only US citizens. I was escorted to a detention area for a more thorough grilling. I knew at that point that my goose was cooked since the man in question clearly enjoyed his uniform and power. He was the ultimate 'jobs-worth'. The more phone calls put through to American lawyers and British agents the more he seemed to relish his power.

After four hours of fruitless conversation with a man, who for the most part gave me the impression that he was unaware that there was any tax system other than the IRS and in fact seemed a little doubtful about the existence of any other nations at all, I was escorted back onto the same plane I had disembarked from four hours earlier and seated in the same seat. Just before I was dispatched to the waiting plane I quietly asked what exactly it was that I had done wrong since I would need to explain myself to both the client and my agent on return to Britain. Jabbing his finger aggressively at the green Immigration form the officer barked.

'See that?' (I'm sure he said 'boy' with a drawled Southern accent or perhaps I've seen too many films.)

'Yes, it's an Immigration form.' I said with forced cheeriness.

'Did you sign this form?'

'Er, looks like it...yes.'

'When you signed that form you waived your rights.' He stated bluntly and stared at me with silent significance.

'Oh really, well how about that... trouble is, you see, if I don't sign it I cannot enter the country.' I smiled hopefully. 'And really I just wanted to know...'

'You have no rights.' He stabbed the form with his finger. 'You are not a US citizen. I do not have to answer your questions. Sit down.'

'Charming.' I muttered and he glared at me before dealing with five guys who had entered the country on false documents from El Salvador. He later

read the riot act to a bemused man who looked like a pimp from Marseilles and there was a brief ruckus and lots of shouting and I was escorted into a side room by three officers clutching the holsters on their hips. 'For my protection' they said, though I felt a lot safer and seemed to have more in common with the low life criminals that I appeared to be detained with. In the meantime I read a wonderful book by Sharma on Gettysburg called 'Killer Angels' before the guards came for me.

I was escorted to the plane by an alarmingly obese guard who walked the entire distance with his hand hovering over his holster and looking as if he was about to draw at any moment, or have a heart attack. I began to worry for his safety, then for mine. I'm not exactly sure what threat he thought I constituted, but of course you cannot be too careful (or too stupid and lacking in common sense) these days. Still, it was a tad embarrassing to be paraded in front of the passengers who were queuing at the boarding gate. I smiled wanly at them and tried to give the impression of being a highly important member of the diplomatic staff being escorted to his First Class seat. Unfortunately everyone saw his hand resting menacingly on his holster. Oh well, I thought, been through a lot worse. When the pompous fool finally delivered me to the aircraft door, he actually said 'Have a nice day, now,' trying to control my giggling I asked for my passport to be returned, but was curtly told that it was being given into the custody of the cabin staff.

I took my seat beneath the practiced disdain of the cabin staff. They clearly thought that I was some sort of odious, deported drug dealer being kicked out of their wonderful country. Drinks were handed around. I was ignored for some reason. An hour after take off and unable to take the scorn any longer, I approached three members of staff in the galley and explained what had happened. To my delight they were aghast at my treatment and exclaimed that if this continued to happen they would lose all their business travellers (it was Delta Airlines, and I just hope they have by now). After this, they were falsely friendly and cringingly insincere in their apologetic fawning for the next nine hours. When I asked whether I could have my passport back however, they replied that this was not possible until we had left US jurisdiction. When asked when that would be I was told that I could have it back when we were over the Atlantic. That one really cracked me up. For some reason, only explicable to themselves, they felt that even though we were travelling at an altitude of 33,000 feet, at something approaching 500 miles an hour, it would only be safe to return my passport once over the ocean since, theoretically, my manic desire to enter the US may result in me jumping out of the aircraft while still over flying the country. Come on guys, nice country but not that nice.

During the flight I gathered my thoughts on all things American. Boy did I gather them! Look, I do not hate America. Far from it. But they do make it very hard to like them sometimes. I watched as a stewardess glared furiously at a passenger who had had the temerity to press the call button. I watched the poor man wilt under the obnoxious contempt of her sneering enquiry as to what exactly he wanted. Okay, I haven't yet developed the sort of furious xenophobia that I became enraged with every time I met someone from China when I was writing about the genocidal abuse of Tibet. Nor have I started saying things like, 'Some of my best friends are American but...' (*actually that is because none of*

your best friends are American. Ed). I used to have this idea of them being loud, brash and pushy and I discovered that they were. I thought of them as hospitable, friendly, traditionally conservative with a small 'c' and amusingly patriotic in a way that no old world Europeans would ever be. I thought that their politicians were a joke with prime time hair and no brains and I was right. They were a society tensioned by extreme opposites. For every right wing reactionary Christian there was a Californian crystal-spinning, liberal loony to balance things out. They were perfectly balanced on account of the huge chips they had on each shoulder. They were presently governed by a frighteningly inadequate leader who delegated much of his power to people who were truly evil and alarming, and the world was a very much more dangerous place because of it. They have a President who famously mangles language. We now know that this is because of a conflict between his brain and the wireless transmitter glued to the centre of his back which tells him what to say and probably accounts for his uncanny ability to say exactly the wrong thing with exactly the wrong emphasis at exactly the wrong time. Hey, and there were we laughing at Reagan and the Spitting Image sketches about the Presidents brain being missing. Reagan is now revered as one of their best leaders ever (honest), which is a little scary when you see the puppet Bush.

I watched the stewardess return and slam a drink on the passenger's table with an audibly angry clunk. He bobbed his head and smiled wanly. I bet he was glad he had bought a business class ticket. What would she have done to some poor creature huddled in stowage? Glassed him, I thought, as I watched her turn away. Her lips were pursed in a tight, vinegary sphincter of a scowl. Her mouth permanently lined by a deep, unyielding disdain. What is wrong with these people?

What is this 'have a nice day, jerk!' attitude towards customers that seems increasingly common in America today? America used to be the inspiration for capitalists everywhere. This is the nation that invented the phrase 'the customer is king... the client is always right.' Cheerfulness, attentiveness, enthusiasm and politeness seemed to be the watchword of everyone working in American customer service. Those days have long gone now. It is not just the vicious dried up harpies employed by US airline carriers; it is in the whole economy. Everyone now has their horror story tales of rude and abusive employees and humiliated customers. To visitors expecting the 'have a nice day' welcome this comes as some surprise, particularly to a Brit coming as they do from a country renowned for its mealy mouthed 'who wants to know' version of customer service. The relationship between service provider and customer in modern America has been transformed. In a way it mirrors the yawning chasm that seems to exist between what the people think its politicians are doing and what they are actually doing.

The once praised currency of American success, the quality of customer service, has deteriorated beyond recognition. Sad to say, it is still far above anything to be found in Britain, but then we never really 'did' the customer service ethic; it was too American, too false for the average Brit and anyway, we like warm beer, cold coffee and abuse from waiters and shop staff. The claustrophobic amount of attention shown by over zealous staff when shopping in the US would overpower the average Brit and being naturally more suspicious

and cynical, they would immediately assume that this is not 'service', but an attempt to get something from them that they do not wish to give. Outraged, they promptly leave the shop without making a purchase.

Service has changed in America because technology has transformed both the way people now shop and the ease with which they can do it. It has also kept prices low and made the business even more ferociously competitive. Customer satisfaction in surveys of almost all areas of the economy – airlines, TV and telecom companies, post office, hospitals, shopping malls and theatres – is well down compared to a decade ago. Part of the reason for this is that the educated, skilled workers who used to interact directly with customers in the 1950's have now moved to better, but more remote, areas of the retail sector. In their place are legions of workers on minimum wages who do not want to be there. Racial inequality in low-end service jobs add to this problem. The bulk of these jobs in wealthy white neighbourhoods are filled predominantly by African Americans or Latinos. Low wages, ethnic resentment and a perceived economic injustice creates angry and bitter employees.

Tipping has a lot to do with it. The 15% tip was once regarded as a reward for good service. In Britain people still tend to have this idea about tipping. In the States it is viewed as an entitlement and an essential part of an employee's wages. I have always thought that tipping was the most pernicious form of moral blackmail that, in America, holds millions of people to ransom every day. I have never really understood it. If I go and buy a tin of paint I do not pay an extra 15% because it 'is' a tin of paint. If I hire a car I do not pay extra because it carries me from A to B. So why should I tip a waitress for giving me what I ordered or a taxi driver for taking me where I wanted to go? Restaurant staff have abused customers for giving less than the 15% which is now seen as a minimum; some customers have been chased from the building despite their protestations that the food was awful, cold, the service angry and rude, and the wait interminable. Companies tracking our every purchase and every move will treat wealthier customers better than poorer ones. Pretty soon society is being divided by racial and financial lines straight down the middle. The amount of care and attention directed to us is in direct proportion to our status, wealth and in some areas, race. Some would say that the poor black communities left to fend for themselves in New Orleans during Hurricane Katerina were a perfect example of this process in action throughout America. Would this happen in Britain? Ask a young unemployed Muslim in a depressed area of Bradford or Birmingham and you might get a shock.

Still, all things being equal, I suppose I was lucky. I sipped a stiff gin and tonic and watched passengers averting their eyes when I smiled at them. I mean you can't be too careful these days, what with all the terrorists and mad mullahs running around (and I don't mean in the White House and Downing Street!). For all I know, if I had been less restrained and so politely British, I could at this very minute be dressed in an orange jump suit, gagged, masked, drugged and winging my way on some spectral CIA ghost flight to Guantanamo Bay for a little light torture and xenophobic abuse before being returned, in the dead of night, to Britain where, before I could kiss the ground, I would be whisked off to Belmarsh prison, tried without a jury and then dumped in the back streets of Cairo when they realised they had got the wrong man.

Security and immigration are serious and sensitive matters, but some people in their enthusiasm to do a thorough job forget that simple courtesy and manners do not need to go by the wayside. I was clearly a respectful businessman in an unusual situation, but I was treated as a criminal with the same disdainful contempt that I saw the officers displaying towards 5 El Salvadorians being deported for having false papers and towards another abusive man being restrained after he too was informed that he was being deported. At this point I was dramatically hustled into the side room for my own safety as five officers surrounded the man. It was laughable. There was never any danger. The man was simply distraught, confused and angry. The bullying show of strength hardly calmed the situation - but that is how they seemed to do things. A little too much bravado and swagger and a lot less commonsense and calm. Bureaucracy and uniforms do have a habit of creating strange behaviour in some folk.

Travelling frequently in America, it is soon driven home that there is something seriously awry with their notions of good security. Despite spending a vast budget it has done a laughably poor job at protecting its citizens; well laughable if it were not so disturbing. It seems that the golden rule is to be vigilant where it hardly matters and hardly vigilant where it really does. For example, after bizarre laptop revealing, shoe removing, nail file stealing moments in an endless queue one is eventually herded on to a plane, given plastic cutlery to eat appalling food and spend the hours idly wondering which burly cowboy type is an Air Marshall and hoping against hope that we will not be diverted to Newfoundland to kick off Cat Stevens or a twelve year old girl travelling as an unaccompanied minor, whose only crime is to have Omar as her surname! Yet while this daily charade goes on 20,000 planes a month fly into New York with unscreened cargo in their holds!! Go figure. Would we not be better off, all being armed to the teeth with weapons that cannot penetrate the fuselage? If I was a terrorist the alarming thought of 400 nervously enraged passengers advancing on me would, as sure as snowballs melt in hell, quickly change by dastardly plans!

Vast sums are promised to develop the latest detection devices which will recognize the terrorists... well it would do so if they actually knew who they were, which at the time of 9/11 they didn't. Today the data banks of the machines would need to be loaded with the facial records of all potential terrorists which nobody has - go figure, no better still, not bother! Manufacturers of these latest machines proudly boast that they are accurate in 99.32% of cases which, at first glance, seems pretty darn impressive, until you do a wee bit of mathematics. At a busy airport such as Boston, Logan this would mean some 170,000 mistaken identities every year and approximately 500 people per day would be arrested, taken away and detained for questioning. It seems that in the last four years national security has been in the hands of people who have gleaned their entire inspiration from Tom Clancy novels! To make matters worse, when errors are made, everyone furiously refuses to take any responsibility and solve the latest problem. Not taking responsibility creates sloppiness, arrogance and rudely officious and ineffective treatment of passengers. God, it is infuriating to have a harmless laser light pointer taken off me with stern warnings of its pilot-blinding threat. I once pointed out that if I

managed to hold the pilots head still for half an hour, while shining the laser into one of his eyes, I may inflict a little light sensitive irritation, but only if his head was very still. I added that I would have a better chance of succeeding if I hi-jacked the cockpit armed with a vibrator. They duly searched my bag for such a sex aid with unsmiling efficiency!

On a more serious note it leads to the buck passing and lack of control that allowed Abu Ghraib to happen. Another aspect, probably unimportant to a proudly nationalistic security official, is such treatment makes alot of people in alot of the world dislike America, just at the very moment that she needs, and deserves, all the friends and allies she can get. I still cannot quite understand what staggering levels of incompetence in the Bush administration led to the squandering of the massive amount of global sympathy that flooded the States after 9/11 from all corners of the world. It is quite a numbing thought that a man's very limitations become the true threat to a nation's security and while proudly boasting that his true strengths lie in his ability to delegate, ignores the fact that he has delegated to some truly alarming characters!

But as a non US citizen I have no rights and I should sit down. It is worth however, pointing out that America has almost no practical experience of dealing with organised terrorism, unlike most European countries. Yet, as a nation, it appears to look upon terrorism as its sole problem, as if it was the only possible target. So it has thrown alot of money at it. \$550 billion to be precise and yet not only is Osama still popping up on video releases and al-Qaeda thriving happily, the defense and homeland security guys still have no idea who posted anthrax spores through the US mail. Inspires confidence doesn't it? If there was anything good to come out of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, perhaps it was that a nation woke up to the fact that having spent over eight billion dollars on an election to return the sitting President, this disaster above all his other calamitous actions, finally revealed his true incompetence. Maybe for the first time they are seeing that his administration is woefully incapable of providing security for his own people, let alone achieving global security for the rest of the world.

Okay, okay, so I'm biased. I got thrown out of the damn place and it annoyed me but that is not the only reason for this rant. Sure, nations always bicker among each other. The Yanks think we are all anally retentive Limeys, the French think they are Gods, the Germans are a nation in search of a sense of humour and we think the Americans are either extreme right wing fundamentalist Christians, or all space cadets from California. We all have stereotypical views of each other and, oddly enough, there is always a little truth even in the most extreme of them, but that doesn't mean we hate each other. It means we generally work together towards a common cause in a state of mutually disdainful accord. As America continues to isolate herself from the friendship of so many nations who would otherwise have stood by her side, how much more difficult will it be for her tackle those factions and nations that hate her, rightly or wrongly, for what they feel her government's have done to them? Anyway, I can't go there so why am I getting so agitated? In fact, if I did go there having just written this rant, I can only see me returning to the UK in an orange jump suit in a state of psychological collapse having spent time in isolation not being tortured!

Still there was one positive aspect to the whole experience... I was so livid, surprised, offended and generally baffled by the whole incident that it took my mind off my recurring fear of flying for the rest of the nine hour flight back to Manchester. I didn't contemplate the orgasmic life of pigs for one moment. Great start to the year!

Now, at the end of the year, and despite being assured that I was not guilty of a criminal offence and that I was only sent back on a minor visa irregularity, I still cannot get the hieroglyphics scribbled in my passport rescinded. It is all very odd. I was sent home with the assurance that I was not being deported and therefore not guilty of a criminal offence. I get home and find that I should never have been sent home in the first place since I was not contracted to a U.S. company. However they will not remove the note in my passport which now means I am no longer eligible for entrance under the visa waiver scheme. To attend business conferences in America I would have to apply for a work visa, but I have now been told I will not be eligible for that either. I can apply for a visa as an 'Alien with extraordinary abilities' (*sounds like a spider crab type who is good on a unicycle, Ed.*) but this costs thousands of dollars for every application. This in itself is a time consuming, expensive business and it seems, involves being questioned by the CIA in the London US Embassy. I'm looking forward to it tremendously especially after filling out the visa application form and being so impressed with the thoroughness and directness of their questions. Here are a few cracking examples to which I must answer 'yes or no'. Potential criminals or terrorists must be shivering with fear at the thought of having to answer such questions. See my first attempt below. I've been advised by admin to try again.

- *Have you ever unlawfully distributed or sold a controlled substance (drug), or been a prostitute or procurer for prostitutes?*

...hmmm... now let me think about that one. I did once go out with Sharon from Broomhall... okay, she was a bit rough, but I don't think that counts. She didn't cost 'owt... but I did get thrush...

- *Do you seek to enter the United States to engage in export control violations, subversive or terrorist activities, or any other unlawful purpose?*

...well, yes I did actually, but now you ask I can see the error of my ways, sorry mate.

- *Are you a member or representative of a terrorist organization as currently designated by the U.S. Secretary of State?*

Erm...no, no, pretty sure on that one, but could you give me a list of the ones that are currently designated by the U.S. Secretary of State? What's his name by the way? Oh, yes, I forgot. I am a member of the Netheredge Crown Green Bowling Club, not that I like bowling of course, it's just that we could get extended drinking as members a few years ago and...

- *Have you ever been afflicted with a communicable disease of public health significance or a dangerous physical or mental disorder?*

I once had a nasty bout of thrush... very unpleasant... quite thought provoking actually... nasty blisters... think it was Sharon, she was a buggar on the vodka and Snakebite...oh, and I got quite animated when we won the Ashes last summer and was banned from the Bowling Club for two days.

- *Have you perpetrated acts of moral turpitude?*

How dare you? I hate decorating. I was once caught shagging the landlady of the Netheredge Crown Green Bowling Club on the pool table. I was barred for a fortnight... does that count?

Have you ever participated in persecutions directed by the Nazi government of Germany?

Don't be daft. I told you that I was a member of the Netheredge Crown Green Bowling Club. Nazi's have been barred since 1939 and Germans... and most people who don't come from Netheredge. We have our standards you know? Heil! Sorry...

Have you ever participated in genocide?

Of course not... but, clever question and I can see where you are coming from. I tripped up on a similar question last year when my application to join the Netheredge Allotments Society was rejected. Very clever indeed... do you have to wear those sunglasses inside or are you just shy?

Have you ever been a drug abuser or addict?

Err.. not that I know of but I do have a strong liking for purple sprouting broccoli... that was why I tried joining the Netheredge Allotments Society but I'm off it now.

While a YES answer does not automatically signify ineligibility for a visa, if you answered YES you may be required to personally appear before a consular officer.

What? Even if I've admitted to being a card bearing member of the Nationalist Socialist Party and a drug addicted pimp running a worldwide terrorist organisation responsible for at least one proven instance of genocide? Bugger! This always happens to me.

Now, it seems, I can't even go on holiday there (*do you want to? Ed... er, no...*) unless I apply for a tourist visa since I'm exempt from the visa waiver scheme. Yet I have been assured that I have done nothing wrong! It was an unfortunate misunderstanding nothing more. It was amusing to see on the US Embassy website page an announcement declaring support for some conference on human rights. These were the very rights I had to waive to get into the country and having waived them could do nothing about rescinding a mistake by the Immigration officer because, guess what.. I had no rights! I don't wish to be treated in this way every time I try to enter the country. Sometimes bureaucracy is hilarious even if extremely costly. So much for the 'special relationship'. Oh well, saves me an awful lot of tedious travel (and abuse) and makes a good pub story I suppose...

Then again... the fun and games in Atlanta did make me think about the country I now live in and how many changes had been forced on the fabric of our nation. As I spend more and more time in Ireland the contrasts seem clearer every day. I have never been overtly political, but I really don't like the direction we are moving in and I do wonder what our fathers and grandfathers, who fought on the blood soaked battlefields of the First and Second Wars for liberty, freedom of speech and human rights, would now think of the state of the country. Bush and Blair have an awful lot to answer for as they now, lame duck leaders, seek for some tawdry bauble in the cesspool they have created to

hold up as their legacy. They may well be seen to be idiots who have sown unreasonable levels of fear in their society to justify their foreign policies, while at the same time overseeing an unprecedented assault on our human rights and civil liberties, in the name of making the world a safer place. It most certainly does not feel safer.

Iraq has been an unmitigated disaster and is now a raging hotbed of insurgents and terrorists, none of whom would have lasted 24 hours under the watchful eye of Saddam's fearsome secret police. Don't know about you guys, but if you find a wasp nest lying on your lawn, you don't start booting it around in an effort to get rid of it! Now, as they scrabble around trying to find some way out of the calamity they have administered, we get a clearer picture of quite what they have achieved and, at what cost. Just before Christmas Blair visited British troops in Basra to assure them that unlike the previous year security was now 'completely changed'. He omitted to point out that the same British troops had been forced to pull out of two anarchic provinces since then. Nor did he mention that it was impossible for him to roam outside the military fortress that he was visiting, that he could not drive anywhere in Iraq let alone talk to an Iraqi. The life of a journalist is now so dangerous in Iraq, that reporting consists entirely of deduction from 'circumstantial evidence' gleaned while trapped in the safe American 'green zone' in Baghdad. Outside of this is so lethal it can only be visited in a heavily armoured American military convoy. National security is non-existent. The borders are porous. Fatalities and explosions are rising day by day. The rebuilding of the infrastructure has failed and been abandoned. Baghdad receives only slightly more electricity per day than it did before the war. Even the lawyers at Saddam's trial cannot be protected by the Americans; two have already been murdered.

Lawlessness, kidnapping and murder are rife. Children of professionals are snatched daily, women are shot for being improperly dressed, barbers executed for shaving off beards. There have been three elections, but without security this does not mean there is democracy, whatever Bush might like to tell us. Those who proclaim the democracy that has now been brought to Saddam's formerly subjugated nation would not dare set foot in the place. The vain glory, ineptitude and downright cruelty of the ill conceived policy is now plain for all to see. President Bush will have his legacy. It will be that heroic photograph of him posing in full combat flight kit, on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. The lie within a lie, by a man who had so assiduously avoided combat service. Then there followed his be-suited presidential announcement with that banner 'Mission Accomplished' waving even more lies in the wind above his head. Perhaps the true legacy that will live on, long after the children have stopped crying for their slaughtered parents, long after the reasons for war have been forgotten, will be the coruscating hatred for his nation that he has managed to engender in the minds of so many millions around the world. He has not made the world a safer place and one begins to wonder who really is the 'Axis of Evil'. Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld seem to spring to mind.

They have to cut and run now because they have no choice not, as they will try and assure us because they have enabled the people of Iraq to stand on their own feet, but because they will only be able to stand once this bungled attempt to defeat terrorism has left their land. It will be hard, brutal and bloody

with little guarantee that the country will not now descend into civil war. Government ministers, local mayors, police and army chiefs will have to cut deals with criminal gangs and religious militias to fix the boundaries of their domains and reach some sort of workable settlement. Saddam style killing squads and torture chambers have already been revived by the present government. Tyranny and separatism are the most likely outcome. The strongest group in the present coalition government is the cleric-backed pro-Iranian Sciri, also known as The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Iran will be the greatest benefactor. If it takes control of the south of the country it will turn towards the east, not the west, for its future allies. I'll bet Iraqi women are not ululating their joy at this liberating news. Bush has comprehensively shot himself in both feet, but then guns and incompetence never go well together. Blair, for reasons few can fathom, has done the same.

In reality America and its Allies never sustained any sort of occupation, let alone civil security and an effective re-building programme. It imposes no laws, exerts no control and watches helplessly as the infrastructure it has vainly poured billions of dollars into repairing, is sabotaged daily. An audit of US reconstruction spending in Iraq has revealed staggering levels of incompetence and corruption. With the military and security service of the country dismantled and with no banking system to speak of, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led by Paul Bremer received UN approval to fund reconstruction with seized Iraqi oil assets mostly held in the US Federal Reserve in New York. C17 cargo planes carrying pallets of shrink-wrapped bundles of crisp \$100 bills began arriving in Iraq. \$12 billion in cash weighing 363 tonnes has since arrived. It was handed out like candy. \$9 thousand million dollars cannot now be accounted for. The US has so far spent £262 billion on the Iraq war and the CPA has spent in excess of £40 billion on reconstruction, both of which have achieved almost nothing.

Oil exports are now at their lowest since the 2003 invasion. Today civilians die in riots incited by blackouts and mile long queues caused by petrol shortages in a country which has the second largest oil reserves in the world. By 2004 the Americans had abandoned all attempts to police the cities and the countryside and had retreated to over 100 fortified bases. At least in Vietnam soldiers could move freely in Saigon. In Iraq travel is by air or heavily armed convoys at high speed. Search and destroy missions do not project power and control. They only increase the death toll, fuel resentment and empower the insurgency. This was never an occupation despite the shock and awe invasion and idiotic displays of military firepower since.

Iraq was a symptom of everything that is wrong with the Bush administration. It is hubristic, hides from the truth, ignores advice and is wedded to political cronyism. Despite the much trumpeted democracy that has been brought to Iraq, it has little to do with Bush's original aims. Then again he has blown the 'democracy' trumpet so often before that its notes are beginning to sound a little flat. I wonder whether the man can even spell the word! Far from creating an independent, secular democratic state in Iraq to replace Saddam's tyranny the coalition has been laying the groundwork for a divided rather than united state. Voting in Iraq is not as free as Bush would happily proclaim - as he did for Afghanistan's first elections - far from it. Bush may

stick to the 'fiction' of a free vote but the reality is a people waiting for 'orders' from their leaders as to how they should vote. There is no doubt that Moqtada al Sadr dictated and controlled the recent elections and used their considerable majority to push through hard line Shia policies terrifying Kurd and Sunni minorities alike.

In truth America and Britain so want to escape from the mess in Iraq that they have stopped being a mid-wife to Iraq's fledgling democracy and have since become active abortionists. They have thrown in their lot with the militant extremists to the extent of refusing to hunt down Moqtada and effectively formed a devil's pact with him by which US lives will be spared and an easy exit assured so long as al Sadr becomes the next Saddam. The elections were no more than a theatrical event for US media consumption. A largely ignorant American audience would happily lap up the utopian promise of democracy as presented by Fox news shots of Iraqi's queuing to vote. Already killing squads have eliminated opposition, fear rules in Sadr city and it will be a Shia Saddam in charge with the name of Moqtada by the time the US and coalition forces have scuttled away from that blighted country. Bush and his cronies rushed into Iraq with little sense of purpose beyond a quick and easy victory. They made little provision for controlling the peace and have paid a heavy price for their arrogant folly. They have created a theocratic Islamic state which is ripe for either civil war or totalitarian repression. They have also made Iraq and Iran into bosom buddies just at a time when Islam is becoming increasingly polarised in the region.

Iran, 90% Shia and highly covetous of Iraq and her oil is now rattling her sabers as hard as she can. The unimaginable but ultimately inescapable truth is that now we may have to go to war with Iran. As this country determinedly heads down the road to gaining nuclear weapons, Bush has been running around Iraq like a headless chicken searching for weapons of mass destruction, blind to the fact that Iran was already building them. Iran was always the real threat to the region, not Iraq, but Bush has so enfeebled both the US and the UN militarily and politically that even our tools of diplomatic persuasion have been fatally blunted. War in Iran is unthinkable but probably now unavoidable. Military strikes will entrench and strengthen the Iranian regime. Iran will cut its oil supply from global markets, leading to oil prices at recession-inducing levels; prices of \$150 per barrel are easily forecast. Military action will strengthen the insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, foster even more violence in the Middle East, increase world wide anti-western feeling among Muslims, and encourage even more terrorism against us at home. If it goes nuclear, Iran will become a new regional superpower in an area riven by religious and ethnic hatred. Others will follow suit and we shall have a nuclear Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Iran will step up its campaign of terror around the world and this time America will be helpless. Terror training camps in Iran, protected by nuclear missiles, will be impregnable. Already there is talk of sanctions. These did not appear to work in Iraq. If we do not get dragged into a pre-emptive strike do you seriously believe that Israel will sit back and watch as Iran goes nuclear? Yet the perception that the USA is trying to control and influence the region simply strengthens the nationalistic people of Iran to want their own nuclear weaponry. If Israel, why not us? It is a good question and hard to answer. Bush still spouts on about

having made the world a safer place; only an American audience could believe such idiocy!

What better tool to make the world a safer place than the average US soldier, once described as 'ill educated, hate-filled, trailer-trash soldiers whose cultural ignorance borders on institutional racism.' Many of these soldiers have never been abroad before, let alone to somewhere as alien as Iraq or Afghanistan, yet they confront these new populations through filtered screens of sunglasses, heads-up-displays, joystick screens of pilotless drones, rifle sights and night vision glasses and step into a war that makes no sense to them, and which is refracted through far too many lenses. They kill and maim because that is their job and they believe in the American way, and they know no different. It is not their fault that they have been thrown into a war more akin to *Apocalypse Now* without the jungles or *Mad Max* with camels. It is Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney who are to blame.

As recent intelligence suggests that Taliban activity is greatly increasing in southern Afghanistan, Britain prepares to send three thousand more troops, effectively to cover an American withdrawal from the region. Donald 'dickhead' Rumsfeld regards Afghanistan as past history, a war, like that in Iraq, long since won, and he wants out of there fast. It was no more to him than a forward base to hunt terrorists and in which to practice illegal 'interrogations' far from the media's prying eyes. 10,000 American troops combed the country for Bin Laden and his cronies and found nothing. They disregarded their law and international law as they bombed whoever they wished to, wherever they were. As in Iraq, they had no intention of nation building. A puppet regime under the leadership of Hamid Karzai was installed and protected but he is helpless as he wanders around the conference circuits of the world pleading for aid that will never come. He won't last long once the Americans have left - and the Americans won't care at all. Britain may be left holding the squalling baby. When will Bush and Blair understand that a vaguely aggressive stance based on 'defeating terrorism' is not a creditable policy upon which two, and now maybe three, heinously expensive wars may have to be fought.

The plan now is to withdraw from Iraq as soon as the 'security situation permits' which it never will, but is probably why Blair is lying to the troops in Basra assuring them that security is now 'completely changed' from last year - true but untrue.

That we now know we went to war on a tissue of lies is bad enough, although not surprising given that politicians only exist to lie. That they are now lying to us in their efforts to extricate themselves is, I suppose, only to be expected. Yet what is truly astonishing is the fact that despite knowing that they lied, we then re-elected them!

The tragedy of Iraq has had a knock on effect on all our lives. We have allowed our governments to behave in a way that some would regard as bordering on totalitarian. It was interesting to note how infuriated Blair became during 'Prime Minister's Questions' last year when some MP shouted out a gibe about a police state. Perhaps the truth hurt?

Guantanamo Bay and the illegal use of imprisonment without trial in Belmarsh prison dishonours us all. Torture is torture however you twist your words Ms.Rice. Britain, once the home of free speech, has become a place

where people can no longer say what they think, where the police arrest you for speaking your mind and where the politicians seem incapable of balancing the competing claims of security and liberty in a free society. Yet we have used wartime excuses to suspend vital aspects of civil politics when we are not by any true definition actually at war. Free speech is even menaced by proposals to ban the ridiculing of religions and protect individuals from religious hatred and bigotry unfortunately it seems to have created a backlash.

An old man is dragged from a convention hall and arrested under anti terrorist powers for shouting 'nonsense' during Jack Straw's speech. The Serious and Organised Crime Police Act makes it illegal to protest within 1 kilometre of Parliament Square without police authorisation. The government has pushed through a law to protect itself from public protest. Maya Evans was arrested for trying to read out the names of those civilians and soldiers killed in Iraq at London's Cenotaph.

The police now have the power and are using it. There are over 20 cases coming up for trial. The police feel they have to make an example of people so we all will fall in to line. Why else arrest Maya Evans? Why use the Terrorism Act 2000 against people who clearly are not terrorists? Why stop, search and arrest 80 year old RAF veteran John Catt because he was carrying a placard and had a t-shirt with an anti-Blair logo, and then claim it was on 'grounds of intervention' under the Terrorism Act? Is it fair to electronically tag and serve a curfew notice on 61 year old peace campaigner Lindis Percy? Why arrest an 11 year old girl, Isabelle Ellis-Cockcroft, under the same act when she had gone with her father to make a protest outside Fairford airbase? 120 others were also arrested for trying to join the protest, although later the Court of Appeal held that the police had acted in breach of the Human Rights Act in so doing. Are we no longer allowed to protest, criticise or show dissent? Am I going to receive a visit from the 'Thought Police' simply for writing these words I wonder? Has political correctness, silent censorship that makes cowards of all and stills our tongues, now become state law?

Is it right that the police should visit a woman who on a radio talk show said gay couples should not adopt children? You may not agree with her sentiments, but does she not have the right to express them and are we now so intolerant that a wide ranging discussion on a popular radio station should lead to investigations of a so-called homophobic incident? Having been interviewed by the police the lady in question, Lynette Burrows was quoted as saying that she now believes that we are living in a police state. *"Somebody somewhere can decide that they don't like your opinions, and in response the police will either lean on you or threaten you. It is insidious..."* It is disturbing if you ask me and what on earth has any of this got to do with defending us against the shadowy threat of terrorism? Two years ago an elderly evangelist, Harry Hammond, rather stupidly, held up a poster in Bournemouth calling for an end to homosexuality, lesbianism and immorality. He was surrounded by an enraged crowd of nearly forty people abused and assaulted and then arrested by the police, charged and convicted. I do not agree with his views, but surely this is not right? I would still defend his right to have them.

When Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain (*what is that exactly? An unelected Muslim Parliament by any chance? Ed.*) said this

month (Jan 2006) that same sex relationships and civil partnerships damage society and that homosexuality carried greater health risks, do you really think the police will be visiting him in just the same heavy handed way? He has been condemned by gay rights groups and MPs from the three main political parties for his 'absurd medieval view' and the idiocy of one minority attacking the other which is quite right but it would be wholly wrong if the police decided that it was their role to come and have an intimidating chat to him as they did with Harry Hammond and Lynette Burrows. Some might ask whether this is another example of political correctness taken to an extreme and facilitating the opportunity of racism, homophobia, and religious intolerance within minorities while the mouths of the majorities are silenced by their fear of the politically correct empowered 'thought' police.

What happens to Speakers Corner now? The North Wales police wasted £4,000 investigating anti-Welsh sentiments supposedly made by Ann Robinson on the BBC show Room 101. She had described the Welsh as 'irritating and annoying' and started a police investigation presumably under the powers given them. Since when has the role of our police been to be the rampantly political correct educators of the citizens it is supposed to be defending?

Our leaders have given the police special powers to protect parliament from dissent. Our movements on roads and streets are being filmed with increasing sophistication. CCTV watches and records our every move. Soon every motorway journey we take will be filmed, logged and kept on file for up to five years as real time movements of our cars are logged by number plate recognition systems. Sure it might catch a lot of criminals but I have an uneasy feeling about being watched in this way. George Orwell's 1984 now seems a little more unnerving and alot more real. Yes, yes I can already hear the cries of 'what do you have to hide?' It is an old chestnut and not an especially good argument upon which to throw away the majority of privately held information about yourself. 'People with nothing to hide should have nothing to fear about releasing personal details' Wrong, wrong, wrong.

A few facts to add grist to this particularly nasty mill. Firstly, do not forgot that information is power. Power is control. Control is the anathema of freedom. The whole balance between the citizen and the State has been altered in favour of the State. Counter terrorism is an oft given excuse for invading the liberties of the citizens. As I was saying, a few facts...

Countless aspects of our identity are being taken from us every day. Each individual loss does not seem like very much. Banks, insurance companies, credit card and mortgage companies need our personal details. Every time we make a minor transaction we run the risk of making these details available to others both legally and illegally. Yet this sort of information seepage is as nothing compared to the rate of data identity theft being committed by the State.

There are over four million CCTV cameras in the UK. One camera for every fifteen of us, or a quarter of the world's cameras to photograph 1% of its population. The police DNA database will soon have samples from 4.2 million of us. It has helped detect 500 serious crimes. Unfortunately it also contains samples from 140,000 people who have never been charged with an offence and from 24,000 children. The police are very unlikely, whatever they say, to

destroy these records. In mid January it was announced that all cautions and all criminal convictions will now be kept on record for 100 years. Our medical records will soon be freely available through the NHS Care Record Development System for any NHS employee and hacker or criminal to get their hands on.

Soon every car will be tracked by satellite. This may make congestion charging and criminal catching a little easier but it will also mean that the police and every government department will know exactly where we are going, or have been, whenever they wish to find out. This is a denial of privacy. Mobile phone companies can do little if the police demand to see their records to check on your whereabouts. This is fine if they are catching a pedophile. It is not so good if, under the guise of the anti Terrorism Act, they seek information on an 82 year old protestor outside a New Labour Party conference. Phone taps are universal on the internet and may be passed on to foreign intelligence agencies. I have nothing to hide but I certainly do not want the right wing morons in America's Homeland Security being given such information on me, do you? Ministers are proud of the fact that they have the capability to skim through the electronic records of credit agencies so as to catch fraudsters claiming benefit. 'They won't hear us coming,' gloated a government spokesman.

No and nor will we if they choose to use the same powers against us. ID cards may be a useful proof of age and identity. Experts know they will be ineffective at counter terrorism and prevention of identity fraud. So why are police forces and government so irrationally keen on them? Forget about the spiraling costs. Start worrying about the information they will hold about you, where it is held and who will have access to it. More than 50 pieces of data, including biometric information, on every individual's card will be held in a central register on a supercomputer. It is only natural that this should develop into a larger collected register of information held on all of us by various government departments including criminal, tax and health records. Do you want to pay £1000 to give the government a complete history of your personal experience? I mean, you don't have anything to hide do you? The biggest threat to our security is a government hell bent on maintaining control over its citizens, for our own benefit of course, but nevertheless exhibiting an unhealthy lust for influence with little regard for liberty or the rule of Parliament. It has been mooted that ID cards may include 'radio frequency identification tags' (RFIT) which would mean that the movements of the owner could be secretly tracked. Now these little beauties are not solely the concern of the CIA and M15.

Do not think that simply because the State is conducting this huge exercise in personal data gathering that it will somehow be safe. Human error, especially in computer use, can very quickly make a mockery of any claims of confidentiality. The absurd mess caused by the installation of computer systems both for the NHS and the Passport Office is a salutary lesson. If they cannot even install it efficiently, what chance is there that they will run it efficiently? The entire NHS computer system, which cost £6.2 billion, is close to collapse. The electronic booking system used by the police and the Crown Prosecution System is a year behind schedule due to severe IT interface problems. There is a huge amount of identity fraud surrounding the newly installed tax credit system. Would you want to trust these guys with details about mental illness,

sexual orientation, and/or your entire financial history? I know I wouldn't. Always opt out of consenting to have your medical records entered on the new database. Do not file tax returns online. Remain very cynical about police motivation to keep records indefinitely on all individuals. Technology is great, sometimes. It is not only criminals that are stealing our identities. The State, far more powerful than any criminal, is happy to use the recording eye of Big Brother technology to steal everything that is known about us. We then have to trust them not to abuse the power they now hold over us. Do you trust politicians that much?

The worst thing about these databases is that they are regarded as always being right. They are as correct as the information typed into them. A single error can quickly be disseminated far and wide. You get incorrectly put on a credit black list because some faceless person has made an error with your data details and you can find yourself with a bankrupt business and a repossessed house before you can sort it out.

Security is not the driving force behind the development of such clever surveillance devices. The business of marketing is very keen on keeping tabs on you. It doesn't have to ask to do so either. You can refuse, as I do, to have a laughably named supermarket 'loyalty card' on the grounds that you do not wish to provide free marketing data for Tesco or Asda in exchange for the occasional voucher. Soon what you buy in these places will have these 'radio frequency identification tags' (RFIT) fitted and they will be able to keep tabs on the goods we have purchased and what we do with them once we leave the store. Experts believe that they will replace barcodes within ten years. These tags, evolved from 1945 Soviet Union bugging devices, transmit data to a receiver that could potentially provide detailed accounts of an individual's shopping preferences and even build up a profile of their social circles and movements. Asda, Tesco and Marks & Spencer have already tested these RFIT's and plan to use them on goods such as clothing and DVDs. The customer need never know that it is there. Tesco, using one of its RFIT's to activate CCTV cameras every time a packet of razor bladed was moved, said "We would not do anything to jeopardise the trust of our customers." She should have added, 'unless it affected our profits.' Would you trust a supermarket with the power of this information? Transport for London uses RFIT's in its Oyster ticket cards to track passengers' movements in the city. Banks have incorporated them in credit cards.

Simon Hughes, a contender in the Liberal Democrat leadership race, recently had his sexual history exposed by one of our glorious red top tabloids who accessed his credit card history to discover that he had been using homosexual chat-sites on the internet. So, if a tabloid newspaper can do that to you, what could a government? Recently a gang was caught hacking into NHS computers to access confidential medical files so as to blackmail people. It is also information that has considerable value to banks or insurance companies. The recent suicide of a senior Vodafone employee has revealed that, during the Athens Olympics, illegal software installed in a 'ghost programme' at Vodafone Greece lead to 100, mainly government, mobiles being tapped. American security agents are suspected of being behind the tapping. Given their dubious involvement in kidnappings and 'extraordinary renditions', their pleas of

innocence are falling on deaf ears. M15 were also accused of having secret surveillance operations running during the games. Data leakage, deliberate or otherwise, can have devastating personal consequences. Just imagine how vengeful ex-lovers, business or political rivals, or paranoid governments could use such data against you. Already politicians are being exposed by tabloid newspapers, police civilians sell tips about arrested celebrities, Delhi call centre workers can sell customer bank details and 40 million credit cards were hacked last year. Information collated for one purpose inevitably gets quietly extended to other unrelated purposes. How comfortable are you to allow the government such unrestricted access to your important personal histories. Do you really trust the likes of Blair, Blunkett and Clarke that much? I know I don't. I would rather someone steal my identity.

The internet has given us enormous freedom to access an extraordinary amount of information which can benefit us as individuals immensely. Google is presently fighting a rear guard action with the US Justice Department, which it will lose. The department wants access to every website address available and every search term entered between a two month period last year. Like Yahoo, Microsoft and AOL it will soon also exhibit the same shameless compliance. They all have to. They are companies in a ruthlessly competitive business and the first thing flying out of the window is the privacy of its customers when profits are threatened. In a \$120 billion business the share price is far more important than you. Unfortunately these companies also possess a staggering amount of information about us. Every search made on their engines is logged and the information stored indefinitely. This is valuable stuff. One day the share price of these companies will drop and it is then that the owners of these companies will come under pressure to make use of this goldmine of data.

None of these noble companies put much of a fight up against the Chinese Government's insistence on censoring some of the available information on their search engine databases. Such political censorship and restricted information is a far cry from the 'Don't be evil' motto of Google, founded in 1997 and now worth \$129 billion, making it the fastest growing company in the world. Is this government interest in search engines the long predicted privacy apocalypse? Not yet, but it does show how all governments will soon come to see how search engines can be used as a form of privatised surveillance. The Chinese have already invested a lot of money in exploiting exactly this aspect of the internet. Do you think the CIA or M15 are anymore circumspect about our privacy? This government likes its control a little too much for my liking.

What is it about New Labour that makes them enjoy banning things so much? Cromwell tried it and look where that got him. Fox hunting, smoking in public, dissent and protest, personal opinions... what else? I wonder if they have never heard of Voltaire who so famously declared "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

(actually I looked it up and it was in fact S.G Tallentyre that said these words in defence of a chap called Helvetius whose work 'De l'esprit' was burned in 1759. In response to this burning what Voltaire actually said was "What a fuss about an omelette!" which doesn't sound quite as good, but I digress...)

This is the so called 'nanny state' in action, convinced as it is that we are unable to think or act for ourselves and that it is the government's duty to show

us, with the occasional help of a freshly empowered police force, how to do it. It's a long way from Socialism. I wonder what Blair and his cronies, Straw, Blunkett and Prescott, would have thought of a conservative government acting like this back in the halcyon days of the loony left militant councils and everyone singing the Red Flag at Labour party conferences. Actually perhaps I shouldn't include Prescott in that list, since he clearly never has thought anything and cannot speak, leastways not in any comprehensible manner.

At least this year David Blunkett finally got his just desserts and that was duly cheering. Far from being the working class man of the people, loved by his constituents in Sheffield, he was an ever more remote figure living the high life of limousines and power in Westminster, happily forgetting the days when he ruled the roost as the rabidly Marxist former leader of Sheffield council and flew his red flag from the City Hall, declaring his socialist credentials to one and all. He had used the ideology of the Left to gain power and of the Right to keep it. Classic revolutionary. He went on to become the most right wing of modern day Home Secretaries brought down rather wonderfully by hubris. Shagging the married American editor of a right wing magazine, fathering her son, and then declaring that the old world family values of wishing to care for that son as his defense was laughable. He seemed to have overlooked the fact that he was having an adulterous affair in the first place.

If that was satisfyingly funny, the legacy of the laws that he brought into force were not. Despite his messianic zeal to produce a police state in the name of security, he left ministerial office at a time when the country's streets are at their most under-policed, its prisons the most over-populated (75,000 and rising) and drug related and violent crime is at its highest in Europe. Over this mess looms his legacy – a now common place government practice of using the so called 'War on Terror' to cow us all into quietly accepting every draconian law going. His great step forward, the compulsory identity card, was reviled by many experts who have repeatedly shown that such cards have never been an effective barrier to the spread of terrorism. They would not have prevented Madrid, Istanbul, London or even 9/11. Despite this we may yet be forced to pay the £20 billion costs of the cards, while at the same time losing yet more of our civil liberties as the government and its police force gains control of a vast amount of data on every one of its citizens, of which only a paltry few are terrorists. Unfortunately his successor Charles Clarke, he of the unshaven jowls who came late to designer stubble, is not much better than Blunkett.

Under the threat of the murder by terrorists of 'hundreds and thousands of people who are innocent of everything' Clarke says he wants to go after only those extremists that he suspects of terrorism and claims he will use his powers rarely. Tell that to the people dragged away from the Cenotaph, the gates of Downing Street and the Labour party conference. He says that he will use the intelligence community as his guide to who is guilty or not, which is worrying because it is exactly these intelligence people who compiled the dossiers used to create a sufficiently strong climate of fear so as to allow Blair to go to war in Iraq in the first place. This we now know was a tissue of lies. Intelligence is no longer used to ensure our security and freedom but as an agency of public fear. Clarke is suspending habeas corpus on their say so while we meekly flinch from the weekly warnings of anthrax attacks, dirty bombs, small pox infections, tube

and bus bombings, and Bali style inferno's everywhere we go. They claim to have prevented many of these attacks but I can't recall them ever listing the details of one such intervention. No one seems to have pointed out that even the 9/11, Madrid and London attacks did not, as Clarke implied, 'destroy everything for which we all stand'. Having said that, it is a little difficult to assess exactly what Blunkett and Clarke have ever stood for, apart of course for themselves. Nor were the attacks ever a threat to Western civilisation. Media spinning, through the security community, to keep our heads down is a cheap trick. Our democracy has stood up to considerably more than threats, real or otherwise, from today's terrorists and does not need these new special powers to remain robustly healthy anymore than it did during the last two world wars and decades of Irish bombings.

Yet Clarke wishes to put under house arrest anyone who he suspects of being a menace including Muslims, Irish, animal rights activists, housewives in Downing street, old age pensioners at party conferences and eleven year old school girls. He wants the power to ban their use of mobile phones and e-mail, restrict their contact with others, enforce curfews upon them and tag them at will. They will be allowed a secret appeal to judges, but neither the judges nor the victims need be shown the evidence his intelligence community has gleaned. What is going on here? It is scary.

Fortunately the law lords saw through such posturing and ruled in December 2004 that indefinite detention without trial of foreign nationals in Belmarsh under the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 was a breach of their human rights and thus illegal. When the law lords published their decision, Lord Hoffmann stated that, *'The real threat to the nation, in the sense of people living in accordance with its traditional laws and political values, comes not from terrorism but from laws like these.'* Here was a law lord declaring that the new anti-terror measures were a far greater threat to our security than anything al-Qaeda could do. Such a damning statement would have in earlier times caused the immediate resignation of the Minister responsible. Charles Clarke had at this point been Home Secretary for precisely one day, yet replied that he would seek parliamentary permission to renew the emergency provisions. The European convention on human rights was clearly of little importance to the great man, nor it seems was the right to habeas corpus which goes back to 1215 and the Magna Carta. Encouraging isn't it?

Of course there will be atrocities. There will be terrorism, yet, however tragic, they will not be a threat to Western civilisation and our culture of human rights, free speech and democracy. We need to be alert but not panic like our leaders seem to do every week. Such is the craven state of our leadership and the extravagantly irrational Anglo-American response to 9/11 (invading a country that had nothing to do with it!) the one true winner of this mess is old Osama bin Laden, laughing himself stupid in a cave somewhere as he watches sympathisers rush to his cause alienated by the heavy handed and incompetent response of our governments. He has managed to get armed police filling Parliament Square, Heathrow and Downing Street, now empowered by laws which the citizens will increasingly come to resent. Heavy handed security is present in every public building and at every public event. Who is scared of who I wonder? Not Osama, I suspect.

One thing that does begin to strike me as the year has progressed is the way that religion seems to keep all this mess and hatred and stupidity bumbling along. Why is it, I wonder, that someone's religious beliefs should be allowed more significance than someone's political, sexual or philosophical ones? They are all world theories by which we make sense of our lives. I find it odd that President Bush cannot open his mouth without exhorting his God to protect him, his nation and everyone on his side? Is it any odder for an Iraqi suicide bomber to die with the name of his or her god on their lips?

Thankfully in Britain we live in a fiercely secular nation and Blair would be ridiculed if he spouted the same religious sentiments in his political speeches. We live in a country where 78% of us declare ourselves to be Christian. On closer analysis it seems as many as 50% of these people, when asked, are not actually actively practicing Christians at all but generally just approve of the idea of it, think Jesus was a good bloke, and regard religion more as part of their cultural identity rather than a deeply held theological belief by which they should live their lives. Fair enough, I can go along with that. I have no problem with it even if it does reveal an alarming level of intellectual shallowness. Hell, if our present role models are Posh & Becks, Wayne Rooney, cheating Majors on game shows and stupid slovenly losers on Wife Swap then at least a passing appreciation of Christianity must be a good thing, surely?

Nevertheless it does beg the question why, if all of the worlds great religions have at their core a desire for peace and a need to unite people in a communal humanity, have so many wars, atrocities and general utter misery been enacted in their name? Richard Dawkins was recently vilified for saying on a radio programme that religion was the source of all evil. I'm surprised he wasn't arrested and forced to wear an orange boiler suit. (*odd the way orange boiler suits are all the rage right now with torturers in Iraq and Cuba, fashion really is a multi-national phenomenon. Ed.*) Yet I always found it confusing to read of British army chaplains saying mass for their troops in the 1st World War exhorting them to fight a just war at about exactly the same time that German chaplains of the same religion were doing exactly the same just across a dangerously muddy field from them. Of course I was a Christian then so it was bound to be confusing.

Being a happy atheist now, I just find it a little daft and a little sad. I suppose the irrational stupidity and natural hubris of all such religions is bound to irritate a non-believer. It never occurs to the believers because, of course, they are right. What is it about believers who seem to demand respect for their beliefs and show damn little to anyone who does not believe what they do? Does it not strike them as a little odd, a touch hypocritical, and a wee bit mad? Even if they are believers, can they not see the essential idiocy of this expectation? I wish some of them could because their bigoted intolerance really gets me down sometimes.

If we live in a tolerant and forward thinking society that accepts humour, satire, criticism, and parody as essential parts of the health of our democracy, why should we suddenly all start feeling desperately guilty because some European newspapers have published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed? Apparently it depicts the prophet wearing a turban in the shape of a bomb? The Muslim world is outraged. Our secular democratic society believes poking fun at

such subjects is an important part of our lifestyle. If there is a general perception that an awful lot of slaughter and killing seems to be coming from the Muslim world, is this cartoon not a way of pointing this out? Saying all Muslims are terrorists is inaccurate. Saying that most terrorists today are Muslim may be accurate. Which is the most offensive statement? Which is correct? How can you answer the question without posing it in the first place?

There are some who feel that not only was the proposed Racial and Religious Hatred Bill poorly thought out and misconceived it was also little more than a sop to the Muslim Council of Britain, so cowed is this government by political correctness. Why should indiscriminate respect be afforded to all religions? Simply because they are religions? Even though one person's god is another person's cult figure? One man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist? Who decides, eh? Respect is a two way street guys – not just what you choose to believe. If some religions are outdated, intolerant dogmas that promote disrespect and hatred towards others, should I respect them? If we live in a society that holds the respect for its citizens as primary and attempts to respect other religions, cultures, women, homosexuals, lesbians, why should we, its citizens, respect those religions that humiliate and condemn these very individuals? Texts found in both the Koran and the Old Testament do exactly this, and yet demand my respect. And all this when I have enough trouble coping with the idea that anyone could possibly believe in the actual notion of a godhead in the first place! If we are not allowed to publish cartoons that offend the Muslims should we also not be allowed to publish the Koran and the Old Testament? It would seem to me that both Christians and Muslims demand not just tolerance, but unqualified respect as well – and to the lowly atheist, don't seem to offer too much in return except humiliation, terror, hatred, bigotry, hypocrisy and a questionably feminine dress sense among its more important male practitioners.

Was the cartoon funny? Probably not. If the Prophet Mohammed should be regarded as a perfect example of humanity, revered in every way, does this not beg the question of why so much atrocity has been performed in his name in recent years? Where does respect start and end? Surely being patient and tolerant is a better way to approach such an issue?

I don't know about you, but I have not even seen these cartoons yet. I feel a little uncomfortable that Muslims the world over are demanding, in the most aggressive and violent terms, that we never publish such things again. Why on earth not? Does it not strike the believers of whatever they believe as being a little weird to demand that non-believers should respect their gods? I do, oddly enough, but I have no idea why; natural good manners I suppose.

The wholly unacceptable reaction of some Muslims in Britain who marched on the Danish Embassy in London shouting abuse at passers-by, threatening to bring about another reign of terrorist tube train bombings in the capital. Posters praising the 7th of July bombers caused great offence to onlookers who asked the police to take them from the protesters. The police did nothing, claiming that it was their duty to keep the peace, not to control how people think. Publishing the cartoons may have been crassly insensitive, but the worldwide outrage in the Muslim world seemed only to confirm all the worst prejudices about Islam. This had become a battle between those wishing to

defend freedom of speech against a slide into a new dark age of 7th century Islamic repression and taboos. It is time to find the balance between the freedom of expression and the freedom from fear. How far does a society bend before something in it snaps with tragic consequences? As an angry man said in my local 'if they want a war then bring it on. We'll nuke the bastards.' Given the consequences of Bush's idiotic policy in the Middle East that may yet be exactly what happens.

Why should I respect a god, an entity that I sincerely believe cannot possibly exist? Should I respect a god that is half-man half-elephant, (Ganesh), more or less than a god who fed five thousand people on a few loaves of bread and some fish, (Jesus), oh... and changed water into wine? If I think a politician, film star, author, d-list celebrity, judge, bishop, man, woman, or child should be as open to criticism, ridicule and satire as anyone else, why should I exclude religions and the pantheons of the world? If Sikhs do not like a play being enacted in a particular theatre they have the right to complain, but do they have the right to intimidate that theatre with mass demonstrations, threatening violence, until the theatre abandons its play and bows to their censorship and the rest of us never get to see the performance? If Evangelical Christians dislike the idea of Jerry Springer 'The Opera' being shown on the BBC or performed in a theatre, do they have the right to try and stop us being free to watch it as well? Can they not just lean forward and turn the channel over? If someone does not like eating meat do they have the right to force me to stop eating meat? I cannot abide the thinking of the British National Party but I will defend their right to expression, so long as they do not break the laws of our society. I will not read their literature, attend their rallies or vote for their representative politicians. I will detest their views and try in my own way to argue against the racist fascism of their thought, but I will 'respect', no, I will tolerate, their right to exist within our society.

Respect is quite a different thing. Just because someone gets up in the morning and chooses to believe a number of impossible things about the world, simply because he believed what his parents told him about these impossible things and they believed them to be true, so they must be, does not mean that I should accord that man respect. Simply because some religions have existed for a long time does not mean they deserve more respect than newer religions. Blind allegiance to ancient unproven tales and superstitions is not a reason for respect. Taking outraged offence simply because somebody does not agree with you or dares to question your beliefs does not command my respect. Reverence for these 'old' religions has often been garnered because the harassment, fear, war and destruction that have been enacted in the name of such religions has demanded respect, or fear more like, as a way of staying alive.

In our society it is not a crime to hate, anymore than it is to love. Nor is it a crime to inwardly have a thought or feel an emotion and nor is it a crime therefore to outwardly express such thoughts and emotions. This is because it is not the role of government to tell its citizens how to think and feel, although the present government has not yet grasped this fact! There are enough laws already to control threatening behaviour and incitement to violence without having a bill passed to empower police to suppress free speech and instigate the notions of Orwellian 'thought police'!

This month an Italian judge has ordered a priest to appear in court to prove that Jesus Christ existed. A militant atheist (*didn't know they existed, Ed!!*) Luigi Cascioli, began legal proceedings against the priest, Father Enrico Righi, in the town of Viterbo, north of Rome, after he had been denounced by the priest in a newsletter for questioning Christ's historical existence. The Court of Appeal, in this most Catholic of Catholic countries, had judged that Signor Cascioli had a reasonable case for accusing the priest of 'abusing popular credulity.' Father Righi has replied that 'if Cascioli does not see the sun in the sky at midday, he cannot sue me because I see it and he does not.' Hmm. Right, well that should be quite an entertaining trial. Cascioli has offered to withdraw his legal action if the priest can come up with irrefutable proof of Christ's existence by the end of the month. A bit tricky that deadline, especially since the Vatican has refused to comment so far. Still it's a hell of a lot more entertaining than listening to politicians endlessly appealing for help from their gods as they drag their nations into yet another quagmire of death, misery and destruction. I was glad to note this year how the stream of fervent religious letters heading my way, mostly, I am sorry to say, from America, has finally dried up. Some were sincere and well meant, some barmy, and a few quite unnerving. Not one allowed me any sort of right to my own philosophy, creed or set of beliefs. I'm rooting for Signor Luigi Cascioli by the way!

In February the high point and life changing moment of my year came while visiting county Kerry in Southern Ireland, the birth place of my mother. I stumbled upon a gorgeous old farm cottage deep in the mountainous Kerry hills. It was in need of repair but it had views to die for. It overlooked a beautiful lake, stuffed full of Salmon and Sea Trout, and hemmed in by dramatic mountain sides. I put in a bid at four o'clock and two hours later, as I was boarding the plane to Manchester, I received a call saying that it had been accepted. If only everything else in life could be so simple. I have spent the year renovating the cottage. It is a wonderfully calming place to live and the only place I have ever had that extraordinary feeling of belonging, of coming home. I have travelled all over the world sometimes for adventure and challenge sometimes to escape and run away from a world I have never felt any great affinity for, and yet in this place I have had found such an overwhelming feeling of homecoming. I didn't even realise that I was looking for it, but our sub-consciousness works in mysterious ways leading us in directions that we have no choice but to follow. I may even apply for Irish nationality on my mother's passport. Whatever happens I feel as if the last few years, since giving up mountaineering, has been a transition period that is finally coming to an end. I do not miss the mountains and may soon begin rock and ice climbing again. Ray and I frequently talk of returning to the Eiger for a 6th attempt but that would be the only mountain I would want to climb. Buying the house in Kerry was something that at last let me see that I had found another path in life. Having spent my entire adult life as a mountaineer I was suddenly left in a strange directionless limbo. Three years later and it seems that I have found the path I wish to walk down for the last half of my life. I hope it leads to happiness and contentment, although I accept now that it will be a life lived alone; in many ways it always has been. Coming to terms with that has been no harder than to accept I would never climb again.

It has also made me think about writing. I have been very busy since the film was released and in the first 18 months there was no chance of me writing anything, but as the following months rolled by my Catholic guilt began surfacing like an oil slick in my mind. I was lying. It wasn't the workload. The reason I was not writing was that I was scared. I had the novel to finish and 2 more story lines to write; these last being based in the 1st World War and in modern day respectively, with no reference to mountains or climbing. Writing fiction and not about the world I knew so well was a daunting prospect. I am always scared when I start a new book and this time it was suffocating and oppressive. It was easy to remain convinced that I wasn't capable of writing fiction, that no one would want to read it, that I was too busy, that I could only write non-fiction, that... that anything I could think of to excuse the fact that in truth, I was running away from it. The world of publishing is a very fickle world. At the moment I am earning good money doing something that is nowhere near as difficult, committing or plain risky as writing. I am convincing myself that I am building up a nest egg so that, in the event of my future writing collapsing around me, I will not be destitute in my old age. This is not such negative way of thinking. I may have been relatively successful in my writing to date, but then I was writing about a particular subject and for the most part I was writing about real experiences. It may be that I have written all that I have to say.

In recent years there has been an explosion in the number of aspiring novelists. Agents and publishers alike complain of being swamped by the masses of unsolicited manuscripts thumping through their doors on a daily basis; so many so that they can do little but skim read most of them. Countless manuscripts are discarded after only a few pages. Some agents receive as many as fifty unsolicited novels a day; some publishers receive over two thousand a year! A recent test proved that the chances of a first time novelist being published are slim indeed. A newspaper sent out the first chapters of published novels by established authors to a selection of twenty agents and publishers. Only the names of the main characters and the authors were changed.

Now these were not your average authors. These were people who had produced timeless prose at the heights of their literary talent, whose accomplishments had been acknowledged as the very best of their generation. Some had been accorded the greatest award a writer could receive, the Nobel Prize for literature. Such a prize winner, VS Naipaul, had his Booker prize winning novel 'In a Free State' politely rejected by all twenty agents and publishers. Stanley Middleton's Booker winner 'Holiday' also suffered similar polite rejections.

Publishers are no longer keen to take risks with unknown authors. They do not carefully nurture and bring on aspirant writers. If the first novel is not a runaway success then a subsequent one would be rejected. This would have finished the careers of Ian McEwan and Ian Bank's at a stroke. Hemmingway and Scott Fitzgerald might also have struggled to get published. Fierce competition in supermarkets that have forced down book prices make publishers wary of taking risks. They will put big promotional money behind something sensational rather than something of quality. The books have to be marketable, as do the authors. Being attractive, below thirty, blonde, vaguely famous with enormous breasts should be enough to get published today.

Fortunately I do not have these qualities. There is a lot of talk about huge advances slopping around the publishing world although, apart from Jordan, I do not know who is getting them. I do know that less than 20 authors of literary novels earn enough today to live without another source of income.

I suppose this is a long winded way of explaining why I haven't being writing in recent years. It is not because I do not want to or because I do not believe I can write something well. It is because I am a realist and I want to make sure I do not need a second income when I set out on the wobbly road of writing. The only way to do this is to make as much money as fast as possible, hope my temporary literary absence hasn't made me unpublishable, and try to grow blonde hair and large breasts. The hair and breasts are proving tricky, but the speaking circuit is ensuring that in a very short time I will be able to start writing again and not have to worry about being an immediate sensational marketing triumph. I had wondered whether growing a suitably impressive writerly beard might have lent me some literary gravitas and encouraged me to start writing, despite the obvious lack of breasts, but sadly my beard is a fiercely Celtic red and just makes me look stupid. As for fame, creative longevity and literary kudos it is obvious to me now after six books that none of these are worth a hill of beans when you are alone in a room, beset by fears and trying to write.

This other problem – writing being scary – hasn't improved much I'm afraid. Well, that too will have to change. It may be that all my excuses are correct but I will only find this out by writing. There is nothing wrong with being scared, just so long as it doesn't paralyse us.

In early July a speaking engagement in London was abruptly cancelled. It wasn't immediately apparent why this had happened but as the day wore on and news reports of suicide bombs on the London Tube trains and the Tavistock Square bus began to crowd the radio and TV news, the reason was self explanatory. Terror had come to London, as it had done to Madrid and New York. In the days and weeks that followed shock turned to confusion and then anger as we learned that this was an outrage committed not by extremists that had travelled from far off and alien countries, but from Dewsbury and Leeds. We had our own home grown lunatics. They lived amongst us, and despite enjoying the benefits and luxuries of life in a rich and democratic western democracy they felt so marginalised and alienated that they hated us with such passion, twisted or otherwise, that they felt their only course was to blast apart innocent victims deep in the dark bowels of the Underground system. It made a lot of people sit back and think about the state of the nation and what had led us to this impasse.

Some, in furious anger, immediately kicked back against the easy soft target, the Muslim population living in strange isolation within our midst. They are an easy target – strange people, strange clothes, weird religion, don't even speak our language, none of them like us, weirdos in our midst, like pedophiles, get rid of them, give 'em a kicking...

Others attacked the government, Bush, Blair, the Iraq War, Osama bin laden, the intelligence community, Blunkett, anyone that they could find fault with. Not many meaningful answers were forthcoming. It happened. It will probably happen again. They hate us. We do not understand why. Who are

they? It is a war. With who? A nebulous 'War on Terror' that no-one can ever win or completely understand why we are fighting it, but fight it we will until we have won...if we believe the cowboy rhetoric of the idiot over the sea.

I went through all these thought processes and was baffled as how we had come to this. Shortly after the bombings I was invested with an Honorary Doctorate at Leeds Metropolitan University. After the usual speeches, hand shaking and Harry Potter outfits, I was told that the University did not want to do any publicity. I was surprised, but not half as much as to learn that some of the bombers or their accomplices may have attended the University. It seemed all wrong. In fact something about the country seemed all wrong. I still cannot quite work it out. What I did work out was that something major has to happen in the way we allow our society to develop, because if we do not then in ten or twenty years we may be reaping a truly awful harvest. We are a nation of immigrants. London, more than any city in the country, is a melting pot of every type of culture, religion and races and has been for centuries. A study of the history of Brick Lane quickly attests to the way new people and cultures have arrived, assimilated and become an essential part of the multicultural flavour of London life. Yet it is apparent that multi-culturalism simply hasn't worked in recent decades. As I drove back down the M1 to Sheffield in a snail of rush hour traffic, a number of questions, mostly unanswered, came to mind.

If radicalised Muslims hate us all, then why should we tolerate them? If they hate everything about our culture, our freedom, our democracy, our religions and our philosophy then why in some politically correct blind belief in multi-culturalism (the greatest failure of the last 50 years) do we insist on accommodating their desire to live here. No other group be they Sikh, Hindu, Jew or Rastafarian, who have as strong and rich a culture, insist on burning books, setting up their own parliament and separatist schools, demanding their own Sharia Law, insisting on the right to issue fatwa's (religiously condoned incitements to murder and race hatred), and now murder fellow citizens. If we cave in and allow them the brutally cruel Halal slaughter of animals against all European law then why not allow female circumcision and honour killings? Where do we draw the line? So as English toddlers are forced to celebrate the festival of Eid when they have barely got their tiny heads around Easter Bunnies, British Muslim children are being taught attitudes from an early age that in modern western societies might be regarded as child abuse. The freedoms they detest here are not freedoms allowed in the countries from which they or their parents originated. Try and build a church in Saudi Arabia, or open a bar in Iran, publish a newspaper in Syria or protest against ethnic cleansing in Sudan and see what happens to you.

We, who have blindly embraced multi-culturalism, allow for the concept of 'live and let live'. The extreme hard line Muslims do not. The rest of their community has, until very recently, remained ominously silent. If fundamentalist Christians had bombed the Madrid trains the streets of Europe's capitals would have had million strong marches of fellow Christians condemning them. With the Muslim communities this has not happened in Spain, New York or London. So much for equality under Islam - that is a contradiction in terms. There was even some suggestion from radical minorities that had all the dead in London been white Infidels then somehow the abomination would have been

less! While we celebrate 'diversity' in our vibrant country that owes so much to immigration, a few deranged individuals from a closed and archaic culture feel that this is such an un-welcoming and racist place that it justifies mass murder. If that were true, why is it that races from all over the world continue to flock here as they do to the 'evil empire' of America?

The very freedom these extremists detest is the freedom they stole from innocent victims, of all races, creed and colour, in the claustrophobic charnel house of the London Underground. Perhaps it is time people stopped pussy footing around, being too scared to be accused of some politically correct 'ism' to actually say what they think. This is not simply unacceptable from the deranged few, it is abhorrent that a community within our society chooses to benefit from all the luxury of western life, while at the same time tacitly condoning, if only by their silence, a twisted religious philosophy that has as a basic tenet that the life of an unbeliever has no value.

Is it now about time that the unbridgeable gap between us and the alienated radicalised Muslim youth growing up in our country is addressed - and fast. No one should stigmatise any communities but that is what will happen if more bombs explode in our cities. People will stand up and shout that this is intolerable. Some may do considerably more than shout. Right wing fascistic political groups will take swift advantage of the divisive outrage in our society. Hate will be everywhere.

It is not us that will cause 'rivers of blood to flow' in outbursts of race hatred but the very bombers who grow like a cancer in our midst and who are fed by the alienating and completely misunderstood world of Islamic teaching. They who, fueled by righteous religious fervour, carry their bombs into crowds of innocents may soon face the wrath of our own righteous anger. Not in some idiotic ephemeral 'War on Terror' that only begets more martyrs and more slaughter, but in an overwhelming up-welling of fury from the populations of Europe, sickened by this mindless racism in our midst. People will not accept this for very much longer. Unless Muslims reform their communities, many in Europe will turn violently against them. I do not endorse race hatred or violence, misogyny or xenophobia, but nor should we sit silently too hidebound by political correctness to say anything. Our own innate embarrassment and sense of fair play means that few of us ever complain about what is happening to our society.

Idiots that glamourise suicide should be reviled and abused for their idiocy and their communities held accountable. The closed Muslim ghettos should open their doors, let their women speak as they have been prevented, teach their children to, at very least, accept our values or face the weight of the law. They should be told that whatever their culture and religion, we are a democratic secular state and the laws, ethics and mores of that state are above everything else. Ask them why, if they hate us so much, did they not choose to go and live in the countless other Muslim nations that would have accepted them? If they hate our culture so much, why have they chosen to come and live here? Should we change the way we dress, the films we watch, the theatre we appreciate, the lives we live, the laws we live by simply because they have come to live amongst us?

Should we stop listening with utmost sympathy, stop trying to understand them, stop pandering to our own fears of religious hatred and damn well say something? But what do we say?

If we say nothing, will we not then reap the harvest in years to come? The genesis of racism is fear and fear leads to violence. As we become more fearful than the less informed, less educated amongst us will resort to violence. Remember the people of the sink estate who attacked a pediatrician's house because they were too stupid to know how to spell pedophile; it is a lesson worth learning because we have enough ignorance within our own culture to unleash the Fascist racist horror that came out of Germany in the thirties and we should never forget that. It is human nature - fight or flee. The longer we flee, the more bloody the fight will be. This is not war mongering on my behalf but a bleak assessment of what the future holds in the next 10-25 years. We need immigration, we always have. Now, at a time when no European country has a birth rate that can provide a sustainable population, we cannot survive without it. 75% of all European immigration is Muslim and yet we have a society completely unable to cope with it.

As American foreign policies of the last fifty years have steadily alienated the world's Muslim populations from that of the West, we are now in the unenviable situation of needing to bring into our society a mass of people who have been brought up to distrust and hate us. Somewhere along the line this is all going to go horribly wrong as if it isn't bad enough already.

Will we end up as a society rent by division and mistrust? For every Asian travelling on the Tube in the weeks after the July bombing the suspicion and palpable fear directed at them by wary passengers must have been very difficult to bear. Yet the fear of the passengers was entirely understandable. Do we or the Muslim community want this situation to escalate to a point where they are universally mistrusted, if not reviled. Who does what first? Us or the Muslim communities?

It is all very well bemoaning the ghettoised alienation of the Muslim communities in our cities, but are our own communities and values any better? What of the vast majority of observant Muslims living peacefully in Britain who consider themselves moderate? They worry about bringing up their children with a real commitment to their religion and yet are terrified of losing them to fundamentalism which they detest. At the same time they see what contemporary British values are and recoil in despair. Coming from a culture where family stability, spiritual integrity and the power of their community is so important, they must look in horror at the thought of losing their children to the crass culture of Britain today.

The 'I'm-alright-Jack, anything goes' anarchy that seems to represent our modern aspirations is as alien to a moderate Muslim as the extremism of the bombers is to us. Our aspirations as a society must seem pretty shallow to a devout and conservative Muslim family. Dominated by a celebrity culture which elevates people to the pinnacle of society for doing absolutely nothing, they must look at us in quiet amazement. We seem to want to sell our souls to the corporate treadmill to acquire nothing of any great value, nothing that connects us deeply to the family and tradition, to the earth and the world we exist within, but simply to gain unfettered materialism. Kids slump, slack jawed, in front of

computer games and televisions because we can not spare enough time from our endless pursuit of money to do anything else with them. All the while the screens pound them into being good consumers, imbuing them with an avarice that their parents cannot even understand. While the apparently wealthy families in the country continue to buy bigger houses, more cars, more consumer hardware, ever more plundered materialism, it may come as a surprise to the envious poor to learn that a vast majority of these families are awash with debt. The annual public debt is currently running at one point one three trillion pounds per annum which works out as a debt of £7,600 for every family in the country. While we live in a society that seems entirely focused on acquiring at the expense of everything else, the average moderate Muslim family must look on in a state of some bewilderment. Community relationships, neighbourliness, good manners, consideration, and basic human kindness are the first things to be thrown out of the window once this insane race for spending and consumer binging races out of control and we all head towards inevitable bankruptcy. A society founded on consumerism eventually consumes itself since it also treats humans as mere materialist objects. We might be proud of our freedoms, but it is worth wondering whether they have actually led us to this state where all we care about is shagging and shopping and where family stability, communal unity and spiritual idealism have long since been crushed beneath the behemoth of rampant consumerism.

It is not simply the society that suffers; the world suffers too. The insatiable demands on the environment are unsustainable. Something has to give and it would seem that it is giving rather faster than we would like to admit. Global warming is no myth. It is happening now, but sadly, by the time it really starts to bite into the soft underbelly of our consumer driven lives and actually hurt it will be too late to do anything about it. In fact it is far too late already. Greenhouse gases in our atmosphere were stabilised at 270 parts per million for the last 12,000 years. In the 200 years since the Industrial Revolution that figure has risen to 380 parts per million and is rising fast. Between 25-30% of the annual carbon dioxide emissions in the UK come from cars and aircraft. We need to cut back on the use of cars. It has been proved that efficient rail systems can hugely reduce the number of car and air journeys. Yet the latest price rises in train tickets mean that a return ticket from London to Edinburgh can now cost more than a return flight from London to New York! In China cities that were once jammed with bicycles are now jammed with cars. There is overwhelming evidence from the oceans, ice sheets, jungles and the mountains of our beautiful planet to tell us what is happening but it seems that we are so blinded by crass materialism that very few of us want to listen and learn.

It is easy to hate the fundamentalist Muslim who tries to shatter the idyll of our peaceful society. It is not so easy to look at ourselves and see, just a little, of why we may be misunderstood, feared and hated in return. A society without deep spiritual aspirations, bereft of philosophical wisdom, with no respect for authority nor any notion of obligations to family values and cast adrift from the traditions and customs that once anchored it firmly against the most divisive of currents, will break down sooner rather than later.

It's not been a good few years really but hey-ho at least the mountains are still there... well mostly, well lots are falling down, the Alpine permafrost is melting and the Gulf Stream is about to switch off. This latter event is regarded by many eminent scientists as being one of the greatest natural hazards to face the planet. No need to worry then, although winter sun holidays may take on a completely different meaning.

In the next few years we shall learn whether we will freeze or melt. The risk of a major comet impact in the average 70-year lifespan has been calculated as about 8,570:1. An ocean wide tsunami comes in at 143:1. Professor Bill McGuire of University College London has, based on previous ice age and recent ocean data, calculated that the likelihood of the Gulf Stream shutting down is an alarming 1:2. It should happen quickly. We should find out our fate in the next few years. That cottage in Ireland could well be uninhabitable for 9 months of the year by that time. Oh, and I hear that Avian flu is fast heading our way from Turkey ...hey ho!

The rate of global warming is already far worse than feared only five years ago and is estimated to be about one third faster than had previously been suspected. A 1°C rise in temperature would lead to the extensive acidification of the oceans, killing off many life forms and leading to the destruction of 80% of the ocean's corals. A 2.7°C rise would lead to the total melt down of Greenland's ice sheet. Temperatures are predicted to rise by between 1.4°C and 5.8°C by the end of the century. There is a 'tipping point' when climate changes become irreversible and the whole climate regulating system breaks down and produces changes that no matter what we do, can never be reversed. Many scientists would argue that we have already reached this point.

Polar bears are apparently drowning in record numbers as the ice sheets that they hunt from melt and drift apart. Bears used to swim up to twenty five miles in search of useable ice floes, now some have been found to swim between fifty and one hundred miles. When they reach ice floes they are often too exhausted to hunt and consequently die of starvation. A pod of some thirty drowned bears was found floating in the Bering straits after having been caught out in the open ocean by a particularly savage storm. 98% of the major fish species in the North Sea have recently been found to be verging on extinction. Many Albatross species are also on the point of extinction due to the slaughter of their numbers by baited hooks on miles of drifting long lines. Logging, oil and mineral extraction is imposing impossible strains on the inhabitants, human and otherwise, of the Congo Basin and the Amazon which is a shame, especially as they are also the lungs of our planet. Penguins are having a tough time too, but we like them and they are film stars now, so maybe they have a chance of being saved. Sand eels, one of the most important creatures in the North Sea food chain, are being dredged up and burnt in power stations; makes sense doesn't it?

A bit depressing, I know, and I apologise, but there were other times in the year that made life good. I was conferred as Honorary Doctorate of Letters at Sheffield University, Sheffield Hallam University and Leeds Metropolitan University. It was a huge honour to have adopted home city universities do this for me and I felt very humbled by the gesture. I have just received news that

Edinburgh University has also offered me a doctorate. What is this? You wait 45 years for a doctorate then four come along at once! When I graduated from Edinburgh in 1984 I didn't have the money or inclination to attend the graduation ceremony so I popped a fiver in the post and asked them to send it to me, then I hitched to the Alps unable to contain my excitement at the thought of the years of freedom in the hills to come. I did later regret not having graduated. I had worked hard and was proud of my degree and yet had dismissed it as nothing. To receive the honour from Edinburgh will be like getting what I couldn't afford in 1984. Still all this dressing up like a Harry Potter Hogwarts Professor can get a little tedious!

In October I travelled with a small film crew to the dark depths of the Congo basin where, in two weeks of incredibly hard and enjoyable work, we made a film highlighting the plight of the gorillas now being driven to the point of extinction by the hungry advance of logging companies and the truly horrifying scourge of Ebola. Tiger Aspect hopes to air the programme on Sky One sometime in the early summer as part of their successful 'Final Chance to Save' series. It really was a quite extraordinary adventure, quite unlike anything I had ever experienced. To be hugged by an orphaned gorilla at the end of the trip was very moving. Here was an animal that as an infant had watched her entire family massacred before her eyes and despite this awful trauma she could still look directly into my eyes, decide she trusted me, and swing herself up into my arms. I'm not going to make the mistake of anthropomorphising these creatures, but there is no other animal in the world that has given me the sense of intelligence, awareness and emotional development as these huge gorillas created. There is only a 1% genetic difference between gorillas and us and close up you can see it clearly. Perhaps it is only humans of all the primates who have retained the 1% of genetic code that allows us to treat our people, our planet and the all life within it with such brutal and cavalier disregard – or maybe it's the bit that gives us that peculiarly repulsive and weasel minded species, the Politician!

It was a strangely disconcerting experience to be sitting on the plane to Brazzaville wondering whether I had been sensible by agreeing to present a programme on the plight of gorillas. I was ambiguous on the subject to say the least. I understood the threats facing these extraordinary creatures – logging, habitat destruction, Ebola virus and bush-meat hunting, most of which were all connected to each other. Brazzaville it turned out was one of the worlds most deprived cities. Judging by the buildings pock marked with bullet holes and the abject poverty of the vast majority of its inhabitants, I could understand why. I have always been a little wary of relatively rich westerners travelling to deprived countries and lecturing the population on how to live their lives in a more environmentally aware and ecologically sensitive manner, when those very westerners wouldn't last five seconds if they had to try and survive the conditions that these people had to endure. So gorillas are wonderful creatures, but then so are cows, chickens and sand eels in their own way. Who am I to say what should and should not be farmed or hunted for their flesh? Destruction of pristine forests is a criminal waste, but I have wooden floors in my house. Since when have I had the right to demand that the lives of animals are more important than the lives of humans? I had two weeks of hard work, 12 hour

filming days, endless takes, bum numbing canoe travel and mind changing sights to work it out.

Not being a jungle sort of guy I was a little nervous at the prospect. Matters were not improved as I read through the briefing paper on the plane. There were extremely limited medical facilities, if any, where we were going. Okay, done that before. Bring your own drugs. Never been asked to do that though. Plasmodium falciparum malaria predominates in the Congo, which unfortunately is very resistant to the most popular anti-malarial drug chloroquine and also can be resistant to fansidar. I quickly searched my wash bag and found that I had chloroquine. I was then informed that it was common for customs officials to confiscate your anti-malarial drugs and refuse to hand them back without a bribe. Stuff them, I thought, they can have mine. Sleeping sickness, otherwise going by the catchy name of Trypanosomiasis, is a parasite spread by the tsetse fly, which are endemic in the area we were visiting. There is no vaccine for Sleeping sickness. Wearing long sleeved shirts and trousers and liberal quantities of 100% Deet insect repellent was the only protection. Tsetse flies are rather like horse flies except, when swollen up with your blood can bite through denim with ease. I had lightweight tropical clothing with me! It was best to avoid disturbing bushes since tsetse liked to congregate in the security of the leaves. Great! Virtually all the clothing I had brought with me (thinking that blending into the background would enhance the chances of seeing a gorilla) made me look like a bush. Philaria (spl?) flies spread River blindness and there was no vaccine and they were around in vast numbers at our chosen destination.

Bilharzia (schistosomiasis) is spread by disease-causing parasites in wet and swampy regions so avoid waterways and marshes. We were heading for the wettest and swamiest areas by dug out canoe! Effective drug treatment for it is available, but not where there are no medical facilities. I was told that the best test for Bilharzia was to spit in the water that you were about to drink. If the spit spread out rapidly it indicated a lack of parasites; if it clung together in a lump don't drink it. I tried this one ten days later by spitting in my whisky and water one evening. I spent ten minutes trying to fish out the pavement oyster now floating in my drink. I drank it anyway hoping the alcohol would sort it out.

Wild animals pose considerable dangers if caution is not properly exercised. Gorillas are wild, sometimes livid, in my experience and tend to charge. If they charge be quiet, do not run or look the gorilla directly in the eye, remain still and hope it rushes past you. Do not run away screaming. Keep a minimum of seven metres from gorillas and do not try to touch them. Seven metres?!!

Forest Elephants should be avoided as they are dangerous and unpredictable. Do not surprise them, as with poor eyesight, they tend to react defensively and violently. Stay quiet and downwind; try and imitate a bush while ignoring the biting tsetse flies. Given that we would be in dense tropical jungle I assumed that the elephants must be much smaller than their plains counterparts or how else could they charge through the forests? Maybe they were tall and thin and good at swerving through trees. Elephants kill far more people than gorillas. Crocodiles also kill quite a few and hippos kill more people

in Africa than all of these animals put together. They live in the north as well by the way.

I watched the jungle sliding past the window thirty thousand feet below me and had the image of trying to run silently from an anorexic, stick-thin, enraged elephant while wildly batting away dense clouds of tsetse flies that thought I was a bush, before plunging headlong into the Congo river. As I inhaled several pints of Bilharzia laden water, Philaria flies swarmed around my head biting viciously. Just before river blindness and sleeping sickness drew me down into darkness I would have time to glimpse crocodiles slithering off the adjacent muddy banks and spot the sinuous serpentine weave of Boa constrictors and swimming Cobras heading towards my watery misery, just as the vast pink, yellow toothed, jaws of a hippo engulfed my midriff. I ordered a gin and tonic and read on.

Ebola virus has recently wiped out the gorilla population in the Gabon. It is devastatingly contagious and has a 100% mortality rate amongst humans; death occurs after about a week and basically involves leaking blood out of every single organ. The WHO had warned that the most recent outbreak in the Western Cuvette province in May 2005 had been contained by the end of June - only three months earlier. They gave warning that another outbreak could occur soon. 5% of the adult population were living with HIV/Aids and 64% of those working in the commercial sex trade were HIV positive.

The Republic of Congo was situated on the Equator and I could expect a tropical climate with temperatures ranging up to 36°c with 75% humidity. The official language was French. The only good news so far. I could speak a little French ten years ago. Poisonous snakes were common place and a serious risk in the jungle. Only a few poisonous snakes are fatally dangerous to humans, but most of these live in the Congo. In many cases bites fail to inject venom. For example only 50% of coral snake bites are effective. Trouble is, nearly 100% of effective bites are fatal! Green and Black Mambas are the most poisonous snakes I was likely to encounter. The difference between the two, apart from colour, was that one of them happened to be the only venomous snake in the world that would chase its prey and could move as fast as a running man. Which one was it? Ensure that all victims are transported as quickly as possible to a hospital. Snake venom acts slowly (4-20 hours) unfortunately it would take us at least three days to reach a hospital! Antiserum treatment could be life saving and must be overseen by a doctor; we had neither.

Assume that all insects were poisonous, as a great many are, and there are extremely limited medical facilities (in case I had forgotten.) Leeches infested the waterways. Bites in the tropics become infected very quickly. Water bees, tiny black flies that didn't bite, liked to drink the sweat on your skin and the fluid in your eyes. I was to be plagued by them rolling under my contact lenses.

Civil war had only recently abated and the last rebel group, the delightfully named Ninjas, signed a cease fire in March 2003 but periodically broke it. The capital was still heavily damaged by the war of the late 1990's. The British Foreign Office warns '...that fighting can break out at short notice,' which is nice of them. The US State department advised '...that the war in neighbouring Congo-Kinshasa has led to insecurity in the border areas in

northern Congo-Brazzaville and travel here is not recommended.' I quickly checked the airline map but despite tracing red lines across the heartland of Africa I was none the wiser. I did know that we were going to be floating around in pirogues at the junction of the Republic of Congo, Cameroon and The Central African Republic. I pressed the buzzer and asked the stewardess for a double gin and tonic.

Two weeks later I had rather changed my tune. Seeing the ravages caused by the logging companies would have changed anyone's mind. It was unnerving to emerge from the cacophony of insect noise and bird calls that exists in the depths of the forests to stand on a newly cut logging road and stare down the endless straight line of red mud cutting through the trees and realise that it was absolutely silent. No animal noises, no tracks, no bird song, and the incessant shriek of the cicadas silenced. There was nothing alive. The hunters had seen to that and I had seen the thousands of wire snares that had been recovered by the WCS eco-guards. They collected between 250 and 900 a week; a tiny fraction of the thousands of indiscriminately set snares that only 12 guards had to find in one hundred and fifty square kilometers of forest. The snares killed everything. The logging companies provided the roads and transport, housing, water and healthcare for their workers but no food. The local hunters suddenly had a huge market to supply, logging workers to sell to, and now roads to take the bush-meat out to the cities, where previously they hunted only for the population of small villages. It was silent on the newly cut road because the amount of snares set had increased by 90% and they hadn't even started logging yet. Over 70% of the Congolese jungle is being exploited by logging. It will not sustain such damage.

Being confronted by the caged adult male Silverback gorillas that had spent their entire lives as orphans, after hunting parties had wiped out their family groups, is sobering. Being trusted by Helen the orphaned female was heartbreaking. A hug from a gorilla is something else, but it was the look in her eyes and the trust in her immensely powerful arms that changed my mind.

What did strike me, apart from the incessant insects, was how happy the people seemed to be despite circumstances that I simply couldn't deal with. I was very much out of my depth, unused to deep primordial jungles and the rhythms of Africa, but I've seen enough deprivation and poverty to gauge peoples' take on their lives. Maybe it was simply a matter of not knowing what they were missing. It did however make me wonder about the whole G8 thing that had gone on in the summer and question some of its true purpose. I don't know about you, but I tend to feel a little uncomfortable when I am being lectured by a bunch of fabulously rich and famous rock stars on how I should respond to world poverty. Somewhere along the line I just stopped believing Bob Geldof. I didn't like him first time, but that was because I was trapped in the day room of the Hallamshire Hospital in agony and without morphine injections for seven hours, because the nurses couldn't hear my cries above the incessant racket of Band Aid blaring through the fracture ward. I'm sure he means well. I'm sure he's a far more selfless man than I, but somehow I got the sense that he had hijacked the whole poverty campaign, got too close to the government, sold his soul somewhat. Paul Hewson aka 'Bono', another rich Irish rock star in a cowboy hat and silly sunglasses, just made it harder to bear.

When Madonna pitched in, I just gave up on the whole thing. Many of the Make Poverty History Campaign feel they were seriously compromised and undermined by Geldof.

Africa has an awful lot of problems and not all of them will be solved by celebrities, charity concerts and more aid. Does Africa really need more aid, more money? I'm not sure. Doesn't that just enslave her to us? Disaster relief, affordable Aids drugs, and humanitarian aid will always be needed by all nations but not just money. Dumping money into Africa has not exactly improved its lot in the last fifty years. Most donated money never goes where the donor hoped, is never accounted for and more often than not supports and upholds the very governments whose corrupt control on power keeps their nations in the abject state they are in. Pumping money into their health systems and education departments has not made these countries self sufficient in teachers, doctors and nurses. More often than not we have then lured their nurses and teachers away to jobs in Britain and America. A recent study by the World Bank reported that the drain of skilled people from small and medium sized African countries to the West has been disastrous.

Surely being self sufficient, self determining and not enslaved to aid would solve more of Africa's problems than simply pumping more money in. They have the energy and confidence and yet we seem to drain it by making them beggars. The children of the educated and wealthy in the poorest of African countries will, more often than not, be found to be working in the west. Does not aid and debt relief simply enable embezzlement, corruption, abuse of power, bad governance and the rigging of elections to continue apace? Would you put out a fire by throwing petrol on it?

The Congo was an extraordinary place with a desperate history. It was lovely, more lovely and more prosperously peaceful than I could have imagined. It has vast potential wealth and more resilience than most of the soft populations of the West. I did wonder, seeing the cheerfulness and confidence of the people in such abject conditions, whether we were doing them any favours. The patronising concern of famous celebrities and donors might actually be destroying this self belief and confidence. Africa has wealth aplenty and skilled people and resilience even if responsible governance is in short supply. The latter will not change by throwing money at it. One should bear in mind that it is easier for the wealthy and influential Congolese politician to travel to New York or London than it is to travel where we did in the hinterlands. Guess where the money is?

Maybe it's just that Hallamshire experience which put me off Geldof. Maybe if I see another celebrity cuddling African babies with starvation swollen stomachs (stand up Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Bono and Bob too) I'll just start screaming. There is something very false about it all however well meant it might be. It is not real, rather like their own lives; it makes me shiver.

At the end of November my faithful and absolutely wonderful companion 'Muttley' came to the end of a very long and happy life. He had always been a trusting and happy soul. I never once saw a nasty side to him. He liked everyone he met and assumed that they liked him. He had no fear of vets and until the end had not suffered a days' illness in his entire long life. Indeed he regarded the vet with his usual bright, questing and friendly interest and paid

no notice to the needle in his foreleg. He always was a great leaner and as he sat on the table he leaned with warm comfortable familiarity into my chest and fell into a very, very long sleep. He died peacefully in my arms at the stately age of 17 and a half years old which by my calculations made him the equivalent of 122 human years old. It was such a sad thing to have to do and all the more confusing to find that the most loving thing I could do was kill the very creature I loved so much. It will take a long time to get over that one. I am quite bereft. I never knew that losing him would hurt so much.

A recent piece of research done, surprisingly enough, by a rich global equity strategist working for a major bank, has claimed that chasing wealth can make you ill and earning more than £25,000 per annum will not make you any happier. The first conclusion is as ever a statement of the bleeding obvious just like the recent 6 month research project at Herriot Watt University into which trousers make women's bottoms look big. The conclusion: women's bottoms look big in clothes if women have big bottoms. Anyway, I digress... So £25,000 is enough is it? I don't think so sunshine. Clearly the researcher has come to this conclusion after earning a fabulous bonus and enormous salary, whose mortgage is entirely paid off and whose children's schooling is already pre-paid for. No-one else lives like this. Certainly with a family living in London you wouldn't have a hope of being happy or even fat on an income like that. I was very happy when I had no money and I am very happy now that I have money. It was the things I did with my life rather than the things I bought in my life that made me happy.

Experiences rather than acquisitions are the things that make you happy and live long in the memory. Money buys you time and time is freedom and with freedom it is easier to be happy. I am not saying that you cannot be happy while living in grinding poverty but it is a hell of a lot easier to be happy when you can feed and clothe your family and not worry about shelter and health and debt. We live in a brutally materialist world, where consuming is the new black, yet nothing material makes us happy for anymore than a brief interlude. We quickly get used to owning things. Happiness comes from happy experiences, freely accessed in our memories for the rest of our lives. A fast car, a diamond necklace, a nice house – we become habituated to having these things; we take them for granted and the pleasure of ownership swiftly dies.

We envy people with money, but money does not buy happiness; it simply makes it easier to attain the experiences that do. It is not what we own, or what our friends and neighbours own, that is important. Keeping up with the Joneses was always a highway to nowhere. Happiness is an absolute concept not a relative one. The hedonic treadmill of acquisition only ever gets steeper and goes faster with every day. This Swedish proverb sums things up best. "If you buy what you don't need, you steal from yourself." Despite all this conjecture you won't have time to think about any of this if you can't pay the bills and your house is being repossessed.

As the New Year began I looked around for things that would please, amuse or surprise me. The great news is that all this pseudoscientific garbage that has been peddled about detox diets and regimes has finally been denounced as the utter twaddle that it is. Leading scientists, clinicians, dieticians and toxicologists have banded together to

present a surprisingly refreshing condemnation of this latest fad known in earlier times as quackery. As ever the quacks peddle it because they earn a fortune doing so and care little that the lies they spew may lead only to frustration and disappointment. This health craze says more about the desperate souls buying into it than it does about the mendacity of the providers. Despite being endlessly lectured by government bodies on the importance of a healthy lifestyle this really was a step too far. The laughable thing about this fad is that it encourages people to waste their lives gazing at their navels or up their colons. Suddenly everything is a toxin to these quacks. The true meaning of detoxification is the process by which specific 'poisonous substances' are removed from the body. These 'poisons' now include sugar, fat and salt and they have to be driven out like demons by rubbing strange smelly oils on the body, eating exotic quantities of fruits and squirting vast quantities of liquid up your bum. Give us a break! All this tosh creates is a sense of poisonous self-loathing and confusion and vast profits for the charlatans. The liver and kidneys are extraordinarily effective and highly evolved chemical factories usually working flat out at this time of year to remove excess alcohol. Adding capsules of thistle milk extract or devouring a potage of 'papaya, pumpkin seed, lemon balm, oats, dong quai root, spinach leaves, shitake, silica, magnesium, pineapple and chickpea' as recommended for the feeling of being lighter and with a noticeable gain in energy after 24 hours will do nothing but confuse the over worked liver and make you flatulent and a little queasy.

Carbohydrate and caffeine boosts energy. This simply costs a lot and tastes a little odd. 'Tens of millions of pounds are spent annually at this time of year on detoxifying cures that have absolutely no scientific basis whatsoever for their claims. Rubbing yourself with "sweet almond oil, essential oils of organic lemon and rosemary, helichrysum and carrot" will not, according to an eminent toxicologist John Hoskins, "stimulate and purify your system. Cooking oil would be just as good since none of this witches brew would ever penetrate the skin," He added that, "On detox the Romans got it right: Mundus vult decipi - the world wants to be deceived - better translated as - there's a sucker born every minute." The only thing that loses weight on a detox diet is your wallet." I like this Mr. Hoskins

Sir Colin Berry (Professor Emeritus of Pathology at Queen Mary, University of London) noted that. "... even if you drink an almost lethal dose of alcohol your liver will clear it in 36 hours without any assistance from detox tablets". He's right. I've tried this a few times myself.

John Emsley, Royal Society of Chemistry said, "There is a popular notion that we can speed up the elimination process by drinking fancy bottled water or sipping herbal teas, but this is nonsense." Brilliant! I always knew herbal teas were a con. Drink them because you like them, but please don't believe all this pseudoscientific bollocks.

I also bear deep suspicions for the whole Spa treatments phenomenon. All these weird massages, facial rubs, and generally uncomfortable personal intrusions on peoples' private parts. I think it was Julie Birchill who said that

"the only people using these Spas were women not getting enough sex or getting too much of the wrong sort of sex." I wasn't entirely sure what she meant but I enthusiastically went along with the gist of it. It is just plain unnatural that sort of thing. It is the same with all the claims of the aromatherapists and masseuse. Of course they can't just say, "It feels nice. It smells good." So they make these increasingly mad claims of what each oil does to you and how each smell affects your mind, your senses, your very being. Again, absolutely no scientific foundation for their claims at all, but who cares. We've already been down that road with the makers of vitamin tablets and supplements. They should have government warnings at the bottom of every label: *These products can damage your wealth: do not purchase because of what you have read, purchase because of what you think you need.*

I don't see why not. They seem to think they should tell us what to do in every other area of our lives. The department of Health and Safety is at once an important, beneficial and effective body while at the same time seemingly the most pernicious, politically correct, hide bound and terrifying government department in existence. I really wonder whether in the future we will ever have any adventurers, explorers and risk takers now that playing conkers and hop-scotch has been banned in various school yards. I know a teacher with decades of high altitude mountaineering experience who wouldn't dream of taking one of his classes for a walk in Derbyshire because of the endless paper work he would have to fill out just to ensure that the school couldn't possibly be sued. But for a Chemistry teacher who was a keen climber, I would never have taken up climbing. It wouldn't happen today, which is a shame.

The mangling of language can be most commonly found in magazine adverts proclaiming the elixir like qualities of shampoo, face creams and other assorted unguents. I would like to think that I am highly educated, well read and with an above average vocabulary but even when read slowly, repeatedly and after applying intense concentration while sitting in the dentist's waiting room, I still had no idea what they meant. It would be funny if it were not such an outrageous swindle. It started with more and more outlandish language used on restaurant menus and has now spread to virtually every piece of packaging that we purchase.

As for fancy bottled waters, there was a piece in the paper last year condemning the whole phenomenon as something made up and marketed by the manufacturers who make billions out of our gullibility. Even Olympic coaches were dismissing as nonsense the idiotic claims of quite how much water should be drunk per day. The myth that coffee and tea should be avoided because they were diuretics was also exploded. The diuretic effects per cup were completely outweighed by the hydration value of the liquid. Nevertheless people still spend fortunes on fancy water despite blind tests proving that very few could accurately tell the difference between them and tap water. Bottled water has become the latest must have fashion prop. People carry them everywhere like designer labels and give the impression that without them they would suddenly die of thirst. Then they throw them away. Blue plastic water bottles everywhere, crushed on street corners, littering hedgerows, bobbing down idyllic rivers, millions and millions of the bloody things that will take several millennia to bio-degrade. I once climbed a

ridiculously hard rock route called 'The culture of Pleasure' on the staggeringly beautiful uninhabited island of Phi Phi Don in southern Thailand. It was all of forty five feet high and I thought the effort would kill me given the 100^F heat and 90% humidity.

Three years later I returned unaware that Hollywood and some squirt called DiCaprio had since been that way to make a film called 'The Beach.' The consequent invasion of fans that had flooded after him to peer owlshly at where he had once stood had resulted in the tide line turning blue with abandoned mineral water bottles. They bobbed merrily around the long tail boat as I sat and stared at the destruction in dismay. Peering over the side at the corals waving fronds of marbled colour in the crystal clear water I watched a few full bottles rolling lazily in patches of golden sand. People had come to see beauty, taken their photographs for posterity then, flinging their plastic bottles over their shoulders, headed off to some other paradise to spoil.

I've seen them littering the Khumbu, abandoned halfway up Kilimanjaro, bobbing down the Congo, just about everywhere. I doubt the billions made by the water companies will ever go into cleaning this global mess up. And, for the life of me, I still cannot understand why people would pay nearly three pounds for tap water in a London restaurant that has been fizzed up with gas behind the bar and then decanted into the restaurants own brand bottle. A fool and his money ... then again I spent £1-95 for a cup of tea in a motorway service station last week. That is one tea bag and some hot water. £1-95! Maybe we are all fools. If so let us at least be happy fools.

The latest hilarity in this marketing can comes on the label for Penta bottled water selling at £1.50 and informing you that, 'You can use Penta to enjoy what we call Bio-Hydration: optimal cellular hydration that will help your body combat the negative effects of 21st century living and help your brain to stay alert all day long.' Good grief! Having read that, one would need a stiff drink to get over the shock of being so brazenly conned by Penta but then I suppose saying 'if you drink Penta it will stop you feeling thirsty) wouldn't quite do it for these advertising wizards. There should be a 'Most Appalling Labeling Award' or 'Idiotic Statements of the Bleeding Obvious Prize'. I'll start the ball rolling with a few choice and true labels seen on the following items.

Peanuts: "may contain nuts."
Sleeping pill box: "may cause drowsiness"
Marine varnish tin: "not suitable for marine use."
Panasonic torches: "use in the dark for brightness."
Box of Puma trainers: "average contents: 2."
Chainsaw manual: "do not attempt to stop chain with legs or genitals."
Hairdryers: "do not use while sleeping/showering"

I was a little taken aback to see that the website had changed. No-one told me about it. I rather like it. I wonder who did it? It seems to have been well received although I did note a slightly spiky remark about branding myself. Hello? You what? Am I bovered? I should point out that I did not design, create or run this website. I definitely didn't give it that daft name! I am a very reluctant website user at the best of times and uncomfortable with the whole

thing. I am amazed that it is still going or that anybody is actually visiting it. I am also quietly delighted that so many people seem to enjoy using it to chat and make on-line friendship. Whatever reason might originally have been for bringing someone to the site, it is quite obvious to me that the friendly, humorous and welcoming nature of the 'members' (if that is what you are called) is the reason for people returning to it. It's nowt to do with me any longer.

As for re-branding myself I didn't even know I was branded! I couldn't see any obvious burn marks last time I looked. I can get some photos of Mutts if they are wanted although I am not sure why, since only I knew him. As for me writing a blog, well I don't even know what one is ... have just been informed ... no, sorry, definitely not writing a daily blog-journal-thingummy-jig - sounds too much like an ego trip if you ask me and anyway I have enough trouble dealing with my own life without sharing it with everyone else. Also I have read quite a few of the forum posts on this site and they are alarming enough without giving you lot a load more ammunition about my ablutions, car, train and plane trips, love life, distinct lack of love life, run ins with officialdom, arguments, bad behaviour, tall fishing stories, personal grooming anathemas, clubbing adventures, pet hates, political diatribes and cottage renovation tales. So I wrote this endless piece which you can regard as a one-off blog, singular ...

I am aware that the views expressed in this piece may give the impression that I am taking the moral high ground and shouting the odds at everyone else. Far from it I'm afraid. These are, I suppose, my private thoughts as to how I think we are heading as individuals and as a society. It may be something that I aspire to, but I am a very long way short of reaching. I own a car, work too hard, for too much money, consume slavishly like so many others, let society dictate me rather than run my own course. I am in my own way racist, misanthropic, sexist, misogynist, alarmist, anti-establishmentarianist, conformist, socialist, hedonist, indeed, all the 'ists', that, if we are honest, we all are. I try hard not to be. I think right thoughts and do wrong things. I try to be considerate and honest and preserve my integrity. I think I do succeed in this in a rather clumsy way but I am not sure anyone else realises it.

I try to be aware of these failings and try to live as best I can in the way I would like others to be towards me. Doubtless I fail on most counts, but I do try and I do think, perhaps too much, about life the Universe and everything and wonder about what life is and what we can do with it. I have ideals. I fail to live up to most of them. I hate hypocrisy and so sometimes I hate myself. I love the company of good friends of which I am blessed with many and yet live an isolated life for much of the time. I love the idea of loving and being loved and yet am scared of the hurt and loss it always seems to incur. I try to be brave and strong but all too often realise that I am none of these. I detest insincerity, lies, duplicity, false friendship and the ugly minds of bigotry probably because I sense a little of all these things in myself (except the latter) I have been blessed with fortune and success, and equally I have been damned by it. I strive to find someone who will know me as me but now surrender to the depressing realisation that I will only meet people who have a perception of

me that I can never overcome. I meet people for the first time who know more about me than I will ever know about them. It is a dilemma. I hunger after simple things that I never seem to acquire and find myself showered with complicated things that I never seemed to have set out to attain. I want the love and companionship of a soul mate yet I know I am an impossible person to be with. Some things I continue to fight for; others I have let loose my grasp of and accepted they will never be. I would like us to live a certain way, yet I live only a very small part of it myself. I try to be true to myself and honest to others. I am not always successful at either. I am not right nor am I wrong.

I apologise if what I have written has angered or offended you. It is better to have an opinion, even if it is wrong, than to have no opinion at all. I would rather have polemics than lassitude; would prefer passionate arguments than dumb acceptance. Anyway you can't complain too much. You could have censored yourself and stopped reading at any time; in truth, I guess most of you probably did. This has been an overly long, uncharacteristically solemn tirade leavened with less humour than I would have liked and it has surprised me somewhat; when I started I didn't realise that I felt this way. For the most part we live fabulous lives when compared to what could have been if born in different places or eras yet we often reward it with shallowness, or at least I do. It's a bit of a bugger really.

Having just re-read this I have come to the alarming conclusion that, quite without noticing, I seem to have turned into a grumpy old man - oh bugger. .. sorry.

My New Years resolutions are: to give up smoking, to spend more time in Ireland, to start writing, and never to fall in love again (that was another very low point of the year but don't bore them with that one, Ed.)

(P.S. who the hell is this Ed guy anyway?)

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