

The Laughter of Our Children

Tony Benn

Tony Benn opened the Launch Conference of the European Network for Peace and Human Rights, which was held on 31st January / 1st February 2002 in the European Parliament in Brussels.

President Bush gave the State of the Union message in Washington two days ago, which I think of as the Washington Ultimatum to the rest of the world. ‘Those who are not with us are against us’. That is to say, any discussion, any debate, any dissent comes under the category of a war against us. Outlawed are any dissent, any discussion, any democracy: that is the problem we have to face.

The United States is now acting wholly unilaterally in its foreign policy. It is disregarding the United Nations Charter, which has been pushed on one side. So have the rule of law, respect for prisoners, human rights, and all the allies, unless they are wholly uncritical. We are now facing an American Empire. Not the first empire ever in the world, but still the most powerful empire we’ve ever known, with bases all over the world, and more of them now as a result of the Afghan War, and of course the development of the so-called Star Wars system to provide Full Spectrum Dominance.

I think it would be very hard to deny that there is a threat to peace and security under the terms of the United Nations Charter. But what worries me (more in a way even than the weapons, because the United States has had the power to destroy any country in the world since nuclear weapons were developed there), what I think should concern us more is the dominant role of *fear* in the politics of the world.

The United States was clearly affected by the atrocity in the World Trade Centre, but, in addition to that, there is a very deep fear of America by the people of the world, and indeed by the client states of the world, the leaders of the client states – you’re either a ‘rogue’ state or a ‘client’ state. There’s no middle way. Our Prime Minister, for example, Mr Blair, dare not take an independent stand, even if he wanted to. And I’m not sure he does, because our nuclear weapons are going to be dependent on the United States. In the same way, the King of Saudi Arabia dare not take an independent

stand because he depends on the United States to maintain him in power. And so on ...

There is a great danger that a coalition which forms up against terrorism may all too easily find itself opposing any form of dissent. We hear a lot about the corruption of power, but there is also the corruption of powerlessness. When people feel powerless they can do very dangerous things. In a sense, you can argue that terrorism itself is a product of the sense of powerlessness the people have when they feel that there is absolutely no alternative route open to them other than to take the action that they do. American policy has been liberated by the end of the Cold War, as the one prevailing superpower. A war for resources, a war for control of military, industrial, commercial, and information channels, makes it not unreasonable to say that American power is, to some extent, the paramilitary wing of globalisation. Today, there are many big corporations in the world which certainly support American policy because they feel that protects their right to operate in certain countries.

The defence contractors who funded President Bush undoubtedly went to the White House and said, 'with the possibility of a recession coming, a little bit of re-armament would help to get the economy going'. This is something which those of my age will remember: Hitler offered full employment in Germany in the 1930s, and he did it by re-armament.

So the danger that recession could trigger a pressure for re-armament is there. I think it is a really dangerous, and really difficult situation. And the first thing we have to do, and those who come here in a sense already do so, or we wouldn't have come, is to understand what is happening. If you talk to people who are not directly involved, they tend to accept the general line that terrorism in Afghanistan is responsible for this and that, and you had to deal with them all. The power of the media is an enormously big factor in this. The BBC is normally not too bad. But as soon as the war begins, there are pictures of planes going over and, though there's some limited discussion, the control of information by the spin doctors in Washington, NATO and London is very powerful. If in spite of all this, we have understood what is happening ourselves, then we have to find ways of explaining it to people. This does mean – and this is what our Conference is all about – we must be linked; all the movements that have an interest in developing an alternative approach. The peace movements all over the world have grown and declined with the passage of events – the European Nuclear Disarmament movement which Ken Coates was very much involved in, for example, the Greenham Common women, all the movements around the world – and they now need to be re-vitalised in the light of what is happening. I remember we had an American Admiral come over to talk to Members of Parliament in the House of Commons, saying that if Star Wars goes ahead, and he was very scornful of its practicality, he said we would need more Greenham Commons in Britain. That was a proud American Admiral.

We must link with the anti-globalisation campaign where there is an involvement of trade unions, of environmentalists, of the women's movement, of

various religious groups and so on, brought together by a common interest in getting some control of the world in which we live. I think of the anti-globalisation movement as an embryonic international movement for democratic control. We therefore need to develop our campaign in such a way as to unite these forces clearly with those against Star Wars.

I think it interesting that Colin Powell has made a statement on the prisoners in Guantanamo, suggesting that the question of the Geneva Convention might apply. I know quite well how that happened. Every American Embassy in the world has sent a telegram back to the State Department saying, 'You're doing enormous damage to the American reputation by going ahead with this', so Powell represents it. Never underestimate the influence that foreign embassies can have on the policy of the government. I remember once, the American Ambassador came with a note of protest to me about something I'd done, and the whole Whitehall machine was in terror at the arrival of an American Ambassador.

Then, of course, there is the task of working with the United States peace movement. Now, many of you here will have links with the United States, as I have. I've been over there and spoken at meetings against the Gulf War, and the Kosovo War, and so on. Although it is not reported much, not even in the American press, and certainly not in the British press, there is a peace movement in America which needs our support. The extent to which we can send people over, and join in discussions with them, will not only be helpful to them, but also introduce a new ingredient into their debate. If this is, as I believe, comparable to the anti-colonial movement that we saw against the European colonial powers, there's no doubt that when all the national liberation movements came to London and other capitals, (the ones I saw came to London) they drew support from British people, who backed their cause. And that, I think, is our function there. And also, we have to use the media and the internet.

The psychological factor of fear in this situation is in many ways more important than the hardware itself. There was a Scottish miner I knew and loved very much, called Michael McGahey, who once said to me 'I'm not frightened of the guns, I'm frightened of the people who want to use them'. And I thought that was a very important comment to make. Of course, I don't want Star Wars, but it's the desire to use them that we have to address. We have to build confidence. If you're going to deal with the corruption of powerlessness, to which I referred, you have to give people the belief and the hope, indeed reasonable hope, that something can be achieved in another way. I think that is, for the moment, almost the most important thing the peace movement can do. Understand it, explain it, and point out that something can be done. Also, of course, you have to address the real issues.

The Palestinian people have suffered most appallingly, and have been treated so cynically. Whenever the Americans want a war, they call it the peace process in Israel. When the war is over they lose interest in it. The Palestinians are perhaps a symbol, in a way, of the oppressed people who need their question

addressed, their problems dealt with, so *they* feel they are not isolated. And that applies to the general questions of poverty all over the world. It has often been said, and is undoubtedly true: we cannot have peace without justice. To give support to those engaged in the variety of struggles which are part of the struggle for peace, and to be broad based in our approach, our campaign for peace cannot be bottled up in one narrow ideological explanation of what is happening. When people face a real issue they do not want to be lectured on the exact interpretation of it from this perspective or that. They want the problem addressed.

Finally, we have also to boost our own self-confidence, because I think a lot of people, even in the peace movement, have felt there was not a lot that could be done. But, if you look historically, all empires decline. All empires decline. I was born in the time when there was a British empire. In 1945, as a pilot in Egypt, I had my little identity card, which I've still got. It said 'you are exempt from Egyptian law'. Why? Because we'd occupied Egypt from 1882. We were thrown out of Egypt in 1956. Our relations with Egypt have improved enormously since we were thrown out. Our relations with India are better. When we leave Ireland, our relations with Ireland will be better. Thus, the Americans might possibly be persuaded to learn that if they really want to be loved all over the world, just get out and negotiate. Of course, that is what will happen anyway. All they will decide is the circumstances under which they will get out. Either they get out under pressure, or they get out voluntarily with good will. That is their future. I think saying that from the benefit of our experience is useful. When I meet Americans I always say I have a lot of sympathy with you because I was in a declining empire, and it's horrible. Everybody hates you. It must be very, very worrying. But it is not as bad as you think at the end. We also know something else. If you had a poll across the world, 99 per cent of the people of the world would be in support of the causes we are discussing at this Conference.

We have to resuscitate the United Nations Charter. I remember it from 1945. 'We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has caused untold suffering to mankind'. Those words were the pledge my generation gave to this generation, and we have to renew it for the next generation. And the United Nations has a critical role to play, reformed and improved.

Bobby Sands, the Irish hunger striker, before he died, said 'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children'. I think that's one of the most powerful statements of peace I've ever heard. 'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children'. I know it is difficult, but too much is at stake for us to fail. I'm a diarist, and every night I write down my impressions. Sometimes I am so gloomy I hardly dare say what I feel. And sometimes I'm so excited I can't believe it's good for a man of my age to have that degree of excitement about what we could achieve if we went about it in the right way.