

# Speaking Peace on the BBC

*Craig Murray*

*Craig Murray was the United Kingdom's Ambassador to Uzbekistan until 2004, when he was removed for complaining about torture in that country. He is the author of Murder in Samarkand (Mainstream Publishing).*

I had the interesting experience of sitting on set at BBC News 24 for over an hour on 5 April, intermittently talking and intermittently on camera. I had come in to discuss both the maritime boundaries issue and the question of the behind the scenes diplomatic negotiations. As Oliver Miles said, there were at least ten bilateral discussions between Iran and British ambassadors, ministers and No 10 officials. Tony Blair might claim there were no negotiations, but they weren't discussing the weather.

Anyway, I was on air when the hostages arrived by helicopter and were reunited with their families. Thus I found myself being asked for an hour questions such as 'How do you think the families are feeling?'

I should say that the presenters were really nice, and the hectic atmosphere of a newsroom on a big live breaking story is great fun. I found myself involved in an interesting game of offering deadpan expert analysis, but interspersing it with subversive comment. I didn't want to push that too hard or I was pretty plain I would have got yanked off. So over the course of an hour I first slipped in the observation that, as a taxpayer, I was not too keen on financing very expensive warships steaming around the Gulf allegedly to collect vehicle excise duty. Later I was able to say that, while I shared the unalloyed delight at the return of the 15, I was thinking rather more about the families of the four British servicemen who had been killed in Iraq that day, and their civilian interpreter. Before they could recover from the shock of that burst through the reverential coverage, I added the 70 Iraqi civilians who on average die every day.

You should understand that over the long broadcast I mostly talked about the return of the captives and had no difficulty in being genuinely upbeat and happy about that. But the reunion of captives and families probably had the largest live news audience for many months;

it did not escape the No 10 spin doctors' attention that their 'Triumph for Tony' moment was being jeopardised by a dissident having been allowed on the BBC.

Ask yourself – when is the last time you saw an anti-war voice, as opposed to a pro-war 'military' or 'security' expert, asked by the BBC to comment on a Middle East development? Yet the majority of people in this country are against the war. If they want an ex-diplomat, they go for pro-war cheerleaders Pauline Neville Jones or Christopher Meyer, even though eight out of ten ex-British Ambassadors are against the war.

Anyway the outraged phone calls from the government to the BBC started coming in. As a result, having been introduced as 'Former Head of the Foreign Office Maritime Section and Former British Ambassador...' the first time, I was reintroduced as 'Craig Murray, who was sacked as British Ambassador to Uzbekistan for opposing British government policy'. The poor presenters, with whom I had been getting on well for an hour, seemed embarrassed.

I therefore decided the gloves were off, and introduced 'the elephant in the room – that the large majority of the British people don't believe that our servicemen should be in Iraq and in harm's way in the first place.'

There is no doubt at all that when you make anti-war or anti-government points on the BBC the whole body language and line of questioning indicates that you are some sort of isolated extremist. Of course, our so-called opposition parties fail to make any such points, and the BBC's normal pool of experts are hand-picked to be reliably right wing on these issues. The absolutely astonishing thing is that I then whizzed off to Sky News (Fox affiliate) and there, in the heart of the Murdoch Empire, the atmosphere is totally different.

I was asked open questions if anything leading me on to be overtly critical of the war, Tony Blair and John Bolton. This is not unusual. Tony Benn, George Galloway and I all get far easier access to Sky than the BBC. Sky does seem to maintain a modicum of journalistic integrity. The BBC has totally lost it since Gilligan, Dyke and Hussey were sacked for telling the truth about Iraqi WMD, and David Kelly was murdered.

Anyway, after Sky I went to buy a birthday present for Nadira. A lady outside the shop told me that she had just seen me on the TV. 'I used to listen to you on Radio 4' she said, 'You looked a lot better on the radio.'