

Benign Whitewash

Ken Coates

During the run-up to the first Gulf War the Pope made his opinions known, and they were against the opening of hostilities. At the time I wrote to the Dalai Lama about this, seeking his opinion. He came straight out with it, very succinctly:

‘There is no possibility of a military intervention in Tibet. As far as we all know, there is not a drop of oil to be found in the whole country.’

In this way the Dalai Lama anticipated the whole debate about humanitarian intervention, which sometimes proves possible where there are diamonds, rare metals, petroleum, or similar humanitarian considerations. This might be deemed an inadequate response to Mr. Blair, who is still harping on on his old themes. Lately he was in Chicago (23rd April 2009) telling the Council on Global Affairs that he had

‘argued strongly for an active and engaged foreign policy, not a reactive or isolationist one: better to intervene than to leave well alone. Be bold, adventurous even in what we can achieve ... I still believe that those who oppress and brutalise their citizens are better put out of power than kept in it.’

Since the British people dispensed with his services, belatedly ‘putting him out of power’ in June 2007, Mr. Blair very promptly enlisted as Envoy to the International Quartet to the Occupied Palestine Territories (OPT). He succeeded James Wolfensohn, who had resigned the preceding April, after accusing Israel of bad faith in maintaining its blockade of Gaza’s borders and obstructing the movement of goods and persons into the territory. The Government of Israel, he said, was almost

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acting as if there had been no withdrawal from Gaza. Soon it was to act even more outrageously, raining phosphorus bombs on a civilian population, but there has been no hint of a Blair resignation.

The Israeli government was pleased to see a friendly face replacing that of Mr. Wolfensohn. Blair was given a mandate to mobilise assistance and foster economic development. His brief also included reform of the security apparatus of the Palestine Authority. The Quartet required the Palestine Authority to 'take strong action against Hamas and Islamic Jihad'. Benign intervention prescribed a variety of measures to crack down on leaders of the Palestinian resistance. The President of the right-wing Israeli National Union Party, Rabbi Benny Elon

'told a local radio station that Blair agrees with them on two primary issues. "These are uprooting the Palestinian terrorist organisations and solving the problem of the refugees without holding Israel responsible for it".'¹

If ever there were a case for the practice of benevolent intervention, it surely arose during the subsequent Israeli offensive against Gaza. The Envoy to the Quartet studiously sat on his hands throughout the massacres.

But the persecution of Muslims in Gaza was not at the top of Blair's agenda during his speech in Chicago. No, he was concerned to vindicate his historical role in opposing the Yugoslav Government in its effort to staunch the disintegration of the country. As Blair told his audience in the Council of Global Affairs:

'The struggle faced by the world including the majority of Muslims, is based on an extreme and misguided form of Islam. Our job is simple: it is to support and partner those Muslims who believe deeply in Islam but also who believe in peaceful co-existence, in taking on and defeating the extremists who don't.'

One such peace-loving Muslim was Mr. Izetbegovic, at the time in question the President of Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the Tribunal which heard the case of President Slobodan Milosevic, a witness reported waiting to see President Izetbegovic in an anteroom, when an imposing figure strode in front of her for a prior appointment. It was Osama bin Laden. Osama's friendly Arab fighters were about to enlist in the Bosnian army, and all were to be issued with Bosnian passports. They could then travel freely wherever the Bosnian writ still ran. Osama bin Laden and his peace-loving friends were thus able to acquire the run of Albania, and those parts of Kosovo which were not under the control of the Yugoslav government.

It is a complicated world, and Mr. Blair's Manichean views fit it none too well. As we already reported: 'Our job is simple'.

As befits a man with a simple job, a simple mind is convenient. Mr. Blair warns us that there is a link between atrocities in Mumbai, terror attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, the destabilisation of the Yemen, and the turbulence in Somalia. 'But is not one movement' he says. What he does not say is that the wickedness of these villains is indeed boundless, and that they can pop up as terrorists one day, and soldiers of righteousness the next. Osama, the destroyer of the Twin Towers, transforms himself into Osama the liberator of the Bosniak peoples, or Osama the hero of the Kosovars. After all, was it not Osama who earned his medals as the liberator of Afghanistan, when he drove away the evil Russians, who put all the girls in schools, and in so many ways outraged the sensibilities of the Taliban?

We always knew that Blair was a slippery customer, but as things progress we begin to see why. He lives in a world of slippery categories. This ceases to be a joke when people's lives come to depend upon his judgements.

The migration of the Mujaheddin fighters from the Middle East via Afghanistan to Bosnia involved a substantial force of men. Most had originally been armed by the Americans during the 1980s. With the establishment of an uneasy peace in Bosnia the Izetbegovic Government of Sarajevo furnished hundreds of Bosnian passports to those volunteers who chose to remain in the area. Training programmes continued under the noses of the NATO troops, and a lively trade in drugs apparently prospered.

It took time for NATO to wake up to the true alignments of its Balkan allies. General Skiaker, leaving the command of NATO troops in Kosovo, confessed that he was

'no longer able to see the Albanians in the area as a people "under a tyrannical regime" but rather "as a people who have frittered away world support through bickering and pettiness of mind". "No longer" said Skiaker, "is anyone willing to consider extremists as people whose grievances should be understood".'²

Undaunted, Tony Blair chooses to celebrate his role in the Kosovo crisis as a paradigm case of humanitarian intervention in his Chicago oration. If Bosnia and Kosovo were prototypes for what was to come, Afghanistan and Iraq were full-blown examples of the complete monstrosity of this kind of intervention. And now, since his pension depends upon it, Mr. Blair has discovered the Holy Land. This means he can afford himself the great pleasure of denouncing Iranian nuclear weapons which do not exist, whilst ignoring Israeli nuclear weapons which do exist in profusion. He can

denounce Iranian terrorism, which is at least partly imaginary, whilst ignoring Israeli terrorism which is anything but imaginary.

We shall return to the question of Iraq, which has qualified Mr. Blair as a fully-fledged war criminal. The Chilcot Inquiry has been established, no doubt with the intention of applying sufficient whitewash to conceal these crimes. It may not succeed. That amount of whitewash will be very hard to find. But unfortunately, this is not a matter simply of the historical record.

The atrocities in Afghanistan continue unabated, and gather momentum. In *Spokesman* number 99, *Obama's Afghan Dilemma*, we had occasion to treat on the perfidy of the Afghan General Dostum, who after an extremely colourful and brutal career, was designated the Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Afghan Armed Forces. On February 2nd 2008 fifty of Dostum's goons attacked the home of Akbar Bai, who had challenged the rule of the General. He was beaten and taken prisoner, alongside his son and a bodyguard. Afghan police then surrounded Dostum's house, and liberated his captives. The Afghan Attorney General wanted to charge Dostum, accusing him of kidnapping, assault and breaking and entering. Mr. Bai, nursing serious injuries in hospital, complained that the General

'had committed a crime and must be punished if there is law and democracy in this country. This is on top of many other crimes he has committed.'

We will not repeat the remarkable dossier of these previous crimes,³ but we will note that General Dostum (we do not at present know whether this title is now honorific or actual) has apparently returned to favour in the Afghan regime. The front page of the *Independent* newspaper on 18th August reports on the General's return from exile in Turkey, avowedly to consolidate the votes of the Uzbek community in Afghanistan behind Mr. Karzai. The Americans are reported to be aghast at this development, because President Obama is alleged to be investigating the celebrated massacre of two thousand or more Taliban captives which occurred on General Dostum's watch back in 2001. General Dostum has critics outside the international community, of course. His chief opponent in Afghanistan is the candidate who is placed third by commentators covering the Afghan Presidential election, Ramazan Bashar Dost.

'The French educated philosopher said "It is time for the international community to see that it is not acceptable that war criminals stay in power".'⁴

Mr. Blair may well emulate Lord Nelson in applying the telescope to his blind eye when considering this matter. The Afghan elections are difficult

enough without raising awkward questions about General Dostum. It will be interesting to see whether President Obama has a similar facility for ignoring unpleasant facts, or whether the enquiries into Dostum's massacres will continue to be prosecuted.

The big trouble with the Afghan elections appears to be that there is considerable doubt about what constitutes a vote. Dostum will argue that the affinities of the Uzbek population follow his own example or prestige. The same cannot be said in the rest of the country. The BBC reports extensive bribery, and sharp practice on a horrifying scale.

On the *Today* programme (18th August 2009) it was reported that on this, the last day of campaigning before the voters were scheduled to go to the polls the following Thursday:

'Thousands of voting cards have been offered for sale, and thousands of dollars offered in bribes for voters.'

Ian Pannell reports:

'More than thirty candidates have spent the last four weeks crossing the country, delivering speeches and making promises. It certainly looked like a regular campaign, but there is widespread evidence that some people working for candidates have deliberately tried to influence the outcome by offering bribes, promising jobs, and actually buying votes. We were told that polling cards were being sold and were put in touch with a contact. An Afghan working for the BBC travelled to the seller's house, posing as a potential buyer. He asked for some samples as proof, then came to me. I have now been given seven voting cards. The cards show the name of the voter, his or her voting number, their details and their signature ... We were offered 500 to 1000 of these. They would be sold to us for about ten to fifteen dollars per card and it was made clear to us that there were plenty more where these came from. These are cards that would be used on election day to vote for the next President of Afghanistan.'

The BBC producer was interviewed about how such cards might be used.

'Bilal, how could these be used to benefit a candidate? Bilal: if you had, say, 1000 of these and you had someone working for a candidate at the polling station, he could in exchange give you, say, a thousand ballot papers. Interviewer: these would then go into ballot boxes in favour of your candidate? Bilal: that is correct.'

The BBC interviewer handed the cards back to the would-be seller, saying that they were not interested.

'Other people have also offered to sell us thousands of votes and some traders have even been arrested.'

In the same interview, the BBC reported on offers of substantial bribes, and a competition between rival bidders offering \$10,000, \$20,000, and then even more. 'I don't know where they get the money from', said the BBC's Afghan interviewee. The British Ambassador said that:

'Whatever the problems, it is still better than not having an election at all.'

Perhaps he should be invited to explain this at the funerals of all those eighteen-year-old boys who have been killed in order to enable an election to take place. Perhaps Mr. Blair might also wish to update his lecture to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, explaining how benign intervention might conceivably improve election results which could otherwise make the wrong choices.

Of course, money is quite helpful in this process. This was strongly pointed out by Malalai Joya, the courageous young Afghan woman MP who has been campaigning to explain the true situation in her country. Writing in the *Independent*, on the 20th August 2009, she said:

'Like millions of Afghans I have no hope in the results of today's election. In a country ruled by warlords, occupation forces, Taliban terrorists, drug money and guns, no-one can expect a legitimate or fair vote ... Even international observers have been speaking about widespread fraud and intimidation and, among the people on the street, there is a common refrain: the real winner has already been picked by the White House.

President Hamid Karzai has cemented alliances with brutal warlords and fundamentalists in order to maintain his position. Although our constitution forbids war criminals from running for office, the incumbent has named two notorious militia commanders as his vice-presidential running mates – Karim Khalili and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, both of whom stand accused of brutalities against our people.

Deals have also been made with countless fundamentalists. This week saw the return from exile of the dreaded warlord Rashid Dostum. And the pro-Iranian extremist Mohammad Mohaqiq, who has been accused of war crimes, has been promised five cabinet positions for his party in exchange for supporting Mr. Karzai.

Rather than democracy, what we have in Afghanistan are backroom deals among discredited warlords who are sworn enemies of democracy and justice.

The President has also continued to absolutely betray the women of Afghanistan.

Even after massive international outcry – and brave protesters taking to the streets of Kabul – Mr. Karzai implemented the infamous rape law, targeting Shia women, to gain support of the fundamentalist elements in the election. He had initially promised to review the most egregious clauses, but in the end it

was passed with few amendments and the barbaric anti-women statements not removed. As Human Rights Watch recently stated: ‘Karzai has made an unthinkable deal to sell Afghan women out in return for the support of fundamentalists.’

And the two main challengers to a continuation of the Karzai rule do not offer any change. Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah are both former cabinet ministers in this discredited regime and neither has a real, broad footing among the people.

Mr. Abdullah, as the main candidate of fundamentalist warlords, has run a wide campaign with money he is receiving from the Iranian regime. He and some of the Northern Alliance commanders supporting him have threatened unrest if he loses the vote, raising fears of a return to the rampant violence and killing that marked the civil war years of the 1990s.’

How does a benign interventionist cope with this dismal state of affairs? Why, with more and stronger intervention, of course.

‘My argument’, says Mr. Blair, ‘is that the case for the doctrine I advocated ten years ago remains as strong now as it was then; and that what has really changed is the context in which the doctrine has to be applied ... [This] requires engagement of a different and more comprehensive kind; and can only be won by the long haul. The context therefore is much tougher. But the principle is the same.’

In a word, the policy generates a fiasco, the cure for which is a bigger fiasco. Are the poor Afghans to endure yet more of these traumas? Or must they wait until the electorates in Great Britain or the United States wise up and demand that the whole procedure be halted?

We do not know how many dollars the Chicago Council on Global Affairs had to subscribe in order to tap the wisdom of Mr. Blair on these matters. Doubtless he did not come cheap, and it is even possible that the votes of one or two Afghan provinces could have been purchased with such a sum.

But where does this leave the poor devils who are entrapped in this war, which generates only further turmoil and hopelessness? Liberal interventions have swept around the world in a veritable plague of death and destruction. Yugoslavia has been ravaged, but the Balkans remains at least as much of a shambles as it was before the interventionists discovered it. Iraq, which after a million of its people have been slaughtered, has declared a certain kind of peace, has celebrated it with the biggest bombs in its history, and new hecatombs of the victims. And Afghanistan is multiplying the corruption of the embezzlers by the ultimate corruption of the grave.

Postscript

Since this was written, the Afghan polls have closed, and a steady dribble of advance results and speculative predictions has run across the Western newspapers. It is evident that there has been a distinctly variable turnout, and there are serious charges about ballot stuffing and fraud. More than one candidate figures in these stories.

In the south, the turnout has sometimes been derisory, and the BBC has transmitted accounts of how in the combat zone, some polling stations were visited by one hundred-odd people out of many thousands. In the north, reported turnout is commonly much higher, but may be dubious none the less. Torn up and crumpled ballot papers which have been rejected by someone have been found in various places.

All this promoted what the BBC transcribed as an ‘explosive meeting’ between the outgoing President Hamid Karzai, and the American plenipotentiary, Richard Holbrooke. Holbrooke bluntly raised some of the questions about the misconduct of the polls, and fraud by a number of candidates’ teams. He thought that a second round run-off could render the election process ‘more credible’. Mr. Karzai apparently went ballistic, although Mr. Holbrooke twice raised the proposal to hold a second round run-off. He voiced concern about allegations that the President’s own campaign team, as well as other candidates, had been behaving fraudulently and stuffing the ballot boxes. The meeting ended abruptly, although the American Embassy denied that Mr. Holbrooke had ‘stormed out’. The spokeswoman did not wish to discuss the details of the meeting any further. President Karzai’s spokesperson denied everything.

Two candidates have complained of attempts to defraud them of victory. The former Foreign Minister has been particularly strong in his insistence that the voting has been irregular. Early forecasts gave him an estimated thirty-eight per cent of the votes compared with forty per cent predicted for Mr. Karzai. Such a result already implies the inevitable need for a second ballot, since the winning candidate needs more than fifty per cent of the votes cast to avoid the run-off. Other candidates have polled relatively well, which makes the fifty per cent target almost impossible to obtain.

If this is true, why were there high words between the Afghan leader and President Obama’s representative? What was the point? Did Mr. Karzai think that he would be able to declare victory with the figures that were already being stacked up? As the BBC reporter, Ian Pannell, said:

‘There have been many doubts raised about the Afghan presidential election about the turnout and irregularities. But this is the first time that a leading western official has apparently expressed it quite so openly. It will raise more

questions about the credibility of the whole process, and could well make the plan to establish a meaningful government in a stable country all the harder to achieve.’

With monotonous regularity, the dead boys continue to arrive at Wootton Bassett.

References

1. Dr. Daud Abdullah: *Concerns about British and EU roles in Palestinian Authority Human Rights Abuses in the Occupied West Bank, Middle East Monitor*, p.11.
2. Cited in Lenard Cohen: *Simon Fraser University News*, November 1st 2001, volume 22, No. 5, p.3.
3. We reported them in *Spokesman* No. 77 (pp. 44-49), and in my editorial to *Spokesman* No. 99, pp. 3-14.
4. *Independent*, 18th August 2009, p.4.

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‘Widespread corruption and abuse of power exacerbate the popular crisis of confidence in the government and reinforce a culture of impunity. Local Afghan communities are unable to hold local officials accountable through either direct elections or judicial processes, especially when those individuals are protected by senior government officials. Further, the public perceives that the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] is complicit in these matters ...’

‘There are no clear lines separating insurgent groups, criminal networks (including the narcotics networks) and corrupt Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan officials. Malign actors with the Government support insurgent groups directly, support criminal networks that are linked to insurgents, and support corruption that helps feed the insurgency ...’

*Commander’s Initial Assessment (General Stanley A. McChrystal)
NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan,
US Forces, Afghanistan, 30 August 2009*