

George Joffe on the Kurdish tragedy

Victims Of War

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Cartoon: Nick Newman

Deception has long been a tool of warfare and diplomacy – General ‘Stormin’ Norman’ Schwarzkopf used it to great effect in his strategic planning for the liberation of Kuwait. That, no doubt, would be considered legitimate. What President Bush did on February 15, when he called on the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his regime, was not. He knew very well that he would not allow the coalition’s forces to openly intervene in the inevitable civil war that would follow.

President Bush also must have known that no other general or politician in Baghdad would be likely to organise a successful coup to overthrow Saddam Hussein. They, after all, are only pale imitations of the Iraqi leader and will stand or fall with him. America’s objectives of preserving Iraq as a unitary state after military defeat by not intervening in its internal affairs while hoping for a change in leadership through a coup were, therefore, always an illusion.

Any professional in the State Department — had the American president consulted them, rather than his cronies on the National Security Council — could have told him the facts. The real threat to Saddam Hussein’s implacable and brutal regime has always been civil war. His antagonists would inevitably be the five million Kurds in the north east of the country seeking independence or autonomy, or the Shi’a majority in the south resenting their traditional subjugation to Sunni Arab regimes based in Baghdad. In short, the Kurdish and Shi’a rebellions were the inevitable result of the war to liberate Kuwait. Saddam Hussein knew this — and withdrew many of his elite troops from Kuwait before the coalition’s onslaught, in order to ensure successful repression of the aftermath.

The two million refugees now gathered on Iraq’s Turkish

and Iranian borders are, therefore, the direct result of the coalition’s strategic decisions. These were to limit its military objectives merely to destroying Iraq’s aggressive potential, although the CIA also apparently encouraged the Kurdish rebellion as part of its covert efforts to unseat Saddam Hussein. The refugees are the victims of both the coalition’s strategic assumptions and of the regime’s brutal repression as, ironically enough, it attempts to realise the American agenda of preserving the unitary Iraqi state.

Yet, horrific though it is, the Iraqi regime’s action is not ‘genocide’, for it kills Kurds and Shi’as because of what they do — resisting its authority — not because of what they are. Yet, they have done what President Bush recommended to them as part of his war effort, to resist ‘appeasement’ and confront a ‘Hitler’. And now they are abandoned. That is why Western official horror over the refugees’ plight seems so redolent with cant and why Turkey and Iran are so resentful over the problem they now face. Rarely has a war fought under the banner of high moral and legal principle been so rapidly unmasked as cynical and traditional power politics, while its victims are merely an incidental inconvenience.

It is little wonder, then, that Western proposals for ‘safe havens’ within Iraq, enforced through the United Nations, have met so much suspicion. While the five permanent members of the Security Council retain their veto power they remain both judges and executioners of world affairs. The legal absolute of state sovereignty should, no doubt, be supplanted by the moral objective of guaranteed human rights — but only when all states are equal before the bench of international opinion. ●

The crisis in the body politic

A Frail Constitution

The government's contortions over the poll tax betoken more than a passing cramp. Relations between the central state and other levels of government have been in disarray for more than 20 years. The poll tax was only the last of a series of increasingly desperate expedients designed to keep the system on its feet without addressing the problems which were causing it to stumble.

The reorganisation of London government in the 1960s, the reorganisation of local government in the rest of the country in the early 1970s, the devolution fiasco towards the end of the decade and the rate-capping of the 1980s were earlier chapters in the same saga. Behind all of them lay the same fundamental questions: how should the British state frame a territorial constitution suited to the late 20th century? How much autonomy should be enjoyed by geographical entities within its borders? What entities, chosen on what basis, should enjoy any autonomy whatever? But the British political class could not bring itself to ask these questions, much less to answer them. And so it staggered on, from stop-gap to stop-gap.

Part of the explanation lies in the rule-of-thumb empiricism and disdain for systematic thinking which have always been the hallmarks of British elites. But there is a deeper reason as well. The alternative to *ad hoc* staggering would have been a systematic reconstruction of the territorial constitution, based upon a coherent set of principles. The search for principles would have raised painful and divisive questions about the nature of the British state and even about the identity of the British people. It would have exposed the contradiction between the myth of local democracy which has traditionally underpinned the claims of local government and the fetish of parliamentary absolutism which underpins the powers of central government.

British politicians would have been forced to decide whether they really believed in local democracy at all, or whether they wanted central government to be omniscient as well as all-powerful. In either case, they would have had to justify their choices and come to terms with the consequences.

It would also have exposed the contradiction between singular sovereignty and multiple nationhoods. The seams laboriously sewn by the Acts of Union of the 16th and early 18th centuries, which still define the political relationship between the three nations of this island, would have unravelled. It would have become clear that the dominant English conception of Britain and the British identity is different from the Welsh conception and incompatible with the Scottish conception: that the structure and rhetoric of the British state are the products of the English conception, not



David Marquand

of the Scottish or Welsh ones: and that if that structure and rhetoric were to change so as to accommodate the Scots and Welsh, the identity and governance of the English would *ipso facto* change as well. No wonder British government after British government did its best to keep sleeping dogs comatose.

Confusion over the territorial constitution of the British state has gone hand in hand with a similar confusion over its place in the emerging European union of which it is supposed to be part. Here too the story of the 1980s differs only in

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degree from the stories of the 1970s and even the 1960s. The European Community is, and always has been, supranational, not international. The notion of power-sharing, of divided sovereignty, of the coexistence of different tiers of government all with an equal claim to represent the people, is fundamental to it.

Majority voting in the Council of Ministers did not suddenly appear from nowhere in the Single European Act. It was provided for in the Rome Treaty, as were direct elections to the European Parliament. When Britain applied to join the Community, she applied to join an entity whose explicit goal was the 'ever-closer union' of the peoples of Europe. Whether that goal was federal, pre-federal or confederal, or whether it

should have been described in quite different language, as yet uninvited, was a secondary matter. The point is that it was logically incompatible with the British tradition of undivided sovereignty and Westminster absolutism: and that in joining the Community the British state had therefore entangled itself in another set of contradictions.

As with the contradictions of the territorial constitution, the reaction of the British political class was to pretend that nothing had happened; that the supranationalism written in to the Rome Treaty was nothing but a rhetorical flourish; and that absolute Westminster sovereignty could co-exist with Community membership. That pretence shaped the European policies of the Macmillan and Wilson governments in the 1960s, the Heath government's defence of the treaty of accession in the early 1970s and the Wilson-Callaghan government's approach to the Community in the middle and late 1970s. The twists and turns of the Thatcher governments – the fights to 'get our own money back', followed by the decision to accept the Single European Act, followed by the Bruges speech and the fight against monetary union – were more flagrant than the twists and turns of previous governments, but they were part of the same syndrome.

Now room for twisting and turning is running out. The government's alternative to the poll tax will bring the spectre of an omniscient central state closer than it has been since Cromwell's major generals. The Scottish Claim of Right and Constitutional Convention have called the general principles of the Union into question. The Community's intergovernmental conferences on monetary and political union, however short they fall of the Brussels Commission's hopes, will drive further chinks into the waterlogged hulk of national sovereignty.

For 11 years, Margaret Thatcher tried to stave off the crisis of the British state which had loomed so large under her immediate predecessors. Her fall – the product, it should be remembered, of a fatal coincidence of internal territorial unrest with external European pressure – proved that even she could not stave it off for ever. Sooner or later, it will have to be resolved – either democratically from the bottom up, or autocratically from the top down. The faint outlines of an autocratic solution can already be detected in the government's poll tax and European policies. Albeit rather timidly, the Liberal Democrats have proposed a democratic one. The crucial question for the future of the British Left is whether Labour can transcend its undemocratic structure and centralist past and trump the Liberal Democrats' cards. ●