

Marching to hell

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One image keeps cropping up in my mind. It is perhaps the only happy image I have of Saturday 15 February. At the mass mud-caked rally in Hyde Park a single rather unhappy-looking Brit with his misted glasses askew was holding a sign 'We'll keep off the grass, Tony, if you keep off the sand'. It was perhaps the only witty comment of the day. Unfortunately, the man was standing on the grass.

It may have stuck not only because it was an unusually harmless image, but also because it was a peculiarly British one in a day when Britain seemed to have forgotten itself completely. I didn't go to the last of these marches for the same reason I didn't want to see this one. Fundamentally it saddens me that the British should get into this state, and do what they did again last Saturday on the streets of our capital, strewing their way with debris and confusion.

Behind the march

The ostensible reason for the march was that the organisers do not want a war in Iraq. The organisers (along with the [Muslim Association of Britain \[1\]](#) (MAB), the 'Friends of Al-Aqsa' and others) call themselves the '[Stop the War Coalition \[2\]](#)'.

Let me tell you something about them. They came together on 20 September 2001. They were against (and marched against) the war in Afghanistan. They were against the toppling of Taliban. They are against the war on terror. They are against the war in Iraq. Their posters say 'Not in my Name!' It never was in their name!

This crew of old left-wingers are the opponents of history, the opponents of everything. They are grippers, whingers, riddled with the middle class's imaginary guilt and in love with any culture not their own. They'll go to their graves with their consciences intact and their world in tatters. They are shoddy thinkers, political children. They are, less sympathetically, the leaders of a horrible mob.

The most worrying are the Muslim associations. About half the posters were from MAB. After the last march [I reported \[3\]](#) my findings about MAB – they think suicide bombing is fine.

They try to make themselves representative of the Muslim population in Britain, and perhaps they are. I hope they're not. One side of their posters said 'No War in Iraq', the other side 'Freedom for Palestine'. Once again this was a theme of the day, with Palestinian flags the only ones on show. At the rally, every time a speaker mentioned Israel a great jeer went up.

Strange bedfellows

The organisations behind this march make very strange bedfellows. Like the MAB and 'The Socialist Workers Party' who both had banners saying 'Victory to the Intifada'. (Let's skip the

rumpus and let me just say, I think it despicable that anyone would wish success to that campaign of Jew slaughter, and as it happens I wouldn't approve a poster – if one existed – saying 'Victory to the West Bank incursions' either.) But some Muslim associations don't stop at wishing the Intifada victory.

Take some of the posters carried by other Muslims on the day – 'Boycott Israel'. Well the 'Boycott Israel' campaign advocates, among other things – and like many another Muslim association (such as 'The Muslim Brotherhood') – *Jihad*. You'd have thought that this would worry nuclear disarmament 'Stop the War Coalition' people. But apparently it doesn't. You'd have thought that the pacifists of the coalition would not find *Jihad* peaceful. Apparently they don't mind it.

Nor does it worry them when the racist British National Party (BNP) gives its backing to the march and finds itself in blissful union with other elements on it. The BNP, you see, said that they supported this march because they are very worried about 'high-ranking Jews' – which is a coincidence, because groups of Muslims were flaunting large banners with 'World Policies Dictated by Zionists' on them. The slogan was accompanied by a diagram no racist BNP member could possibly fault.

There were other equally odd unions made on the march. Personally I'd be interested to see how the halal-meat-eaters got on with the animal-rights brigades and the hunt-sab protestors, or how the Mosque brigades would have got on with the Lesbian rights activists. Of course, the Muslim world and its representatives in Britain have never been particularly bothered about human rights that do not directly affect themselves.

Muslim 'fear'

Muslim spokesmen in Britain make great political play at the moment of the 'fear' their community feels with all these terrorist arrests going on. Well, Saturday was obviously, for them, a day when they lost their 'fear', because they seemed anything but scared.

I'm thinking particularly of the Muslim mothers teaching ten-year-old Muslim girls and boys to chant hateful anti-Bush and anti-Blair slogans outside Downing Street. None of them, flaunting their hatred, seemed particularly scared. Nor did the youth who, dressed as a Palestinian terrorist, jumped over the barricades of Whitehall to pose triumphantly for his photographer friend. Nor did the men in Hyde Park with posters saying that the deadly ricin found on Muslims in London was a police plant.

The Muslims didn't seem particularly fearful when they organised themselves for their ostentatious pray-ins. So unafraid were they that I saw them pulling over camera crews and photographers to catch their humble devotions.

The young Muslims handing out their new racist 'Mecca-Cola' to quench their shout-sore throats didn't seem afraid – no more afraid than the Muslims marching with posters saying 'Criminal Sharon', or the MAB Muslims spear – heading the procession with vast banners proclaiming that Tony Blair and Britain were responsible for the deaths of millions in Iraq. It seemed to me that the Muslims were anything but fearful. They were serious though, which is more than can be said for a lot of the march.

Veterans and first-timers

You'd have been forgiven, at times, for thinking that a carnival was in progress rather than a procession asking for war not to be declared on the tyrant Saddam Hussein's regime. Some

people seemed to be treating it very lightly indeed. There were floats and there was carnival music. There was dancing and skipping and shouts of 'where's the after-party'. There were students all wielding posters with dirty puns on George Bush's name and posters making sexual innuendoes about Blair's parents, and Jack Straw's libido. Oh, yes, they treated it very seriously. How moving it was when one young girl walked past the Cenotaph to the war-dead with her banner – a vagina with hair added and the message 'Fuck me, not Iraq'.

The young students and others in a similar vein really fall into two camps. They either say 'war is bad', full stop, or they are the phoney revolutionaries who enjoy a day out on the streets shouting 'Fuck George Bush' and feeling like Ché Guevara. The latter (the bandana wearers), well it's sad but they might grow up. Of the former, well, we're with you there, but I'm sorry to say that although John Lennon could write a tune, 'Imagine' is not what I would call a guide to *realpolitik*.

But the people who made this march notable were the first-timers, and there seemed to be a lot of them. They probably weren't expecting the banners saying 'Victory to Iraq' or 'Call a general strike', but they ended up marching anyway. They feel strongly – kind of – that they haven't been given enough information for why we should go to war with Iraq. They feel this has crept up on them suddenly and they don't know what to do about it.

Well, they get a free vote to decide who runs their country, unlike the people of Iraq, but they surely can't expect the nation's foreign policy to be run by occasional polls from the nation's tabloids. They are mainly ignorant (by choice or chance) of the machinations of international weapons inspections, oil and the rest of it, but if they want to pretend to be experts, fine.

Essentially they're worried about war – so are we all. They hate the idea of Iraqi children dying – so do we all. But they do not have the monopoly on concern or morality. The problem is that they assume that anybody who was not on their march is pro-war. It is not the case. The rest of us may well be against the anti-war movement, or simply under the belief that these things are best left to the experts.

They talk about the United Nations as if it is God. It is not God, and though it may be able to define a modern 'legal' war it cannot define 'just' war. And when else would they have spent a day with protesters against whom the Cenotaph had to be surrounded by a ring of police and the Holocaust memorial in Hyde Park covered over? This was, really, not their march.

What about Saddam's victims?

All this is, of course, parochial and deeply self-indulgent. The most important thing in the end is what was missing. There were thousands of posters calling, like the speakers in Hyde Park, for regime change in Britain and America. It was one of the 'jokes' of the day. But do you know how many of the thousands and thousands of posters I saw on the day even mentioned Saddam Hussein? Or even remembered his victims?

I'll tell you. Two. Two posters. One said simply: 'Assassinate Saddam'. The other poster which mentioned Saddam Hussein was a small placard carried by a young Muslim lady portraying one of Hussein's victims at Halabja. Although I hate such confused mass protests – alone of all the people on that day, I might have marched with the lady who carried that poster.

For the rest of them I have to say that they should feel shame – terrible shame – that in the midst of all their modish equivalencing and violent rage and self-pity, the various factions forgot the people who it should be about. Of course, a lot of other people don't particularly care for the people of Iraq, but it would be nice if people didn't use new horrors to buoy up old prejudices.

As for the support the march did get – it was impressive. Over three-quarters of a million is a good number to get on any demonstration. The organisers should be proud of themselves. Gaddafi was pleased about it also. So was another man who doesn't care much for the people of Iraq. On Sunday, Saddam Hussein sent a thank you to all the demonstrators and described the rebellious marches as a victory for Iraq.

Congratulations, guys.

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