

Paper turns its back on a great legacy

In its leaders [editorials] supporting the war in Iraq, the Observer newspaper proves that it has truly buried its great liberal editor David Astor, and his principled, “freethinking” legacy.

The Palestinian writer Ghada Karmi has described “a deep and unconscious racism [that] imbues every aspect of western conduct toward Iraq”. She wrote: “I recall that a similar culture prevailed in the UK during the 1956 Suez crisis and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Nasser was the arch-villain and all Arabs were crudely targeted. Today, in Britain, such overt anti-Arabness is unacceptable, so it takes subtler forms. Saddam-bashing, a sport officially sanctioned since 1991, has made him the perfect surrogate for anti-Arab abuse.”

Reading this, I turned up the Observer’s tribute to its great editor, David Astor, who died in 2001. In opposing the British attack on Suez in 1956, Astor, said the paper, “took the government to task for its bullying and in so doing defined the Observer as a freethinking paper prepared to swim against the tide”. In a famous editorial, Astor had described “an endeavour to reimpose 19th-century imperialism of the crudest kind”. He wrote: “Nations are said to have the governments they deserve. Let us show that we deserve better.” The present-day Observer commented that “the richness of [Astor’s] language and relevance of the sentiments resonate today”.

The absence of irony in this statement is bleak. Little more than a year later, in its editorial of 19 January 2003, the Observer finally buried David Astor and his principled “freethinking” legacy. Pretending to wring its hands, the paper announced it was for attacking Iraq: a position promoted by its news and feature pages for more than a year now, notably in its barren “investigations” seeking to link Iraq with both the anthrax scare and al-Qaeda. The paper that stood proudly against Eden on Suez is but a supplicant to the warmongering Blair, willing to support the very crime the judges at Nuremberg deemed the most serious of all:

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an unprovoked attack on a sovereign country offering no threat.

Not a word in the Observer's editorial mentioned the great crime committed by the British and American governments against the ordinary people of Iraq. Withholding more than \$5bn worth of humanitarian supplies approved by the Security Council, Washington, with Blair's backing, maintains a medieval blockade against Iraq. Cancer treatment equipment, water treatment equipment, painkillers, children's vaccines, to name a few of the life-giving essentials that are maliciously withheld, have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of vulnerable people, mostly infants under the age of five. Extrapolating from the statistics, the American scholars John Mueller and Karl Mueller conclude that "economic sanctions have probably already taken the lives of more people in Iraq than have been killed by all weapons of mass destruction".

When the Observer celebrates the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, with pictures of exhausted Iraqis "thanking" their liberators, will it explain to its readers that as many as a million people, mostly children, could not attend the festivities thanks to the barbaric policies of the British and American governments? No. A contortion of intellect and morality that urges participation in what has been described as "a firestorm of 800 missiles in two days" censors by omission.

We come back to Ghada Karmi's references to the veiled racism that propels every western attack on Arabs, from Churchill's preference in 1921 for "using poison gas on uncivilised tribes" to the use of depleted uranium in the 1991 Gulf slaughter. This racism applies, quintessentially, to her homeland, Palestine. While the Iraq pantomime plays, America's proxy, Israel, has begun the next stage of its historic ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. On 21 January, the town of Nazlat 'Iza in the northern West Bank was invaded by a force of armoured personnel carriers, tanks and 60-ton, American-made Israeli bulldozers. Sixty-three shops were demolished, along with countless homes and olive groves. Little of this was reported outside the Arab world. Some parts of the West Bank have been under curfew for a total of 214 days. Whole villages are under house arrest. People cannot get medical care; ambulances have been prevented from reaching hospitals; women have lost their newborn babies in agony and pools of blood at military checkpoints. Fresh water is permanently scarce, and food; in some areas, more than half the children are seriously undernourished. One image unforgettable to me is the sight of children's kites flying from the windows and yards of their prison-homes.

Then there is the slaughter. During the month of November, more than 50

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Palestinian civilians were killed by the Israelis - a record by one calculation. These included a 95-year-old woman, 14 young children and a British UN worker, shot in the back by an Israeli sniper. Human rights groups say the deaths occurred mostly in circumstances in which there was no exchange of gunfire. "The Israelis have killed 16 Palestinians within 48 hours," said Dr Mustafa Barghouti in Ramallah on 27 January. "That's an average of one Palestinian every three hours. The silence about this is simply unconscionable."

While Blair damns Iraq for the chemical weapons that a swarm of inspectors cannot find, he has quietly approved the sale of chemical weapons to Israel, a terrorist and rogue state by any dictionary meaning of those words. While he accuses Iraq of defying the United Nations, he is silent about the 64 UN resolutions Israel has ignored - a world record.

The Israeli terrorists, who subjugate and brutalise a whole nation, demolishing homes and shops, expelling and killing and "systematically torturing" (Amnesty) day after day, are not mentioned in the Observer editorial. No "decisive action" (the Observer's words) is required against the prima facie war criminals Ariel Sharon and General Shaul Mofaz, who, along with their predecessors, have caused a degree of suffering of which Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda can only dream. There is no suggestion that the British force heading for the Middle East should "intervene" in the "republic of fear" that Israel has created in Palestine in defiance of the world, and "displace" them. There is not a word about the weapons of mass destruction that Sharon repeatedly flaunts ("the Arabs may have the oil, but we have the matches").

To most people in Europe, and across the world, these double standards offend common decency. Overhear people on the bus and in the pub if you need to know why. This decency, combined with a critical public intelligence, is not understood by the suburban propagandists, whose fondness for and imagined closeness to power mark their servility to it. The same power and its court were defined succinctly by that distinguished scholar of international politics, the late Professor Hedley Bull. "Particular states or groups of states," he wrote, "that set themselves up as the authoritative judges of the world common good, in disregard of the view of others, are in fact a menace." **JP**