

Sleeping with the enemy

The National Union of Journalists and the Blair government are planning a “launch” ceremony, at which they will announce their “partnership”. According to John Fray, the NUJ’s deputy general secretary, this collaboration will “promote awareness among journalists of the issues that surround the struggle against poverty on a world scale... We want to help the media to tell it like it is.”

In a glossy letter to NUJ members, Fray says that joining hands with the government is “enhancing the understanding of the need for a positive approach to international development amongst those who report and comment on the issues...”. For this “positive approach”, the government is paying the journalists’ union 80,000 pounds. What a bargain price for the principle of independence from power.

A “partnership” with the NUJ is a master stroke for a rapacious British government whose “aid” and “debt relief” are intended to mask, as Gordon Brown put it, an “obligation” on the poorest countries to “create the conditions for [business] investment”. The chief civil servant at the Department for International Development wrote, “We are extending our support for privatisation in the poorest countries from the power sector in India to the tea industry in Nepal.”

Since when did privatisation have anything to do with “the struggle against poverty”? Privatisation is about control of markets and profit. Period. Britain’s “new global deal” for the poor is one of those brilliant propaganda illusions that enjoy widespread sycophancy among courtier-journalists who, like rock stars, prefer to think of their government as benign, regardless of its record of exploitation, lying and violence. That’s how Blair got away with his WDM lies for as long as he did and how he’s getting away with “aid” tied to extremist free market World Bank and IMF policies that have devastated the poorest countries.

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For example, Zambia was pressured to sack thousands of teachers if it wanted to qualify for “relief”. As Caroline Pearce of the Jubilee Campaign says: “Debt is used as a tool of control.”

Now in the pay of the government, will the NUJ tell this truth about aid, “like it is”? Will John Fray publish another glossy newsletter, this time describing how the Department for International Development, his new “partners”, have handed out millions of pounds of “aid” money to the far right-wing Adam Smith Institute, and Halcrow and KPMG, to push privatisation, such as water? And what will be the NUJ’s new “positive approach” to the Blair government’s impoverishing arms sales to 14 of Africa’s most conflict-ridden countries?

The NUJ, of which I have been a life-long member, has done excellent work highlighting abuses against fellow trade unionists around the world, as in Colombia. I asked Jeremy Dear, the general secretary, about his new “partners”. He, too, cited the NUJ’s work in Colombia, “the most dangerous country for journalists in the world, where the British government fund the murderous Uribe regime.” He then disclosed that the union was taking money from the Foreign Office in order to establish in Colombia “the first independent trade union for journalists so they can expose what is going on in their country.” This is the same Foreign Office that is “fund[ing] the murderous Uribe regime”. Such is the familiar game of having it both ways: a game at which governments are well practised.

He also revealed that, in the Ukraine, “dozens of NUJ activists” had taken British government money to set up “an independent union for journalists”. How independent is it? The Ukraine is, of course, a Washington/Whitehall “showcase project”. He also said the union was taking British government money for its work promoting press freedom and journalists’ safety in Iraq and Palestine. “There is not one single example of the NUJ compromising its independence as a result of securing outside funding,” he said, “... and no government or individual can buy it.”

Accepting tainted money – money from the same source that “funds a murderous regime” – is itself a compromise, and a dangerous one. Why should a government, which has a clear, ideological world view and a proven record of warmongering, give money to a trade union whose members should be exposing not collaborating with its manipulations? I urge my fellow NUJ members to take up that question urgently, remembering that the current US government also funds journalists who also protest their innocence.

What this “partnership” promises is harm to the union’s credibility abroad,

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because it will be seen as yet another example of “embedding”. It also lowers a threshold, demonstrating just how insidious “embedding” has become, as if it now has a certain legitimacy. In Iraq, the BBC, embedded up to its ears, has all but lost its credibility, because it broadcasts the occupiers’ news - rarely spelling out that 80 per cent of the deaths are caused by the Americans and their clients. Read the instructive exchanges between the editors of MediaLens (www.medialens.org) and Helen Boaden, the head of BBC News, about why the BBC has remained silent on American atrocities in Fallujah and the use of Napalm, and why it suppresses independent eye-witness reporting.

Another form of embedding was clear in most of the reporting of the “shock” rejection of the European constitution. The French were caricatured as haters of change, rattling on the “European dream”. On 29 May, the Observer, once a celebrated liberal newspaper, published a cartoon headed “The Completely Bonkers Frog”. The image of a huge farting frog might have been lifted from an especially grotesque Sun front page. That a spectacular majority in two European nations voted against the market fundamentalism that has torn the very fabric of British life was not the news. Neither was the fact that 80 per cent of working class people and 60 per cent of those under 25 voted against the greed of the European rich and the autocracy of the central banks: against poverty, unemployment, war and the betrayal of post-war social democracy once proclaimed as a mainstay of Europe’s post-fascist ideal of “never again”. (How desperate the true right are; with the contortion of intellect and morality that distinguishes New Labour, Denis MacShane, a former Blair minister, smeared the voters with the absurdity they were beckoning fascism and anti-Semitism).

It was also a vote against media-ism. Almost the entire French media had demanded a “yes” vote, and the “shock” was theirs. There is a lesson in all this for journalists who care about their craft. Millions of people across the world no longer credit the “global” (western) media as independent or truthful. This is especially so of young people. In Korea, during the last general election, a majority turned to the internet for their political news, dismissing the likes of CNN and their own establishment media, just as people in Stalinist countries used to.

For most human beings, the evidence of their lives is that consumerism is not democracy and “globalisation” is a vicious war against the poorest, a form of terrorism, and millions of them are taking action. The National Union of Journalists should not collaborate with their enemy.