

# What happened to the 'what' or the 'why'?

I watched the BBC Ten O'Clock News (May 17). Having just returned from an assignment in faraway places, it was, as ever, salutary to see how Britain's state broadcaster presents news to millions of people who do not enjoy the privilege I, and the BBC's representatives, share that of being allowed to go and find out what and why things happen. Neither the "what" nor the "why" was evident in this bulletin; indeed, it wasn't so much news as a series of pronouncements by the spokespeople of the spokespeople, to paraphrase Orwell or Brecht.

The main item was a disgrace. Hysterical from the start, it was about immigration and shaped by a spurious "exchange" in the House of Commons between Tony Blair and the opposition leader, during which each vied for the mantle of Britain's cruelest man. Throwing out people was the subject, in the spirit of the Daily Mail, once Blair's favourite newspaper. Blair wanted to make clear that he was prepared to send people back to countries where they would not be "safe": i.e. countries where the state tortures and murders.

Blair even quoted the former, hated Home Secretary Michael Howard, to show how tough he was prepared to be. The darkest irony hung over him and his nominal opponent, but none was acknowledged by the silent and mostly craven MPs behind him. An excited BBC "home affairs correspondent" told us that 30 million people came to Britain every year, then in that strange high-pitched, rising-and-falling voice affected by some TV "reporters", he explained how an "electronic border" would soon surround Britain run from a "a great data base" that would record the personal details of everyone arriving and leaving. This would eventually include their fingerprints – just as in Bush's USA, though he didn't make this obvious comparison. Drained of humanity, the entire item was cast as frightening and a threat to Blair's career.

So on to Somalia, where a BBC reporter was on hand in "one of the most

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dangerous places on earth” to greet Hilary Benn, the Minister for International Development, who had taken the “risk” of coming here. Why? It wasn’t at all clear. That Benn’s DFID serves primarily as a promoter of what is called neo-liberalism throughout the world, the proven scourge of true development, was not mentioned, as this is unmentionable.

For a senior member of a beleaguered, discredited government it was a gift: a wonderful photo opportunity. It was, as the philosopher Hanna Arendt once put it, “action as propaganda”. She referred to “the advantages of a propaganda that constantly ‘adds the power of organisation’ to the feeble and unreliable voice of argument, and thereby realises, so to speak, on the spur of the moment, whatever it says.” She was referring to ingrained deference to power which, of course, has nothing to do with truth or the gathering of news.