

Life, death and farce at the annual meeting

By Emma Mayhew

nasper.org | May 5, 2004

Two men dressed as Tony Blair and BAe Chair Dick Evans in a bed together on the pavement outside the QEII Conference centre in London. It must be time for the highlight in any anti-arms trade protester's diary – the annual farce that is the BAe Systems AGM.

Tony and Dick's snuggle on the streets of London was, of course, designed to highlight the intimate relationship between the government and the arms industry. But this was just one of a whole series of issues which campaigners were plotting to ask as we shuffled through the tight security of the Conference Centre. Once through the x-ray machines that ensured the BAe Board would not be faced with any of their own products we settled into our seats at the foot of a stage decorated ironically by plastic peace lilies, as patently false as the new BAe slogan plastered across the stage, "innovating for a safer world".

The arms exporter's contribution to enduring global peace was exactly what was on trial over the course of the next three hours of almost entirely hostile questions put to the board. We listened as Dick justified in his own mind BAe's ongoing supply of spares for Indonesian Hawks, to a government which boasts not only one of the most appalling records on human rights but have themselves recently admitted that there is no external threat, only internal "security problems". He justified BAe's construction of nuclear submarines, the attempts to sell arms to Iraq in the 1980s, the supply of parts to American Apaches now used in Iraq and the sale of 66 Hawks to desperately impoverished India.

But it was questions on spying and access to number 10 that really sparked off heckling and jeers from the audience. Last September The Sunday Times published an article alleging that BAe had paid a company to employ spies who had successfully infiltrated the London-based group Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT). When asked directly "Has BAe paid for information on CAAT?" Dick's "I'm not going to answer that" spoke for itself.

Last October former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook confirmed the suspicions of many

Life, death and farce at the annual meeting | 2

when he wrote in his autobiography “In my time I came to learn that the Chairman of British Aerospace [Sir Richard Evans] appeared to have the key to the garden door to Number 10.” When asked to respond, Dick happily boasted “we have access into number 10 on key issues – one thing about this government is their accessibility”. And of course it is. That’s how BAe were able to place 13 of its staff into the MoD between April 2000 and June 2002 some working in the department for up to three years. That’s how BAe directors and staff are sitting on at least 16 out of 19 identifiable Task Force groups affiliated to the DTI and MoD advising government on military policy. That’s how a BAe consultant donated 25% of Jack Straw’s election expenses in 2001, how a former BAe director and Labour donor became a DTI Special Advisor in 1997 and how a former Junior Minister of Defence happily borrowed the chair’s private jet in 2001.

Rather less happy was BAe Chief Executive Mike Turner. One man who had consistently heckled Dick, branding him a liar throughout the meeting at any opportune moment had only received scant attention from the chair. All those anger management sessions Dick is said to have received obviously did the trick, but not for his colleague. The CE came storming over to the man at the end of the meeting followed by an entourage of security personnel who clearly sensed a fight in the air. Mike simply couldn’t believe the audacity of the protester and repeatedly demanded to know what he did for a living, clearly hoping he was unemployed. The irony of Mike Turner attempting to imply that the man made no useful contribution to society because of what he did all day wasn’t lost on those of us who heard.

We, on the other hand, were definitely about to make a useless contribution by depositing our voting cards on the way out. Dick had already been nominated, mainly by institutional shareholders representing pensions funds, investment houses, insurance companies and so on to use their votes as he willed, giving him control of 84% of all votes cast.

As we left, the police were collecting up papier mâché severed limbs from around the barriers used to pen-in campaigners, and we wondered if it was worth buying one share in BAe to get a few free biscuits and watch corporate titans earning upwards of half a million each year struggle in the face of ordinary people determined to expose their company for what it really is?

Yes!