

Through the Looking Glass

Political correctness, foreign policy and bad decisions

ROGER HOWARD





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CONTENTS

Summary

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| 1. The limited vocabulary | 1 |
| 2. Ahistoricism | 15 |
| 3. Patriotism | 29 |
| 4. Some other incorrect terms | 35 |

“As this is a Nationall day, and this Honourable Assembly a Nationall Assembly, so this Text is a Nationall Text, suitable for the occasion about which we are met, National Repentance will divert Nationall judgments and procure Nationall blessings”.

Edmund Calamy, ‘England’s Looking Glass’, a sermon to the House of Commons, 22 December 1641.

SUMMARY

- Recognising and tackling popular fallacies at the time, when it really matters, is one of the greatest challenges that confront not just politicians but each and every one of us.
- It is particularly important in foreign policy where we risk assuming that other people in other countries share our own attitudes, assumptions and aspirations; or if we transpose our assumptions, values and prejudices on others.
- There will always be misunderstandings between different peoples and cultures. But the growth in the West of political correctness over the last few decades means that a particularly wide gulf now separates us from the rest of the world.
- There are three broad strands which illustrate how our political correctness blinds us to conditions elsewhere in the world: our ahistoricism; our lack of patriotism; and our reluctance to acknowledge our 'national identity', 'national consciousness', 'national character' or 'national mentality'.

- This represents a dangerous blind spot, one that means that the looking glass, through which we see the outside world, gives us a distorted picture.
- This looking glass does not necessarily lead to any particular policy, whether it be one of obedience or hostility to the US, or of intervention or non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries on ethical or humanitarian grounds; nor was it a primary cause of the decisions to go to war in 1999, 2001, 2003 or at any other time.
- However, the mistakes that were made before and after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan do illustrate the dangers of seeing the world through a looking glass that has been shaped and distorted by the way we think and talk in Britain.
- Policy-makers should therefore do everything they can to ask certain questions and raise certain issues that, for one reason or another, may have become deeply unfashionable at home. What really matters, in other words, is the *means* by which foreign policy judgements are passed and policy subsequently determined.
- This is a challenge that confronts every Government. For the looking glass which distorts our view of the outside world is embedded too deeply in our culture to be pushed aside.
- To shatter the glass we must, at the very least, widen the vocabulary that we use to describe what we see around us.

1. THE LIMITED VOCABULARY

Even the most educated person in the world can fall victim to the most ridiculous, or dangerous, ideas. Prejudices – narrow, unreasonable and perhaps nasty prejudices – are just as prevalent in today's Britain as at any previous time, even if it is just as difficult to stand back and see exactly what they are.

The forgeries of Vermeer painted by Han van Meegeren in the 1930s and 1940s convinced all the experts of the day – and were immensely popular. Yet today they are easily identifiable as fakes. With hindsight, perhaps many years later, so too can the ideological fallacies of a particular moment be revealed.

In fact, to use a different artistic simile, this task might be compared to a visually impaired man struggling to appreciate a fuller picture of which he can snatch just a few fragments, and may perhaps not even see at all.

Unfortunately someone who suffers from clouded vision will see the outside world in the same way. He will have an incomplete picture of what is happening inside another country if he views its affairs through his own narrow looking glass. It is like shining a small torch onto a vast object and expecting to comprehend its size, scope and intricacy from a moment's glance.

It is inevitable, to some degree, that we all view the outside world on our own limited terms, seeing our own motives, interests and attitudes in other people. In everyday life most of us tend to assume that other people, whether they are strangers or those who are closest to us, are to some degree like our own selves. People who are habitually dishonest and untruthful, for example, are known to be the most mistrustful of others. Adulterous husbands or wives tend to be highly suspicious of their partners. And there have always been significant cultural differences between, and amongst, Western countries on the one hand and other parts of the world on the other: Britain, for example, has been a relatively 'secular' society, even by the standards of most of its European neighbours, for at least half a century.

So during the Cold War, for example, Washington strategists tended to view world events through a two-dimensional prism of 'communism versus the free world', a prism that excluded a much bigger and vastly more complicated picture. The US involvement in Korea and Vietnam was based on the idea that communist states – the Soviet Union and Korea in the first instance and China and Vietnam in the second – would be brought closer together by a shared ideology that would outweigh nationalist sentiment.¹ Some of the more dogmatically minded analysts in the Kremlin were probably not much better, viewing the history of the UK, US and elsewhere in narrowly Marxist terms and feeling bemused by what they regarded as the docility of the Western 'working classes' towards their 'rulers'.

In the same sort of way, British leaders have in recent years tended to emphasise the importance of issues – such as materialism, 'diversity' and 'equality of opportunity' – in places

¹ See generally R McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, Vintage, 1996.

where they probably mean little or absolutely nothing to local people. As both Chancellor and Prime Minister Gordon Brown has talked about the need for 'investment' and 'jobs' in parts of the world where they are, at best, of secondary importance. The priority for Iraq, Afghanistan and the embryo of a Palestinian state is peace, security, law and order, but in 2005 Chancellor Brown sent officials out to the region to study prospects for "supporting the Middle East peace process through economic development". The idea was to replicate for both Israelis and Palestinians what had worked well in Northern Ireland, but, as Jonathan Freedland has written, "to talk about industrial parks and apprenticeships now, while Hamas is firing rockets at Israel, Israel is shelling Gaza, and Fatah and Hamas are killing each other, risks looking idealistic, if not irrelevant". Freedland added that if someone "asks Brown about Afghanistan, his first answer is that the Afghans need an alternative crop to the poppy. He speaks about the need for investment in Iraq, too."²

There are some other glaring examples of the way in which Western leaders have viewed the outside world through their own, highly particular, prism. As Prime Minister, Tony Blair, once commented how:³

"This Monday I visited it [the new Iraqi Government] in Baghdad, I sat and talked with the leaders, chosen by the people, Sunni, Shia, Kurds, non-aligned, and heard from them not the jarring messages of warring factions but one simple, clear and united discourse. *They want Iraq to be democratic. They want its people to be free. They want to tolerate difference and celebrate diversity.* They want the rule of law not violence to determine their fate."

² J Freedland, "Brown's New World Order", *The New Statesman*, 28 May 2007.

³ Speech of 26 May 2006.

The story of the post-war occupation of Iraq is another example. During his spell as a deputy provincial governor, Rory Stewart described how Washington officials “insisted that Iraqis were educated middle-class people with secular, liberal sympathies” and put great emphasis on “governance building capacity”, “security sector reform” and “conflict resolution”.⁴

A particularly British problem?

But if all of us are to some extent bound to look at the outside world on our own terms, British governing élites are particularly at risk of seeing things in a narrow way. This is because British society, perhaps more so than its counterparts elsewhere in the West, has in recent years undergone far-reaching, sweeping cultural changes that mark it out from nearly everywhere else.

Over the past two decades or so, British culture has started to become increasingly ahistorical. In contrast to the US, whose founders remain revered and whose early story is treasured, few Britons today know much about their country’s history. The teaching of their national story has been demoted in schools, in some cases perhaps even whitewashed altogether. A recent survey found that many children have either never heard of Winston Churchill or are under completely the wrong impression about who he was and what he did.⁵

Take this one stage slightly further forward, however, and it is clear that this is both a cause and an effect of a lack of patriotism. If we suppose that a politician, head teacher or bureaucrat has deliberately side-lined the teaching of a national story from schools, then our ahistoricism is clearly a reflection of underlying attitudes. If it has happened more spontaneously and

⁴ R Stewart, *Occupational Hazards*, Picador, 2006.

⁵ “Winston Churchill Walked on Moon, Say Pupils”, *The Daily Telegraph* 22 March 2008.

unconsciously then it is a cause. But either way there can be no doubt that in the past few years it has become unfashionable to be 'patriotic'. Such sentiments are rarely expressed outside sporting circles – football is the most obvious single example of a game whose fans are openly patriotic – and have only been officially sanctioned by successive Labour governments in an occasional, haphazard and often superficial way that tends to coincide with plummeting opinion polls: when in March 2008 Gordon Brown raised the idea of establishing a 'British day' he did so at a time when the Conservatives were acquiring a clear and steady electoral lead. But this, too, makes Britain something of a special case: it is not an issue in France or the US, for example, even though some politicians may try to score points by accusing their rivals of acting unpatriotically. Elsewhere in the world it would also be just as unthinkable not to value one's own homeland.

In both Britain and the US, it is almost unheard of to hear or read of references to "the national consciousness", "national character", "national identity" or the "national mindset". While it is, of course, common to refer to the "national interest", this term does not refer to individuals and their attitudes. Political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic is instead saturated by terms such as "multi-ethnic" and "diverse". But in nearly every other part of the world, the issue of "nationality" – of who feels they belong to a particular country – is of paramount importance, even if people may not make conscious references to the term or have their own, highly distinctive, words for it.

The main reason why this unconscious whitewashing has happened is not hard to see: terms such as "national character" might conceivably exclude those people who, for cultural reasons, may not share a distinctive lifestyle and mindset. So it is easy to tarnish them as 'racist'.

The causes of this rift between Britain's own values, and those that prevail elsewhere in the world, are complex. But there can be no doubt that one of the most important factors is the degree to which "political correctness" has permeated our lives.

Towards a definition of Political Correctness

Although political correctness immediately conjures up images of "left-wing council banning black bin-bags, nativity scenes being banned by the Red Cross and handicapped people being called 'otherwise-abled'",⁶ it is much easier to say what this phenomenon is *not* than what it is.

To begin with, political correctness is not an ideology, based on a fixed, written and wide-ranging statement of beliefs in the same way as, say, Marxism. It is instead an underlying attitude, one that is very difficult to pin down and which moves in mysterious ways, sometimes even selecting quite random targets: there is no obvious reason, for example, why it is politically incorrect to smoke cigarettes, as opposed to taking cannabis, binge-drinking or driving a motorcar.

Nor is it necessarily based, as some people have claimed,⁷ on 'emotion' at the expense of 'reason'. This is too abstract. There are of course times when a politically correct argument represents an emotive, knee-jerk reaction on the part of someone who has a complete disinterest in and disregard for the facts. But equally there are times when politically incorrect views are based on a respect for 'tradition' and 'customs'. So someone could conceivably argue against mass immigration into Britain on the

⁶ A Browne, *The Retreat of Reason*, Civitas, 2006.

⁷ For example, one of Anthony Browne's central contentions in his pamphlet *The Retreat of Reason* is that political correctness represents how "a reliance on reason has been replaced with a reliance on the emotional appeal of an argument."

grounds that such an influx would endanger British traditions, while the contrary viewpoint might be based on data that attempt to demonstrate that 'immigrants bring jobs'.

Nor are the advocates of political correctness necessarily intolerant. Although it is certainly true that many of their number become angry when anyone disagrees with them, such intolerance can be found in anyone, from across the political spectrum, who has strong views. An eminent conservative historian, for example, admitted that "some of Mrs Thatcher's supporters *were* doctrinaires and did the Party great damage by intruding ideological truths"⁸. In any case there are some people who have PC views on particular subjects but who manage to put them forward in a civil fashion.

To get to grips with the term, it is best to start by drawing a clear distinction between political correctness in its wider and narrower senses.

Progressive Thinking

In the looser sense of the term, political correctness refers to liberal views that can be loosely termed progressive. This progressiveness has two strands.

One is a suspicion of authority. The politically correct instinctively champion the rights of the victims of authority. Sometimes these victims may be in a remote part of the world – the Chinese government's persecution of Tibet in the spring of 2008, for example, would be likely to stir progressive Western opinion as much as the persecution of Tutsi tribes by some Hutus in Rwanda in the mid-1990s. Other victims might be deemed to suffer from the greed of multinational companies or from the grip that some traditions, such as the Western custom of smoking, are felt to

⁸ M Cowling, *A Conservative Future*, Politeia, 1997.

exert. On both sides of the Atlantic, advocates of this type of anti-authoritarianism also tend to target the “White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (WASP) culture that they argue is endemic in society and puts others at a disadvantage.

Often, however, it may not be clear who the victim, or what the authority, is. In the Middle East some progressives might condemn Israeli actions against the Palestinians just as others were infuriated by Hezbollah’s activities on Israel’s northern borders in the summer of 2006. And certainly the identity of both can certainly vary over time. During the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, ‘authority’ was associated with the British judiciary, as well as the army and police. Today, at a time of judicial activism in the name of rights, our judges are regarded with suspicion by the right but championed by the liberal left.

This suspicion of authority can merge with something else – a mistrust of ties and loyalties to particular places rather than to mankind in general: we should feel kinship for people from all over the world, even if we don’t share their language or culture, rather than to our own fellow nationals. The big challenge, from this point of view, is to recognise universal rights that can throw off these shackles once and for all.

This line of thought finds its origins in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, when thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and de Condorcet declared that their ultimate aim was “to destroy prejudice, and rectify human understanding” by challenging “the terrors of superstition and the dread of tyranny”.⁹ The descendants of these *philosophes* included the young Karl Marx, whose early views reflected a shared commitment to the existence of a universal truth, rather

⁹ Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*, 1794.

than particular ones, and are today to be found amongst those who emphasise the universality of human rights above all else.

These two distinct attitudes – a suspicion of authority and a love of universal values rather than particular ones – identify political correctness in the wider sense of the term.

Self-Hate

There is, however, no reason why any progressively-minded person is likely to indict his own country, or the culture he belongs to, more than any other. But when we refer to political correctness in its narrower sense, however, we are referring to those who are quick to criticise their own country – its people, government, policies and past – while perhaps avoiding the castigation of others. The defining quality here is not self-doubt. After all, many societies, like many individuals, have suffered from diffidence. It is in any case arguably better to suffer from an excess of doubt than the hubris that some have felt affected the Blair and Bush presidencies.¹⁰ It is instead contempt, even hatred, rather than doubt, of one's own self that makes this different.

So someone who is politically correct in this narrower sense is likely to allege that Western multinationals are exploiting the developing world but be completely indifferent to China's growing role there; to overlook or perhaps condone the cruelty and corruption of Africa's native dictators while pinning all responsibility for the continent's ills on Western donors, or the lack of them; to argue that global warming is caused more by the West than any member of the developing world; or to claim that Britain's recent boom in house prices, which has made property a mere dream for millions, is caused more by, say, divorce, easy credit and property investment than by immigration.

¹⁰ D Owen, *The Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair and the Intoxication of Power*, Politicos, 2007.

Sometimes there is of course no neat distinction between progressive opinion and a narrower self-hate. For example, those people who champion universal human rights, and those who are hostile to the British nation-state in particular, have both made a big issue of the 'globalisation' that they claim now makes national sovereignty a myth:¹¹

“And because our world is now so connected and so interdependent it is possible in this century for the first time in human history, to contemplate and create a global society that empowers people.”

The point here is not that this is a very dubious argument – the nation-states of world have always been to some degree interdependent¹² – but that it is usually put forward by people who dislike their own country.

Political correctness in this narrowest sense is probably a particularly British affair: few people in France or the US, for example, feel ashamed of their national story. This is perhaps partly because Britain's past has been so closely associated with the story of Empire. Our rule over India lasted for more than 200 years, and at the zenith of Britain's imperial power, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Union Jack flew over one quarter of the world's surface. The British imperial experience deeply affected the mentality of both rulers and ruled, and in recent years has become associated in this country with oppression, subjugation, exploitation and racial superiority. In short, it has created feelings of post-colonial guilt upon which political correctness has thrived and without which it would probably be unknown.

¹¹ Gordon Brown speech, 12 November 2007.

¹² See for example, J Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, Penguin, 2007.

In these respects, there is a clear line of demarcation between contemporary Britain and not just the rest of the world but also its own immediate predecessors. Terms and expressions that would have tripped off the tongues of earlier generations are today virtually unheard of. Elsewhere in the world, it would equally be unthinkable to disown one's own past, or deny that one's own country does not have certain distinctive characteristics. In short, political correctness has made today's British mindset unique, cut off from both the rest of the world and from its past.

At what point such feelings surfaced in the British national consciousness is difficult to judge. But it is certainly true that there was an unmistakable transformation of popular attitude in the quarter century that followed the end of the Second World War. Feelings of national self-hatred may have previously long been latent in some quarters – George Orwell once described how in the 1930s there was a “divorce between patriotism and intelligence... if you were an intellectual you sniggered at the Union Jack”¹³ – but by the early 1970s, politically correct attitudes had visibly surfaced and become plain to see.

One milestone which symbolises how popular attitudes changed was the Suez Crisis of 1956. The Prime Minister Anthony Eden pursued arguably honourable ends with means that clearly belonged to a different age – the attempt to use military force to seize control of the Suez Canal was more reminiscent of the nineteenth century – and by doing so provoked a wave of public outrage at home as well as abroad.¹⁴ Another milestone was Enoch Powell's inflammatory ‘Rivers of

¹³ G Orwell, *The Lion and Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, 1940.

¹⁴ Keith Kyle describes how “the dam of controversy broke” as “the passions of the time, so uncharacteristic of British life...lashed with particular severity” during the crisis. *Suez* | B Tauris, 2003.

Blood' speech in 1968, warning of the dangers of mass immigration. This polarised public opinion, all the more so as it coincided with two other currents of thought that were prevalent in post-war Britain. One was the onset of a progressive, liberal revolution – the 'flower-power revolution' – that questioned and even transformed many social and cultural norms. The other was a sense of complacency that crept into a country that had survived the misery of economic depression in the 1930s and the struggles of the Second World War but which, within a relatively short space of time, went on to enjoy the unparalleled prosperity of the Macmillan years. Political correctness, it might be said, is not "the luxury of the powerful society"¹⁵ but a vice of the complacent – that is, of those who take the success, or even the survival, of their own society for granted.

These influences are likely to be far greater than that of the "cultural Marxism" that some commentators, such as William Lind, have suggested.¹⁶ According to this viewpoint, Marxist contempt for Western norms, and the desire to overthrow them by revolutionary means, are transferred from the economic realm to wider social and cultural issues. Political correctness, in other words, is seen as a Marxist revolution by other means. But this fails to explain why political correctness, in its narrower sense, is really a particularly British affair: after all, the Communist party had a much stronger following in France and Germany than in Britain, where political correctness is stronger.

Implications for Foreign Policy

The advent of political correctness, in both its wider and narrower senses, has meant that it has now become deeply unfashionable

¹⁵ Browne, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ W Lind, "The Origins of Political Correctness", address at George Washington University, 10 July 1998.

to discuss, or even consider, certain aspects of our own culture and society. Our vision, in other words, has a blind spot, and we can't see our own selves, or others, as we should.

In the first instance, political correctness has been a primary cause of the ahistoricism of British society. Because it has been associated with guilt and shame, not of pride, Britain's past is neither taught in schools with the attention it deserves, if it is taught at all, and is not celebrated or embedded in everyday culture in the way it might be. This means that we are also at risk of assuming that the rest of the world is equally ahistorical.

And because traditional values have been partially, or even completely eroded, in our own society, our understanding of other countries is also dangerously incomplete. It is unfashionable to talk about 'tradition' and has equally long been incorrect to talk about 'British patriotism', because it grates on politically correct ears. The progressively minded dislike a patriot's love of his own country rather than mankind in general, while self-haters dislike British patriotism even though they may well admire a black African patriot. But if this term has been devalued then we risk downplaying, or ignoring, the fact that other people, elsewhere in the world, might have feelings like this. The same is true of other terms, such as the 'British national character', or 'racial differences': they have fallen out of use because what they describe is frowned upon by the politically correct.

The point is not that Britain should be more incorrect, that it should be more patriotic, that it should be prouder of its history or more aware of racial differences. These are wider questions. Much more simply, it is that when these type of terms have been even partially obscured, then important issues and questions about the rest of the world are not even raised and asked, let alone countered and answered.

2. AHISTORICISM

Two words that are now heard less often than ever before are 'tradition' and 'custom'. In politics, the media and everyday usage, it is not commonplace to refer to Britain's traditions of anything, particularly of things that offend the progressively minded, such as parliamentary sovereignty, the common law or freedom from state control. The terms tend to surface only occasionally, when they are marshalled to support politically correct causes such as a liberal immigration policy: for example, the claim that Britain has a 'proud tradition of offering sanctuary' is often parroted quite unthinkingly.¹⁷

This is a sign of the increasing ahistoricism of British, and to a lesser extent Western, culture. True, in the high street history books sell in vast numbers and continue to dominate the best-seller lists, but this is partly a reflection of a suppressed appetite on the part of a general public that wants to find out more about something it would otherwise miss.

¹⁷ In March 2008, for example, when the Independent Asylum Commission claimed that the UK government's treatment of asylum seekers fell "seriously below" the standards of a civilised society, one official retorted that "we have a proud tradition in Britain of offering sanctuary to those who truly need our protection".

To be more specific, there are two different ways in which our viewpoints have become 'ahistoric'. In its narrower sense, the word refers to being preoccupied only with the present and future. In a wider sense, however, it is also true that our perspective on the past can be narrowly focused on those things we are supposed to feel guilty about, or which fit a politically correct view of the world. In 2007, for example, a great deal of attention was paid to the abolition of slavery 200 years before. Tony Blair said that Britain's role in the trade was a matter of "deep sorrow and regret". Yet the role of Great Britain in spearheading the scrapping of the practice, and then using military force to enforce the ban, was overlooked or played down, and it was instead condemned for having been complicit in the practice over the preceding years.

Political Correctness and Ahistoricism

Ahistoricism in the broadest sense may have complex causes. It is possible, for example, that it is partly a sign of just how technologically sophisticated our culture is. Our society makes the most of the instant pleasures, gratifications and conveniences. Perhaps, too, it has something to do with the affluence that, before the onset of a credit crunch in late 2007, most of us enjoyed. It is possible that affluence could make some people more interested in themselves rather than the world around them, just as the fall in the number of voters in general elections has coincided with an increase in living standards and disposable income. But this fails to explain why *British* culture appears to be particularly ahistorical and why, in the wider sense of the word, our national past has become a source of guilt rather than pride.

One possible explanation is political correctness, which has exercised a much more powerful grip in Britain, certainly since 1997, than elsewhere in the West.

Another example of how our viewpoint has narrowed is the contemporary obsession with the Second World War, Nazism and the Third Reich. This chapter in European history is not only the focus of much study in schools but also saturates every aspect of our popular, and to some extent our academic, culture. As Anthony Browne has pointed out, there is a connection between this “Hitlerisation” of history and political correctness.¹⁸

“The double standards of PC have ensured that communist dictators, such as Stalin, are treated far more leniently than fascist ones such as Hitler. This is not explicable by the number of deaths they caused: in the twentieth century, communism (in the Soviet Union, China and South East Asia) was responsible for far more deaths than fascism.”

At the very least, it can be said that this episode is the subject of a disproportionate amount of attention because other parts of our history are seen as a source of shame, not pride, and have therefore become forgotten and obscured.

The combination of ahistoricism and political correctness was particularly acute in Tony Blair. Geoffrey Wheatcroft has described how he had “no respect for tradition, sense of history, reverence for custom”.¹⁹ As leader, he self-consciously sought to sweep away historical practices and institutions with almost revolutionary fervour: Britain’s historic traditions – amongst which were the independent nation state, parliamentary democracy, the common law, the Union, inherited titles in the House of Lords, ancient posts such as Lord Chancellor, and

¹⁸ Browne, op. cit.

¹⁹ G Wheatcroft, *Yo, Blair! Tony Blair's Disastrous Premiership*, Politicos, 2007. See also P Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, Politicos, 2000.

army regiments – were either challenged or swept away. His encouragement of mass immigration from Eastern Europe and beyond arguably represented a powerful attack on Britain’s way of life. Other long-established institutions – notably the monarchy – were always within his sights but simply beyond his range. Mr Blair, wrote the eminent historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, “is not interested in history (and) sometimes seems eager to wind up our history.”²⁰

There are probably times when this ahistorical approach may have something going for it. It helps explain, for example, why Prime Minister Blair was so adept at helping to solve the problems of Northern Ireland, where differences between various interest groups had become so deeply embedded that they were previously considered virtually intractable. “Those of us who were eyewitnesses of the early years of the Troubles find it hard to shed the baggage of our memories”, as Max Hastings has written, whereas “Blair and his people, drawn from a different generation, sought to wipe the slate”.²¹ But only rarely is there such a pressing need to forget the past and far more occasions when an ahistorical approach proves damaging.

Learning from the Past

A sense of history is perhaps particularly important in the exercise of foreign policy. The greater the risk that a particular foreign policy will go wrong, and the stronger the sense of taking the plunge into the unknown, the more valuable such lessons will be. And the differences between nations and cultures are inevitably greater than those within them. A

²⁰ H Trevor-Roper, “Prime Minister Without a Cause”, *The Spectator* 19 December 1998.

²¹ M Hastings, “Moment of Truce”, *Sunday Times*, 23 March 2008. This article was a book review of *Great Hatred, Little Room* by Jonathan Powell.

realisation that our own understanding and knowledge is limited should act as a valuable restraint on the pursuit of an over-ambitious foreign policy.

The background to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 illustrates these dangers. The argument here is not that any study of history would have militated against the invasion, or indeed justified or condemned any particular policy. It is simply that the planners of the campaign, and of a post-Saddam Iraq, would have been likely to think differently about how they implemented their plans if they had seen things in wider terms.

It is no coincidence that the British prime minister who was so indifferent to his own country's past was also uninterested in the history of the land to which he was about to commit his troops. This was equally true, writes one author on the subject, of "American advisers and other political staff in Iraq (who) made little attempt to read up on Iraqi history or Arab culture".²² But had Tony Blair seen his venture from a more historic perspective then he could have asked how earlier British, Western and non-Muslim involvement in Iraq had fared, and therefore more accurately gauged the level of resistance that his own troops would meet.

Two enterprises, in particular, would have been well worth studying. In 1920, the British were forced to beat a hasty retreat from the newly formed state of Mesopotamia when they found themselves unable to suppress a series of uprisings, orchestrated by local mullahs. And the other valuable lesson was the Suez operation in 1956. The attempt to take control of the Suez Canal had rested on the assumption that local people would quietly acquiesce, or even be sympathetic to Allied troops. Only two members of the British cabinet had questioned this assumption.²³

²² J Steele, *Defeat: Why they lost Iraq*, I B Tauris, 2008.

²³ Kyle, *op cit*.

“it would be dangerous to assume that the military operation would be quickly over”, as Walter Monckton argued before the Cabinet on 24 August, “we must not underrate the Egyptians”. Unfortunately, such warnings proved prescient, for the invasion force encountered far heavier resistance than expected from both Egyptian soldiers and local civilians alike.

Reading up about such relatively recent episodes, and the lessons they seem to teach, would have prompted the architects of the 2003 campaign to at least prepare for stronger resistance than they expected and, to avoid being seen as a foreign force of occupation, perhaps to have quickly handed over the reins of power to Iraqis. But as Jonathan Steele writes, “if Bush and Blair were weak on recent Iraqi history and its negative impact on their nations’ reputation, they seemed totally unaware of more distant events, in particular Britain’s colonial role in Iraq.”²⁴ Instead, he continues, “there was no hint” in the Foreign Office memos that were sent to Government ministers before the onset of the war “that occupying Iraq would produce resistance”.²⁵

The difficulties of imposing democracy in a post-Saddam Iraq would also have become much clearer if the sponsors of war had been reminded that the country had no tradition of democracy. But only rarely were such obvious points ever raised, one of the few occasions being a note from foreign secretary Jack Straw to Tony Blair that simply pointed out that “Iraq has had no history of democracy so no one has this habit or experience.”²⁶

²⁴ Steele, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Steele, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Steele, *op. cit.*

The ahistorical approach of the British prime minister and his officials was not shared by their counterparts from other, less politically correct, parts of the world. For example, in a speech to the UN Security Council in New York on 7 March 2003, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin foresaw serious tensions between various Iraqi communities if the invasion went ahead and argued that:

“These crises have many roots. They are political, religious, economic. Their problems lie in the tumult of centuries... we believe that the use of force can arouse rancour and hatred, fuel a clash of identities, of cultures – something that our generation has a prime responsibility to avoid.”

Nor did retired British diplomats, the products of an earlier, politically less correct age, share Blair’s ahistoricism. As some retired ambassadors wrote to the national press in 2004:²⁷

“To describe the resistance as led by terrorists, fanatics and foreigners is neither convincing nor helpful. Policy must take account of the nature and history of Iraq, the most complex country in the world.”

In the run-up to war, the more historical perspective of Arab governments on Iraq also helped to enlighten Juan Gabriel Valdes, a former Chilean foreign minister who was a UN envoy in 2003, to the dangers of a US-led attack. Valdes wrote that:²⁸

“Members of the Arab group at the UN... told us, in private, exactly what has happened historically in Iraq... it was not very difficult to get that information, that if the war happens, Iran would take an enormous role, that the

²⁷ Letter of former British ambassadors to Tony Blair, *The Times*, 27 April 2004.

²⁸ Steele, *op. cit.*

situation would be absolutely catastrophic, and that the turn of events would leave the USA and GB to be involved in an atrocious situation.”

NATO’s present role in Afghanistan has also been conducted in largely ahistoric terms. Parallels with the disastrous Soviet experience during the 1980s, or indeed with several ill-starred British attempts to occupy and pacify the country during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, have been made only rarely. It is no coincidence that some analogies have instead also been made by those who originate from a less correct culture: the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan and his adviser Lakhdar Brahimi are reported to have told the Security Council that not only would there be “great difficulty in trying to find troop contributors” but also that “the whole history of foreign forces in Afghanistan gives us great cause for concern”.

There is another respect in which the British and US perspective on Iraq displayed all the trappings of ahistoricism. In the same way as much contemporary Western culture has become narrowly focussed on the events of the Second World War, so too did many British and US officials appear fixated by comparisons between Iraq and Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. One US official, journeying to Iraq, recalled that on a flight to Baghdad “not one person seemed to need a refresher on Iraq or the Gulf region. Without exception they were reading new books on the American occupation and reconstruction of Germany and Japan.”²⁹ Condoleeza Rice, speaking at John Hopkins University in April 2002, argued that: “this is a period not just of grave danger but of enormous opportunity... a period akin to 1945 to 1947”. Similar statements were repeated by other officials at every level of the US administration.

²⁹ N Feldman, *What we owe Iraq: war and ethics of nation building*, Princeton, 2003.

The same narrow perspective has been taken by numerous politicians. It informed our response to the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s,³⁰ while in late 2001, as NATO fought its early battles in Afghanistan, Jack Straw is alleged to have even called the Taliban “Nazis”.³¹ The point here is not just that there were clear and obvious differences between post-Saddam Iraq and post-war Japan and Germany in 1945.³² It is that much more important and wide-ranging comparisons were ignored and overlooked.

There is another sense in which both British and US leaders had a perspective that was too narrow to be useful. Both, it appears, were preoccupied with how history would judge them: “I’m here for a reason”, President Bush is said to have told his officials, “and this is going to be how we’re going to be judged.”³³ He added on another occasion that “when some years from now History judges us, I don’t want people to ask themselves why Bush, or Aznar, or Blair didn’t face their responsibilities.”³⁴ This is not just a highly egocentric historical perspective but an inverted one, looking forward to how someone might be judged by ‘History’, rather than back to discern the lessons of past experience that might be of some relevance to the present.

³⁰ See J Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*, Free Press, 2004.

³¹ Kampfner, op. cit.

³² Most obviously, in 1945 the US had clear legitimacy under international law which it plainly lacked in 2003; Japan was occupied for seven years and Germany for ten; neither was ethnically fragmented and their people had a track record of political docility.

³³ R Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, 2002.

³⁴ Transcript of a discussion 22 February 2003 held at Mr Bush’s ranch at Crawford, Texas. Quoted in “The moment has come to get rid of Saddam”, published in *El Pais* on 26 September 2007.

Assuming that Others are Like Ourselves

This is a dangerous basis for foreign policy. If we assume that other people see themselves and the outside world in the same limited terms as we do, then we will misjudge, and underestimate, the difficulties of dealing with them. So it a dangerous error to suppose that other people have a perspective as ahistoric as our own.

Unfortunately there was just such a conflict of perspective prior to the Iraq war. The Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, for example, pointed out that:³⁵

“The Arab world...cannot bring itself to consider the Crusades a mere episode in the bygone past...there can be doubt that the schism between these two worlds dates from the Crusades. Deeply felt by the Arabs, even today, as an act of rape.”

And a former prime minister of Jordan, Taher Masri, argued that a US occupation of Baghdad, “a major Arab and Islamic city for centuries”, would conjure up images of Hulagu Khan, the Mongol warlord who destroyed Baghdad in 1258 and would lead to disastrous consequences for America and the Arab world: “all these factors boil inside us: it is bad for you and bad or us”, he warned presciently.³⁶

In other words, involving ourselves in other parts of the world is a much more complicated business than the ahistorically minded are likely to realise. If we do so, then we risk stirring up much deeper emotions than we ever expected, and perhaps find ourselves seen in a more different light than we ever thought likely.

³⁵ Steele, op. cit.

³⁶ T Judah, “Waiting for the War”, *New York Review of Books*, 27 March 2003.

Above all, we are likely to underestimate the sheer difficulty of changing things that are viewed by others in strongly historical terms. Memories that run deep are not erased easily enough to allow new institutions to suddenly thrive, as the sheer difficulty of imposing democracy in the Middle East illustrates. Again this is not necessarily an argument against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, but merely indicts the way in which it was carried out by a Washington administration that, in the words of one distinguished commentator, had “an ignorance of Iraq’s history and society”.³⁷

What is more, if someone thinks they have a historic claim to something, then they are likely to fight for it. And if their enemy is either unaware of, or indifferent to, these historic claims, then they are likely to underestimate just how determined their opponent will be.

The example of Kosovo

There could be no better example of this than the British and US attack on Kosovo in the spring and early summer of 1999. When the air onslaught began, on 24 March, the architects of war in Washington widely expected Belgrade to crumble after just a few hours of bombing. It soon became clear that they had badly miscalculated, for the Serbs held out against a very determined Allied air attack for much longer than anyone expected, and suddenly conceded defeat in early June only after enduring nearly 40,000 sorties and losing some sympathy from their allies in the Kremlin. But crucially the Serbs were fighting for something that was very precious to them – their sovereignty over the province of Kosovo. The strength of their feelings over the issue were clear. Allusions to Serbian history,

³⁷ P Galbraith, ‘Iraq: The Bungled Transition’, *New York Review of Books*, 23 September 2004.

particularly the events of the fourteenth century when the Serbs had fought the Ottoman invaders, were constantly made by President Slobodan Milosevic but also permeated wider Serbian culture.³⁸

By contrast, the parliamentary debate on Kosovo on 25 March 1999 was conducted in almost entirely ahistorical terms – other, that is, than to the Second World War. The veteran MP Tony Benn did comment that “even if we forget our history the Serbs do not forget”³⁹ but only one member, Edward Leigh, mentioned the epic battle of Kosovo between Serbs and Ottomans in 1389 that symbolises Serb perspectives on the province. Leigh pointed out that.⁴⁰

“We are dealing with a people that who believe in their heart of hearts add with an absolute passion that Kosovo is an integral part of their homeland.... (even if)we may think it ridiculous to think in terms of history the whole time.”

And in the debate on Iraq on 24 September 2002, a few months before the invasion, there were, once again, virtually no references to the history of the region before 1990 (except for references to the appeasement of the Nazis in the 1930s).

This ahistorical approach is relatively recent. It is noticeably different from the parliamentary debates of earlier times. An example is the reaction to the foreign policy crisis in 1951 – the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by the Iranian premier Mohammed Mossadeq. In their main discussion on the

³⁸ T Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, Yale University Press, 2000.

³⁹ Hansard vol. 328 p.565.

⁴⁰ Hansard *ibid.* pp.596-99.

matter, on 21 June, MPs saw things with a much stronger sense of history. One member compared the behaviour of the Russians to that of the Czars during the preceding century and commented that:⁴¹

“It is a remarkable thing when we read the history of the events of the past century how those designs and how those manoeuvres, not only on the Russian side but on our side as well, have a similarity to the present situation.”

Other MPs claimed that the situation was “unprecedented in history”,⁴² drew comparisons with events of 1899,⁴³ and referred to “a Nelson act”⁴⁴ on the part of their enemy. Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison also pointed to “historical comparisons”, argued that there were “plenty of precedents... in the nineteenth century” and added that “Persia has a long record of international interference behind it”.⁴⁵ And in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* on 25 April, Anthony Eden, himself a Middle East expert, had drawn attention to the historical background to the affair and the “long memories” of the Persians. The contrast with the later debates on Kosovo and Iraq could hardly be greater.

⁴¹ Hansard vol.489, p.756.

⁴² Ibid. p.760.

⁴³ Ibid. p.796.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.769.

⁴⁵ Ibid. pp.825-6.

3. PATRIOTISM

Another term that is heard less often today than before is 'patriotism'. It is true that the word crops up sporadically and occasionally, usually as part of a government-inspired initiative that is intended to strike a particular image. But generally it is unusual to hear of someone being referred to as 'an English patriot', while a 'British patriot' is virtually unheard of altogether. It is more common to hear references to a French or US patriot but not of a 'German patriot'.

The reason is that, for different reasons, it is more unfashionable in Britain and Germany to be proud of one's country. In Germany, memories of the 1930s and the Second World War are of course still recent and painful, while in the UK the influence of political correctness has seeped into the public mind. In a truly Orwellian sense, whoever controls the word controls the thought: the fact that it is less common than before to refer to patriotism is both a symptom and a cause of this underlying attitude towards our own selves.

This has dangerous repercussions for foreign policy. If we are not patriotic towards our own country, or else are just not quite aware of the term and what it stands for, then we will not expect

other people to be patriotic towards theirs. It is hard to imagine a more serious misunderstanding.

Consider, for example, the premises upon which Tony Blair took Britain to war against Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq two years later. Here was a Prime Minister who showed little interest in the history, traditions and institutions of his own country and whose rhetoric lacked the patriotic tone of Margaret Thatcher or John Major.

On other occasions, he also devalued the term. In a speech in Poland in May 2003, for example, he claimed that Eurosceptics were “unpatriotic”, while at the Mayor’s banquet speech in November 2000 he spoke of his own brand of “enlightened patriotism”. In June 2003 Gordon Brown also referred to the “patriotic case for British engagement with Europe”. But such usage devalues the term firstly because any policy could equally be called patriotic – cleaning city streets or accumulating a vast personal fortune could equally be termed patriotic. And secondly it is surely inappropriate to label a transfer of fundamental political powers away from the country. As Margaret Thatcher pointed out, when she described how Mr Blair was “committed to the extinction of Britain”, this was akin to something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. “when I use a word”, as Humpty Dumpty said scornfully, “it means just what I choose it to mean”.⁴⁶

It was in the same spirit that proposals were made in the spring of 2008 to help newly arrived immigrants bond more strongly with their new homeland. As Sir Peregrine Worsthorne wrote, the document was:⁴⁷

⁴⁶ M Thatcher, “Tony Blair is committed to the extinction of Britain”, *Sunday Telegraph* 1 June 2001.

⁴⁷ P Worsthorne, “Who will pledge allegiance to this curs’d isle?”, *The First Post*, 2 April 2008.

“...pretty thin gruel, rather on a par with the inducement offered by a good insurance salesman. True, there was one blood-stirring idea that immigrants should be obliged to pledge an oath of allegiance to the Queen – but that one, needless to say, was met with universal derision. In future, therefore, becoming British will no longer require any declaration of love or loyalty; merely assent to a contract.”

If Tony Blair had no instinctive feelings for his own country, how could he ever have expected the Afghans or Iraqis to fight hard for theirs? To ask this question illustrates how the difficulties of imposing peace and stability were seriously underestimated.

As Jonathan Steele has written, Tony Blair “had no feel for Iraqi pride...that underlay much of the Iraqi resistance”. He added:⁴⁸

“Failure to understand this Iraqi patriotism was the biggest single mistake made by Bush and Blair, both in the months before the war and in the years that followed Saddam’s downfall. They ignored it, they minimised it, their policies often provoked it, and they never appreciated its strength and importance. It was this inability to put themselves into the mindset of Iraqis that doomed the occupation to defeat.”

Blair was simply not in a position to understand the full fury of the insurgency campaign that followed. When Charles Tripp, a distinguished academic and expert on the Middle East, went to Number 10 to brief ministers on the country they were about to invade, he quickly saw the limited prism through which the Prime Minister was viewing the world.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Steele, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Steele, op. cit.

“Straw asked interested questions, who, what, why and so on. Blair didn’t seem that interested... the Prime Minister was taken in by the notion that Iraqi delight at getting rid of Saddam would override any resentment about being occupied by foreigners, or any other negative reactions.”

The patriotic reaction of most Iraqis to a foreign invasion was expressed by a former soldier, interviewed in *The Times*:⁵⁰

“As a loyal officer under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi major never imagined that one day he would become an insurgent, but when Iraq fell five years ago he was left bitter, jobless and desperate to drive the invading forces out. ‘I saw my country collapse right in front of my eyes,’ said Abu Abdullah, who has since orchestrated countless attacks against the US military, spent time in the notorious Abu Ghraib detention centre and briefly joined forces with al-Qaeda.”

It is particularly significant that, in this interview, the Iraqi refers to his ‘country’ – a word that very rarely appeared in Tony Blair’s own speeches or soundbites when he was talking about either Britain or Iraq. In his speeches about Iraq, for example, he constantly draws a contrast between the “regime” of Saddam Hussein and “the people”. Later there are numerous references to different “communities”. For example, in one short statement, issued shortly after the initial attack, Blair said:⁵¹

“Our enemy is Saddam and his regime; not the Iraqi people. Our forces are friends and liberators of the Iraqi people, not your conquerors... Iraq will be run by you, the

⁵⁰ “I fought for my land against the US. Now I fight alongside them”, *The Times*, 15 March 2008.

⁵¹ Statement on Iraqi TV, 10 April 2003.

people of Iraq...(Saddam's) money was stolen from you, the Iraqi people... I know too from my meetings with Iraqi exiles who live in Britain that you are an inventive, creative people.”

But he referred only once to their ‘country’.

The example of Afghanistan

The occupation of Afghanistan since 2001, following the toppling of the Taliban regime by NATO forces, has also been seen in the same limited terms. It is today almost unheard of, in Western circles at least, to hear any reference to an ‘Afghan patriot’. The invasion and subsequent occupation were instead portrayed in much narrower terms of ‘repression’ of the Afghan people by a ‘hard-line’ and ‘cruel’ regime.

This is, in one sense, fair. The Taliban that ruled much of the country in the late 1990s were both cruel and despised. But it nonetheless omits a vital aspect of the struggle – the Afghan love of country and, by extension, their intense suspicion and hostility towards any outsiders who might threaten their independence. No matter how well intended their aims and effective their methods, it would be almost impossible for any foreign troops to be committed to Afghanistan on any meaningful scale without stirring up a countervailing patriotic reaction. The large size of NATO’s current force – around 40,000 troops – could hardly fail to do just that. As Jolyon Leslie has put it: “the impunity with which foreigners and their hired hands strut around Kabul is a clear indication of who is in charge... and many Afghans see (this) as a embodying what is going wrong in their country”.⁵²

The point is not that anyone outside Afghanistan should now be portraying NATO’s insurgent enemies as ‘patriots’: it would be

⁵² “Money, Lots of Money”, *London Review of Books*, 20 March 2008.

not just ridiculous to portray an enemy in these terms but dangerous, since it would give them a degree of respectability that they do not deserve. The insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq have instead rightly been portrayed in other terms, such as 'drug-runners' or 'Al Qaeda' operatives, for example. What matters is that the architects of war need to be aware of the strength of patriotic feeling in any country they become involved. We all need to be constantly reminded that, in every corner of the world, there is a big and vital distinction between 'one's country' and being 'foreign', and that this is likely to be more important than any difference between a particular regime and the people it rules over.

4. SOME OTHER INCORRECT TERMS

Besides 'tradition' and 'patriotism', another term that is slowly fading from everyday usage is 'nation'. In fact, a whole range of other, associated terms are heard much more rarely. It is uncommon to hear of 'national character' – a book published in 2006 entitled *The English National Character* raised eyebrows, as it was almost certainly intended to, for precisely that reason – or 'national identity'.⁵³ Less common still are references to 'a national mindset', 'nationhood' or 'national consciousness'.

Consider, for example, the terms upon which the debates on both immigration and devolution have been conducted. The immigration debate has been defined, almost entirely, by the question of how much wealth has been generated by immigrants from Eastern Europe and what strain, if any, they impose on national resources. By contrast, the issue of nationhood, of what loyalties they have and what their sense of belonging is, is barely mentioned.

When in March 2008 the British Government announced plans to introduce a 'sense of Britishness', its spokesmen referred to "a

⁵³ P Mandler, *The English National Character*, Yale University Press, 2006.

sense of shared belonging, a sense that you are part of a community with a common venture, to integrate better newcomers to our society and be clearer about what the rights and responsibilities are.”⁵⁴ But, once again, there was no reference to ‘nation’. Similarly, the parliamentary debate on devolution in May 1997 was dominated by arguments about the practicality, fairness and the expense of both the referenda and the proposed changes. There were few references to nationhood.

As before, there is a noticeable difference with parliamentary debates of earlier ages. In the 1951 debate on Mossadeq’s act of nationalisation, for example, none of the MPs had any hesitation at all in identifying national characteristics. There are references to the “national pride” of the Iranians, to Britain as “a great and powerful nation”, to “the Persian make-up”, “nationalist feeling and mentality”, the “Persian mind” and “nation”. One member emphasised that “Persians are very irrational and almost uncontrollable on political issues.”⁵⁵

As Prime Minister, Tony Blair often stated that globalisation has made national sovereignty something of a myth. In its place, he emphasised “the universal application of global values”, arguing that “we have to show these are not western still less American or Anglo-Saxon values but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen”.⁵⁶

It is not hard to see why any reference to ‘the nation’ has become politically unfashionable in recent years. The term ties the individual to a particular place and identity rather than to

⁵⁴ Lord Goldsmith, speaking on 11 March 2008.

⁵⁵ 1951 debate, Hansard, p.811.

⁵⁶ Speeches of 21 March and 26 May 2006.

mankind in general: so the existence of 'a nation' necessarily obstructs the rule of universal 'human rights' that progressives tend to admire. Above all, a 'nation' has acquired racial connotations ever since various thinkers of the nineteenth century gave the term this narrower meaning, one that Nazism later thrived upon.⁵⁷

There is, of course, no reason at all why a nation should be defined in these terms: its underlying characteristic is 'a shared sense of belonging' that is forged over time, and this means that a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society like the US or South Africa can be a nation just as much as a relatively homogeneous one. But this has not stopped the word from acquiring some darker connotations in domestic British politics, having become synonymous with aggression and xenophobia.

However, in some cases, 'the nation' can be championed by the politically correct, mainly when a particular nation is seen to embody the cause of a perceived underdog at the expense of a traditional practice and institution. For example, advocates of devolution feel no qualms about referring to a 'Scottish nation' whose very existence, as opposed to a 'Scottish identity' or to 'Scottish history', would be at odds with the existence of a united British kingdom: the branding of the Scottish National Party, which is opposed in principle to the Union, is the most obvious example of this. In the same way, the politically correct would champion the rights of, for example, the nationalists who championed the cause of freedom from British colonial rule, such as Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya or Mahatma Gandhi in India, for example.

⁵⁷ Most of these writers were German but some, such as Charles Pearson, the author of *National Life and Character* (1893), were British.

What have become much more forgotten than references to 'the nation' are some associated terms such as 'national identity', 'character', 'mindset' and 'consciousness'. These are terms that are now unheard of, even when an underdog is being discussed. This is because these terms are likely to be even more exclusive than a 'nation': anyone could conceivably become a 'national' by simply obtaining a passport, whereas it would take much longer to acquire a distinctive attitude or mentality.

The implications for foreign policy

To see the outside world in these limited terms, however, is dangerous for foreign policy.

This is mainly because it allows us to underestimate how different people are in different parts of the world. Unless we constantly take into account the distinctive habits and attitudes of the particular people we are dealing with, and which constitute their national character, then we are at risk of taking a 'one size fits all' approach.

In the same way, we easily underestimate the difficulties of changing the long established habits and customs of other peoples. The planners of the US attack on Iraq hoped to quickly establish a new, post-war order that was based on noble values such as freedom and democracy. The trouble was that such practices were alien to local people.

'Nation-building' is no quick and easy task. It is one that could last a generation or more, creating a clear dilemma for any foreign force whose presence on another country's soil would stir nationalist sentiment and patriotic feeling.

But, once again, Tony Blair expressed no interest in the strength of Iraqi nationalist sentiment. He hardly seemed even to have

known that it existed. Again, Charles Tripp recalls telling the Prime Minister that “there’s a force in Iraq called Islamic nationalism. When you look at the effects of the West’s sanctions, you must be aware of something cooking there”⁵⁸. The same was true on the other side of the Atlantic. General Wesley Clark, for example, visited the Pentagon prior to a Senate testimony in September 2002, when planning on post-war Iraq did take place, and later said that “it was based on the assumption that a US invasion would be welcomed as a liberation by most Iraqis. The strength of the Baath Party and of intrinsic Iraqi nationalism were underestimated, as was the degree of factionalism among the Shiites”.⁵⁹

Nor was it coincidence that one of the chief US architects of war in 2003, Paul Wolfowitz, was able to clearly disassociate Saddam Hussein’s political order with Iraq as both a country and nation, describing Iraq as a “brittle, oppressive *regime* that might break easily”.⁶⁰

Everyone, it seems, is afraid of being branded as ‘racist’, and is reluctant to talk about ‘the nation’ and its every aspect because the term has become associated with a *distinctive* race and ethnicity. In fact the way in which these two terms – race and ethnicity – are used in everyday conversation is also rapidly changing, in a way that can easily damage foreign policy.

Racial Taboos

Curiously, while it is common to hear of someone or something described as racist, it is unfashionable to talk about ‘race’. In Western countries, we pride ourselves on being colour blind and

⁵⁸ Steele, op. cit.

⁵⁹ “Iraq: What Went Wrong”, *New York Review of Books*, 23 October 2003.

⁶⁰ Kampfner, op. cit.

not even noticing differences of skin colour, let alone assigning them any importance. If the term is heard at all, it conjures images of the 'race wars' that scarred the US in the 1960s or possibly of Nazi persecution of the 1930s and 1940s, images that anyone would certainly want to turn away from.

It is certainly true that the term 'race' is a particularly difficult one to use because only rarely is it clear just what a particular 'race' happens to be. Some people might say 'the whites' are a race, others 'the Caucasians', 'the Europeans', 'the British', 'the English' or even 'the Celts'. Like numerous other terms, it is a word that only has some meaning when it is used in a negative sense to say what someone or something is not: it is uncontroversial to say, for example, that 'Asiatics' are not the same race as 'Africans', even though this begs the question of whether there are different 'races' amongst Asiatics. But difficulties like these should not deter anyone from using the term, or at least recognising that in some cases it does have some meaning.

The trouble is that we easily ignore such differences abroad because we are colour blind at home. It is very unusual to hear of a British analyst referring to different 'races' in parts of the world – except in places, such as South Africa, where politics is, or in the past has been, highly racialised. Even in discussion about contemporary Zimbabwe, where white farmers have suffered serious persecution by the government of Robert Mugabe, or Darfur, where a predominantly Arab government has persecuted a black African minority, the term is very rarely used by Western politicians or commentators. They prefer, instead, to speak of 'cultures', 'peoples', 'tribes' and 'ethnic groups'.

However successful 'multi-racialism' is in contemporary Britain, we risk failing to realise the difficulties of involving ourselves in the affairs of other countries if we are blind to their own differences of race.

A topical example is Afghanistan. The country is made up of not just different cultures and ethnicities but of different races. In the north of the country the Tajiks do not just speak a different language and have different customs but have very distinctive physical characteristics that set them apart from their Pushtun counterparts in the south. In the west, around the city of Herat, the people bear a clear resemblance to the Persian majority in Iran. No one pretends that these differences are ever neat: in the city of Kabul, for example, all the different ethnic and racial groups rub shoulders. But these differences do exist.

By ignoring the existence of racial distinctions, and preferring to talk about the differences of 'peoples', 'tribes' and 'cultures', we underestimate the difficulties of enforcing a lasting settlement that unites all Afghans under one flag. It is true that, over the past century or so, most Afghans have developed a sense of belonging to an Afghan nation. But just how much loyalty they have to the Kabul government is a different matter, and depends in large measure on how fairly they feel their interests are being represented: if local rulers feel they have more to gain by being independent from a Kabul government, then they will not hesitate to become so, while at the same time proudly proclaiming their loyalty to the idea, if not reality, of Afghanistan. This is why, since its formation in 1747, the Afghan state has only rarely exercised any authority over the entire country, even in recent decades.

The formidable challenge of imposing effective unity on a country like this might have become clearer to Western politicians in 2001 if they had described Afghanistan's divisions as 'racial', rather than just 'ethnic' and 'tribal'. But it was significant that the agreement that was signed in Bonn in December 2001 sought to establish a 'broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative' government for

Afghanistan, but never mentioned 'multi-racial'. In fact, this term is very rarely, if ever used, to describe Afghanistan.

The same racial blindness has helped us obscure the challenge of imposing unity in post-Saddam Iraq. The Kurds, for example, pride themselves on being a different race from the Arabs, Turks or Persians. Yet they are usually branded in Western circles as a separate ethnic group in Iraq. If the Washington administration had used this term, then it may have realised the difficulties of forging a "democratic, federal, pluralistic and united" country. Unfortunately it dramatically underestimated the constant rivalries and tussles for political power between the Baghdad government and the Kurdish north. The oil-rich city of Kirkuk, for example, is the home not just of Kurds and Arabs but also of Turcomans, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Yet it is hardly ever described as 'multi-racial'.

Ethnicity and Multi-Culturalism

Differences between races are more difficult to ignore than ethnic distinctions, all the more so because, in Western circles, discussion of 'ethnicity' has started to become synonymous with the phrases 'multi-ethnic' and 'multi-cultural'.

The truth is, of course, that ethnic differences can be just as profound as any other type of division. In Iraq, and in the Balkans, for example, these divisions run partly along religious fault-lines and have caused deep, bloody and lasting rifts. In these and other cases, it may be unrealistic for anyone to expect different ethnic groups to share power or even to rub shoulders. But because ethnicity has started to become synonymous with "multi-culturalism", this has become harder than ever for the West to recognise.

It was a sign of the way in which 'ethnicity' has become synonymous with 'multi-culturalism' that some Western

politicians and diplomats have at times prescribed reforms that are quite ill suited to the particular society they are dealing with. So in the Balkans during the mid-1990s, for example, the US and German Governments were committed to finding a multi-ethnic solution to both Bosnia and (in particular) Sarajevo against the advice of those on the ground who regarded it as unworkable. The American diplomat Warren Zimmerman, for example, wrote how:⁶¹

“Most of all we stand for the simple proposition that people of all ethnic strains can live together, not without tensions, but with tolerance, civility and mutual enrichment.”

Lord Owen described the dangers of this approach:⁶²

“If we had seen it, we would have warned against two particularly bald statements, one asking the Serbs on Sarajevo ‘to renounce partition of the city’ and the other asking the Croats to ‘renounce partition of Mostar’...only people who had not been involved in the delicate negotiations...would have plumped such provocative words on the table.”

At other times, Westerners easily overlook ethnic divisions altogether in the same way that they tend to do so with racial differences. Few people make the obvious point that in Africa, for example, voting patterns in elections tend to strongly follow ethnic fault-lines, as people vote for representatives of the particular tribe they belong to. This means that elections can easily become a formality, as the biggest tribe reinforces its grip on power, rather than a fair reflection of who deserves to

⁶¹ D Owen, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and its Destroyers*, Times Books, 1996.

⁶² D Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, Jonathan Cape, 1995.

win. There have of course been numerous close-run elections in some countries – Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2008, and Nigeria the previous year are examples – but tribal loyalties often stand in the way of a properly free and fair outcome.

This is not an argument against promoting democracy in Africa. It is the continent's best chance of establishing good governance. But it does show that the outside world should not raise its hopes too high, and should not expect democracy to somehow be a magic wand.

In short, we are looking at the rest of the world through a highly distorted looking glass, one that has been shaped, to an important degree, by political correctness. We will see the outside world in a much clearer light if we can smash the glass. Doing so is one of the biggest foreign policy challenges that confront us.



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There will always be misunderstandings between different peoples and cultures. But the growth in the West of political correctness over the last few decades means that a particularly wide gulf now separates us from the rest of the world.

We suffer from a dangerous blind spot. The looking glass, through which we see the outside world, is giving us a distorted picture.

The flaws in the looking glass explain many of the mistakes made before and after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. They distort our view of the outside world but are embedded too deeply in our culture to be lightly pushed aside. To shatter the glass we must widen the vocabulary that we use to describe what we see around us.

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