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Comment

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THE moral and aesthetic debate raging over the building of a Holocaust memorial in the prime real estate quarter of central Berlin has now become a campaign issue.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced the plan to build the memorial nearly a decade ago, and the search for a design began *over four years ago*. He vetoed the first design, a 100 yard by 100 yard tombstone which he decried as "monstrous".

The selection committee could not agree on a single design, so it recommended two. The judges, rather than choose between them, added two more designs to the shortlist. At that point a public forum was set up with the highly unrealistic goal of reaching consensus on whether it was necessary to have a memorial, how it should look and what it should stand. At each stymied attempt, Kohl warned about the disgrace Germany would suffer in the eyes of the world if the memorial were not built.

But now Kohl, who seems settled on the design by architect Peter Eisenman and sculptor Richard Serra, is running out of time; he is pushing for a final decision on the design before Sunday's election, so we need to be that the project will be cancelled if he loses to Social Democratic challenger Gerhard Schröder.

Schröder might well cancel it. In a dig at Kohl's pet project, his cultural affairs advisor suggested that the £6 million allocated for it would be better spent on the upkeep of existing memorials, in particular the former concentration camps, falling into disrepair due to lack of funds.

Staking one's claim for the moral high ground on this issue is not restricted to politicians. Leading German intellectuals and writers are also voicing concerns. Can a single physical structure do justice to the scale of the atrocity? Is it possible to find an aesthetic solution to the dilemma of how to commemorate Europe's murdered Jews?

What about the Gypsies, Communists, homosexuals, anarchists, disabled people, and many others who, although not part of well-orchestrated genocidal plot, still fill victim? Does a monument teach anything about history, or is it only a symbol?

The debate is as much about the nature of post-war German identity as it is about Hitler's victims. Does Germany want to teach future generations about its history or does it want an enormous symbol to show the rest of the world how it already learned lessons from its past?

There should be not one memorial in Berlin, but many — marking where trains pulled out and where shops were vandalised and where people once lived who suddenly disappeared. Then in future, without inherited guilt or shame, children could analyse the ubiquitous claim of "I didn't know" and contemplate the question of individual responsibility in one's own community, where racism and xenophobia continue to thrive.

Civic spirit is still strong. But it doesn't count for much on your CV

Madeleine Bunting

I AM sick of sex. Before you commiserate with, or seduce, my husband, I'd better clarify that I'm sick of hearing, reading and watching sex. The orgy of self revelation last week has been about as erotic as watching cattle copulate. So I'm declaring a sex-free zone. If you're looking for details of whipped cream, cigars or other unexpected sex accessories, pass on.

In the conference on the Third Way today in New York, expect to hear a lot about community. Expect to hear even more over the next three weeks of the conference season. Last year, the word community appeared in newspaper coverage of the respective party conferences: Tories 34 times, LibDems 19 and Labour 68. In Gordon Brown's October 1997 conference speech, he talked about the Labour Party a staggering 19 times; that's on average three times a day. Community has become a political mantra: calming, spreading a sense of well-being, but hard to see what it actually means.

The LibDems are first off with a proposal for another trowel's worth of community to education. Don Foster, education spokesman, is proposing "that Neighbourhood Schools Trusts made up of the local community and businesses should take over the running of schools. For more than a decade everyone — Tory, Labour and LibDem — have been applying community to the problems of educational underperformance. The rhetoric of dispersing power to people to run the institutions which affect their lives is unobjectionable. But, having spent three and half hours at a school governors' meeting last week, the idea filled me with scepticism. The meeting started with the familiar appeal for governors to serve in vacancies at another school. Just who and where are the people who have hours to spare every week, developing the huge expertise in complicated issues from educational policy to insurance required to run a school? (The unpleasant discovery last week was that contrary to all previous assurances, there is a grey area in the law and that governors could be personally liable in lawsuits against the school.) Being a governor is a thankless, time-consuming task which — given the enormous responsibility — demands an expertise that worryingly few governors have. Community?

Just as we learn that the British work unusually long hours compared with our European counterparts; just as we learn that a huge proportion of mothers are now working, just as we jump on every labour-saving device and every service industry to relieve the rush; we learn that its our civic duty to run our kids' schools. Bizarre.

There has been a crisis of confidence in the effectiveness of the state and in educational policy in particular; everyone has leaned on the "community" as the solution. Sociologist Matt Ridley who argues in The Origins of Virtue, that one of the most distinctive characteristics of the human species is the evolution of our social instincts, ("society is as much a product of our genes as our bodies are") blames the welfare state for crippling them. He writes the welfare state replaced "thousands of effective community institutions — friendly societies, mutuals, hospital trusts and more, all based on reciprocity and gradually nurtured virtuous circles of trust with giant, centralised Leviathans like the NHS, nationalised industries and government quangos, all based on condescension".

Ridley has given intellectual credibility to an idea first framed by the Tories but now partially adopted by Labour: if you roll back the state, you will rekindle the frameworks of mutuality and co-operation. I have two concerns. Firstly, that although the rhetoric is unimpeachable, it is about dispersing power to people. Labour, like the Tories and Labour, there has been massive and massive extension of centralised power into the classroom. "The National Curriculum under the Tories laid down what had to be taught, and through such initiatives as the Literacy Hour, Labour is prescribing exactly *how* to teach it.

My second concern is with the credibility of the concepts of duty and altruism which underpin the debate about community and civic spirit. The question of motivation and how cultures conditions it, is where the debate on community needs to be. Who volunteers and why? And what chance is there of increasing their number?

The headline figures underpinning the doom-merchants' argument of a decline in civic spirit — 22 million Britons volunteer for on average four hours a week. But volunteering is, as one expects, patchy. It is higher in prosperous neighbourhoods among higher socio-economic groups. Indeed its absence can be taken as a relatively reliable indicator of social exclusion. Civic spirit is not so much in decline as inconsistent. It probably always has been. There's a dangerous nostalgia in the Ridley argument. It was precisely the terrible holes left by networks of community institutions and charities which prompted the welfare state.

The headline figure masks also a shift from younger volunteers to older. Among the 18-34 age group the numbers of volunteers fell from 2.7 to 2.2 per cent (this *is* a big drop) while those aged 35-54 showed significant finding was that, Ridley questioned about motivation, personal benefit ranked high; they referred to meeting new people and was a reference on their CV.

Does this help explain the difficulties of recruiting nurses, teachers and midwives? Of course pay is relevant, but is the revenge-laid week, there was little reference to what has traditionally motivated millions to go into these caring professions — altruism. In a culture in which self-sacrifice and service to others is held out as an unparalleled ideal, then professions dedicated to them confer status — the concept which dominated discussion of the issue last week.

Only a materialistic culture determines status simply by wealth. Personal virtue (often female, often of Irish origin) has subsidised these public services for several generations. No longer.

Ridley's argument that there has been a decline in civic spirit may be partly correct. We are failing to transmit ideals to the X generation. But surely the welfare state is less to blame than competitive, consumer capitalism?

The ethos of competitiveness has sunk deep into the way we socialise our children. Life is a race, and you've got to be the first off the starting block.

Why do journalists recycle the leaks as though they are fact?

Hunting with hounds

Peter Preston

NO community of journalists spends more time agonising about its ethics and the need for public trust. That is the American way. Once the story of Clinton and Lewinsky is done, once the final juice has been squeezed and spat away, you may bet on a spate of special seminars and learned reports reviewing the lessons and making lofty rededications to a cleaner, brighter future. Phooey! The time for such lessons is now.

Newspapermen and broadcasters need to understand their audience. They have to stay in touch with its feelings and concerns. A few weeks ago one sixth (British) audience was treated to a further warm bath of Diana remembrance. But, yet again, the people had the last, hollow laugh. They had quelled unheralded emotion in the medium aftermath — her death. A year on, though, they apparently wanted no.

There are two reasons for the disregard of them. The clarion cry of public opinion got it wrong once, then wrong again. Who could unerringly catch such a fleeting mood? But the Bill/Monica equation has no similar refuges on offer. American opinion, exhaustively polled, is clear where it stands as another sordid week begins. It does not revere its president, but it does not want him impeached. It continues to stand by his record in office. It does not want to see that allegedly squirming video, nor to read another 2,000 pages of evidence. But what it wants is not what it is going to get.

Many sub-groups within the media (and politics) may quite legitimately not care a fig about that. Some have been pursuing Clinton since he emerged from the obscurity of the governor's mansion in Little Rock. They hate his "liberal" policies and his glib persona. They think him a bad lot, to be hounded down and exposed at almost *any* cost.

Others are less dedicatedly antipathetic. They thought that Ken Starr was probably going too far. They were alarmed about the process and the system. But they are, quite genuinely, sickened by the details of the sexual encounters and the legal evasions summoned by a trained lawyer to conceal them. These, in their book, are high crimes and misdemeanours. Time to go, a judgment carefully formed.

Crucially, however, neither the sealed hunters nor the increasingly sickened form a majority of the pack. They are a minority within their own small world, just as they are a minority within the greater spread of the United States.

TWO more sub-sections. The politicians — for all their prating about sacred responsibilities and the majestic duty to administer even-handed justice, have rapidly done the predictable thing: divided along narrow political lines. The Republicans are gambling on electoral advantage to come. Well, they would, wouldn't they?

But what of the legions of the non-partisan; the reporters and producers and analysts just following the story, just doing their job? Why do they, in every question, every soundbite, seem so damnably eager? Why do they keep invoking Watergate (as though seedy fumbles between consenting adults were the 90s equivalent of burgling, bugging and the subversion of federal agencies)? Why do they perpetually recycle the leaks — good, bad and loony — of legal "insiders" as though they were fact, not a sometimes vicious spin on reality? Why, this morning, are they strayed alongside the Republicans on the committee who wish to pour every word and every picture on to the great dissemination of the Net?

What makes them think that they have got it right, and that the public's right not to know, clearly manifested, counts for nothing? This is another sort of gamble. If Newt Gingrich and Henry Hyde have got it wrong, they'll pay when elections come around. But the media stands at no elections; the damage it does to itself will not be so easily expunged.

The video we'll have a chance to see in a few hours may or may not portray a snarling president on the ropes. The TV newscasters talking of "bombshells" and "nails in coffins" have not seen it. They parrot what the friends of Starr and their mates on the Judiciary Committee say. They haven't read the 2,800 pages of damning this or damning that.

This isn't the journalism they talk about piously in other forums. It is a gallop in search of a given solution: the guy's a disgrace and he has to be got rid of somehow. If the public disagrees, the public is deluded. Clinton must be brought down because everyone who's endorsed his demise will look a trifle foolish if he survives.

But the issues are rather different. If Clinton is the crusader of decline, then the Republicans's business would be greatly changed: as Jefferson, FDR or GW. If lying about it is a "high crime", then the divorce courts would be a fast track to the cross.

Impeachment is not a flippant exercise. It is the most profound overturning of the will of the electorate, twice clearly expressed. And it requires a fundamental seriousness of purpose, a basic echoing of the legal imperative: innocent until proved guilty. Today is something else. Everybody knows, or says, Clinton is a liar. He'd been through the mincer of prosecution questioning for four hours. Lewinsky is a liar. She junked the story she first told under oath, then told another in uncannily commodious denial. No one has had the chance to mince her in the dock. Why did she keep that dress for two-and-a-half years? How much will she make from her touted book? There is no chance to ask the questions, because the name of the game is summary injustice.

There is a case, sure enough, for impeachment. There is a case, after the mid-term elections, for hearings in the House of Representatives where the evidence may be cried and subject to cross-examination. But there is no case at all for this week's bad cause, which is the dumping of everything in the public domain as a spectacle in embarrassment. Intended — at last — to make the people change their minds.

Congress is the judge and jury here. That's what the constitution says. No forced resignation without representation. No insistent cacophony designed to produce an instant result. Of course the Republicans want that. But why are the journalists tagging along, bent on willing the end by any means? They will regret it soon enough. And so shall we.

American opinion doesn't want to see that allegedly squirming video

Dog day afternoon

Endpiece

Roy Hattersley

THE idea came to me in what is called a flash — an explosion of unexpected and unencountered inspiration. At the time when lightning struck, I had just finished a hot and happy hour talking about last year's book and I was walking in the Hay on Wye sunshine towards the Festival beer tent. Festival audiences are kind. So I was lulled into a false and dangerous sense of well-being.

The young lady who approached me reeked with sincerity. "You are," she said, "my literary hero. As journalist I most admire in all the world." Despite the implausibility of her generations, I still did not recognise her as a phoney. Indeed, I put my head on one side like an attentive (if and usually large) sparrow and waited for more well-informed lit crit. Although I was not disappointed, I was distressed. For she went on to say, "I hope you're not dumbing down. I hear you have written a book about your dog. What happened to the great novelist?"

I was about to tell her that the great novelist was alive and well and would return to fiction as soon as he could find a large supply of old-fashioned, quick-drying Tipp-Ex, when Antony Howard — a long-standing friend who takes a depressingly professional interest in me since becoming obsolete — called out from the crowd. "Look at Trollope," he said. "Even The Evening Standard Londoner's Diary." It was then that I established what John F Kennedy — writing about being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine — called grace under pressure. Pulling my great novelist's face, I replied: "If Virginia Woolf can do it, I can do it."

The extraordinary aspect of that answer had nothing to do with the fact that I have never read Flush. I talk about dozens of books that I have never read. But I have barely heard of the title story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning as told by her dog. Perhaps I hoped I thought it when, three years ago, I visited the house in which the poet died. On one of the walls there was a picture of Mrs B hugging a spaniel. At the point of exposition, I had a vague recollection the first time in three decades that Flush came into my thoughts. Yet it popped out of my mind at just the right moment. I gave thanks not to the gods who watch over gossip column victims but to Buster. He has made me think dog.

If, in my dogless days, you had whispered pre-Raphaelite in my ear, I would have responded, "Light of the World." Not now. Clearly the best of all the brotherhood's work is "Order for Release" in which the wounded Jacobite is reunited with the dog he left behind when he fled to the Hanoverian jail. She has also brought him dog. It is, in the words of the training manuals, "trained off" a habit which disciplined dogs rather than people jump up. When I get home from America, his paws will punch me in the groin as soon as I walk in. And I will love it

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voted wife who has brought his garden to the Hanoverian jail. She has also brought him dog. It is, in the words of the training manuals, "trained off" a habit which disciplined dogs rather than people jump up. When I get home from America, his paws will punch me in the groin as soon as I walk through the door. And I will love it.

Buster has changed my view of literature as well as of art. These days, Bill Sykes' brutality towards Nancy seems a trivial offence as compared with his treatment of Bullseye. My sympathy for the Spanish civil war republicans is diminished every time I recall how little homage they paid to their Catalonian hound — least according to George Orwell. How could Huxley have created a character who dropped a Pekinese out of an aeroplane? Owsley's a dog who has excited a new sort of sympathy in me. The dog-deprived may call it sentimentality, but however it is described, it means that I support the hound of the Baskervilles rather than Sherlock Holmes.

There is no doubt that, as works of art, books that lack canine interest are incomplete. Howard's End should have had a couple of Labradors in the garden. The Nottingham miners were surely not so preoccupied with their sons and lovers that they had no time for whippet racing. John Le Carré's secret agents would have possessed extra emotional depth if, before they were smuggled into the Soviet Union, they had agonised about leaving their terriers in kennels. The Right Stuff should not have paid tribute to the first men in space without making clear that a dog had made the journey 10 years earlier.

Buster's Diaries — written with me as Boswell to his Johnson — does not claim to redress the literary balance. Nor does it offer a dog's eye view on questions which are none of a literary dog's business. Buster has no opinion on the single European currency. And he does not pass judgment on President Clinton's conduct and character. He simply describes the difficulties of owning a man and teaching him to behave in a way which does not upset the neighbours. I suppose that it has a happy ending. In a little less than three years, he has managed to get me more or less under control. After all, I did not bite the young lady from The Evening Standard's Londoner's Diary.

Buster's Diaries is published by Little Brown.

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