
THE TABLET

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NOW GIVE PEACE A REAL CHANCE

The midterm elections in the United States produced what amounted to an overwhelming vote of no confidence in President George Bush's administration, particularly its policy on Iraq. It is much less clear what a viable alternative policy would look like, however, and the Democratic Party, which took control of both congressional Houses from the Republicans, is united only in wanting an early end to the present painful mess. Much the same applies in Britain. What both countries are seeking, without really saying so, is a convincing strategy for an early withdrawal that can be represented as something other than a total failure. With presidential elections now only two years away, that factor is likely to prove crucial in Washington.

But less so in Britain, where an impending change of prime minister gives the Government a unique opportunity to dump unwanted baggage without too much loss of face. Furthermore, the fact that Mr Bush is now looking for fresh options means the British can do so too without breaking ranks. Tony Blair's proposal that a dialogue over Iraq's future be opened with Syria and Iran would have been so contrary to the way Washington was thinking two years ago as to be unsayable, but goes almost unremarked into the policy melting pot now.

Iraq was supposed to be the regional model of human rights and democracy that would undermine the despotic regimes in those two countries from within. Now they are being asked to help America out of a deep hole, which must mean, in the case of Iran, that a toughening of the Western approach to that country's nuclear programme is no longer opportune.

Iran and Syria are bound to demand as a price for their cooperation not only a cessation of hostile rhetoric towards them but also a reversal in Mr Bush's laissez-faire attitude to Israel, which has hitherto allowed Ehud Olmert's Government to deal with the intransigent militancy of Hamas and Hezbollah however he likes. From now on Britain should lose no opportunity to say to both Israel and America that there will be no peace in the Middle East as long as they remain in denial over UN Resolution 242, which demands an Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 boundaries.

Ever since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the first signs of resistance to occupation, it has been hard for the American and British Governments to decide whether their presence in Iraq was making things worse or better. Britain knows from its colonial past that withdrawal of a stabilising outside force often leads to war rather than peace, at least in the first instance. But holding a foreign civil war at bay, with mounting casualties and growing damage to troop morale, is not something that domestic public opinion can support for very long. Seeing this, both sides step up their pressure to drive the intruder out – the better to get at each other's throats. The Iraqi insurgents must regard this strategy as fully vindicated by the American elections.

But the bigger sea change, ceasing to regard either Israel or Iraq as outposts in America's misdescribed "global war on terror", is as yet far off. It still seems to be the only tune Mr Bush knows how to sing. At least from now on London should stop offering him a chorus.

DANGER OF GROWING PARANOIA

Bishops of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church meeting together from time to time, as they did in Leeds this week, seems such an obvious idea that it is surprising it has not happened before. This coming together of the bishops of England may be a recognition that theological convergence between the two Churches has gone as far as it can – indeed, now faces new difficulties – and that "doing ecumenism" needs inventing. They are dealing with a society that gives the impression, perhaps misleadingly, of becoming aggressively secular. There is a temptation to circle the wagons against the foe outside.

"There is a strong tendency by commentators to try to make religion a private affair and that is something that should be resisted," said Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, added: "We must stand together to show that Christians are part of the solution, not the problem." Thus they endorsed a diagnosis that has achieved something of a Church consensus in recent months – that secularist forces in society, by virtue of being over-represented among the media, have been allowed to punch above their weight. The point was made last year in a submission by leaders of faith communities to the House of Lords Select Committee on BBC Charter Renewal, which declared: "The BBC ought not to see the world entirely through the prism of the metropolitan liberal and secular elite's values which inevitably inform the editorial process for the majority of the programme makers." Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, said recently that the BBC was dominated by the "chattering

classes" who "saw themselves as holding the flag for Britain, and that Britain is definitely secular and atheist".

Clerical irritation is similarly and rightly directed at public bodies, which claim it is discriminatory, and offensive to other religions, to behave as if Christianity was the official religion of the country – though it is. The growing refusal to acknowledge that Christmas is a Christian religious festival is the sort of municipal or commercial silliness that would give political correctness a bad name, were that possible. The desire not to give offence would be admirable were it not based on wilful ignorance. Anybody who actually asked members of minority faiths if they object to Christianity holding a special place in British culture would be laughed at. Hindus embrace Christmas as a local festival they can share in. Muslims celebrate the birth of Jesus as their second most senior prophet. The Chief Rabbi no less is a zealous defender of the Establishment of the Church of England; and so on.

But the bishops need to be careful: to be carried away by anti-secular paranoia would do them no good. It would be better to ask the chattering classes out to dinner than to scoff at them; better to offer the BBC convincing representatives of Christianity with something important to say than lob brickbats over some supposed secular/religious brick wall. The Churches can ask to be judged, as former Home Secretary Charles Clarke judged them in an excellent speech on Wednesday, by their contribution to the welfare of society, which, as he acknowledged, is vast. Most non-religious people – and he is one – can see that for themselves.