

Silencing the British People: The Legacy of Thatcherism and the Iraq War

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It is often said that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. If a person or a group of people has the power to do as they wish without fear of having to answer for their actions in any meaningful manner, would they feel obligated to listen to those who protest against their actions? Would they feel that those with less power than their own are worthy of being heard?

Since the War on Terror began, Britain has followed the example set by the US, clamping down on civil liberties, protest and dissent. Not all actions taken in this regard have been related to the alleged threat of Islamic terrorism; some have come about through a need to alter a historical narrative, some have come about through chances offered by legal fallout, some have come about in order to keep an agenda on track, and so on. Below are some examples of such moments in the recent history of Britain, where chances to silence, or at the very least, downplay dissent have been seized upon with gusto by the British elite.

The Iraq War: Anti-War Protests and the September Dossier

February 2003 saw the largest political protest in British history. An estimated two million Britons took to the streets of London as part of a wider global movement to march against the looming Iraq war. The protest united people of all ages, ethnicities, faiths and political persuasions. The noise was deafening. A rolling forest of placards and flags covered the streets around the heart of the British capital, calling for peace. In places, parts of the route became so packed with marchers that movement slowed to a standstill.

The establishment's response to the march was to ignore it. Then Prime Minister Tony Blair, a disciple of Margaret Thatcher, was elected by a landslide in 1997. He dominated the British political landscape, and apparently became so used to getting his own way that he felt that the concerns of the protestors bore no consideration as his government continued to plan their attack against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Blair, with the backing of the media, had done everything possible to sell the Iraq War to the British public, a highlight of which was the now infamous September Dossier. The dossier, among other things, alleged that Hussein would have been able to attack Europe with his fictitious arsenal of weapons of mass destruction within forty-five minutes of the order being given.

On a related note, there is the case of Dr David Kelly. Kelly was a Ministry of Defence biological warfare expert and former United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq who came to public notice in July 2003 when he was revealed to be the source cited in a report by BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan. The report alleged that the dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had been 'sexed up', and that British intelligence were concerned about some of the claims made.

Kelly's name became public knowledge as he was questioned aggressively regarding his role in Gilligan's report in a televised hearing by Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee on July 15th, an experience which caused him great stress. The following day, he was questioned by the Intelligence and Security Committee. The day after, Kelly apparently took his own life near his home in Oxfordshire.

Following Kelly's death, the Blair Government set up the Hutton Inquiry, the conclusion of which would be that Kelly had indeed committed suicide. Lord Hutton also decided that the evidence, including photos of Kelly's body, were to remain classified for seventy years, a decision that raised suspicions of a cover-up. Hutton would later claim that he took this decision to spare Kelly's family any further grief through media reports, and not because there was something to hide. Many dismiss Hutton's explanation for his actions, and suspect that the Hutton Inquiry was little more than a whitewash, covering for the assassination of Kelly, a man who dared to offer a glimpse into just how far the Blair Government was willing to go to push Britain into what would prove to be one of the most horrific wars of recent decades.

G20, London 2009

The G20 summit held in London in 2009 gave us another glimpse into the utter contempt the elites of Britain have for dissenting voices. Demonstrators were kept well away from those they wanted to be heard by, while the mainstream media downplayed their presence, using the classic tactic of reporting attendance figures well below the actual numbers.

The media were also there to capitalise on the result of systematic provocation and violence from the Metropolitan Police, the desired outcome being that the protestors would respond with equal force, allowing them to be vilified further. This brutality from the Met demonstrated neatly the Us vs. Them mentality instilled in the Police force, a necessary mechanism to keep the Police serving the establishment. It also led to the death of Ian Tomlinson, an uninvolved passer-by who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

His death and the subsequent inquiry paints a very telling picture. Video footage of a police officer, PC Simon Harwood, attacking Tomlinson without provocation, eye witness testimony of Harwood's apparent lust for violence that day, which included assaulting a BBC cameraman shortly before he attacked Tomlinson and motive demonstrated by Harwood's attempt to conceal his identity, were apparently not enough to convict a member of the British Police for crimes committed. And it is not as outlandish as it may initially seem to predict that were a civilian being investigated for such actions, there would be no doubt that the defendant would be convicted. And were the roles reversed, and the victim a police officer, an example would be made of the defendant through the sentence passed down.

The reason for this appalling lack of justice is very simple. The political class of Britain need the Police. If convictions for violence against protestors and, in this case, random civilians, are a possibility, then the Police will be less eager to act in such a way for fear of prosecution. This will then derail the attempts to provoke protestors so that they can be smeared by the media. And as an interesting side note, initially, the Police claimed to be pelted with bottles by protestors as they attempted to aid Tomlinson, a claim shown untrue by video footage.

The Legacy of Margaret Thatcher

Cut to the present day, and, with the death of Margaret Thatcher, and disgruntled Brits seized upon the opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the legacy left behind by the so-called Iron Lady. The method of protest chosen by some was to throw a party. Many will say this was distasteful, but with Thatcher's penchant for backing some of the most brutal, murderous dictators and regimes of the Cold War, not to mention domestic policies that gutted Britain of jobs, wealth, social services, infrastructure and a critical sense of community, all in the name of furthering the Friedmanite free market ideology, it is hardly surprising many were pleased to see her go.

Perhaps the most innovative way in which much of Britain showed its distaste for Thatcher was to try to propel the song 'Ding Dong The Witch Is Dead' from the Wizard of Oz to the top of the music charts. The BBC, hosting the music chart show, decided that it would only play a five second clip of the song in an effort to avoid offending anyone.

But perhaps this attempt to avoid offending those saddened to see the back of a woman who supported Apartheid in both South Africa and Israel can be seen in another light. It is, after all, a good way to downplay the anti-Thatcher sentiment. The song doesn't get the full air time, and those who sought to make the song number one can be painted as distasteful and classless by right wing pundits and frowning news readers.

The problem with this move is, however, is that sometimes, when you ban something or try to marginalise it, it becomes all the more attractive to those you are trying to keep it from. The BBC may have only played five seconds, but that would not have stopped people going to YouTube and watching a video featuring the song. But with the British Right and Pseudo-Left united in their grief over the loss of a woman who paved the way for the war crimes of Tony Blair, the City of London-centric policies of Gordon Brown, and the disastrous anti-working class austerity measures of David Cameron, George Osborne, and Nick Clegg, the BBC cannot be seen to be going against the grain and actually giving angry working class Brits their voice with any degree of parity to the sycophantic tributes from Thatcher's fellow upper crust neoliberals and working class flag wavers who appear blinded to Thatcher's assault on British society by the Falklands War and the IRA. Once again, one is reminded that you can never underestimate how useful an enemy is to an authoritarian government when it comes to fooling vast swathes of the electorate into backing ludicrous policies.

The Fight Against Independent Media

So while the British establishment may be well practiced at playing down and marginalising people with an alternative point of view, they are not able to stop people from having this view. They are trying, let there be no doubt about it. In the aftermath of the recently concluded Leveson Inquiry, ridiculously open-ended laws have been brought forward, allegedly designed to reign in Britain's gutter press. But bloggers in Britain, providing a refreshing and much needed counterbalance to the narrative provided by corporate and state controlled media in the UK, are under threat of huge penalties if they fail to tow the line as well. The nature of the language in the new legislation screams misuse in the near future, so open to interpretation it is.

Walter Cronkite once said - 'Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy, it is democracy.'

Well, Britain likes to call itself a democracy, yet the state of said British democracy looks bleak indeed. Independent media is slowly being stifled. Nice, orderly protests by

'respectable' (read; tame) Britons are ignored or hijacked by the mainstream media and politicians posing as the opposition. Protests by those looked down upon as 'fringe' or 'extremist' by the establishment are attacked by the police. And when frustration at being robbed, abused, exploited and ignored boils over into violence, then it is those who have been wronged who are painted as the villains.

But who is the villain? Those who see wrong in the world around them and try to speak out? Or those who, by comparison, have everything, yet still lie, steal, corrupt and destroy entire nations for profit and power?

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