

Reject the law of silence

Can you imagine the BBC apologising to a rogue regime that practises racism and ethnic cleansing; that has “effectively legalised the use of torture” (Amnesty); that holds international law in contempt, having defied hundreds of UN resolutions and built an apartheid wall in defiance of the International Court of Justice; that has demolished thousands of people’s homes and given its soldiers the right to assassinate; and whose leader was judged “personally responsible” for the massacre of more than 2,000 people?

Can you imagine the BBC saying sorry to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or other official demons, for broadcasting an uncensored interview with a courageous dissident of that country, a man who spent 19 years in prison, mostly in solitary confinement? Of course not.

Yet last month, the BBC apologised “confidentially” to a regime with such a record, so that its correspondent would be allowed back, having promised to abide by a system of censorship that continues to gag the dissident. The regime is Ariel Sharon’s in Israel, whose war crimes, appalling human rights record and enduring lawlessness continue to be granted a certificate of exemption not only by the US-dominated west but by respectable journalism. The Blair government’s collusion with the Sharon gang is reflected in the BBC’s “balanced” coverage of a repression described by Nelson Mandela as “the greatest moral issue of the age”. Simon Wilson, the correspondent made to apologise for a proper, important and long-overdue interview with Mordechai Vanunu, will know better in future.

That is hardly new. Pressure applied to the BBC by the Israel “lobby” has been so successful that, as a Glasgow University study revealed, many viewers of television news in Britain believe the Jewish “settlers”, whose illegal and often violent squatting on Palestinian land has undermined hopes of real peace, are actually Palestinians. What is new is the extent to which insidious state propaganda has penetrated sections of the media whose independence has been,

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until recently, accepted by much of the public.

To appreciate this, one applies the Law of Opposites and the Law of Silence. The Law of Opposites can be applied to almost any news broadcast these days. The long-awaited death of the Pope is a case in point. By reversing the river of drivel about him – “the people’s Pope” (almost universal), “the man who changed history” (Bush), “a shining example . . . revered across all faiths and none” (Blair) – you have the truth. This deeply reactionary man held back history and destroyed lives all over the world with his fanatical opposition to basic decencies such as birth control. He called this “abominable”, spitting the word out, and so condemned millions, from starving infants to babies born with Aids. In Latin America, he publicly humiliated courageous priests whose “preference for the poor” dared to cross the medieval hierarchy he upheld. The claim that he “brought down communism” is also the opposite of the truth. As I learned when I reported his papal return to his native Poland in 1979, the Catholic Church in that country, whose conservatism he embodied, was a scheming bedfellow of the Stalinist regime until the wind changed.

The Law of Opposites can be applied to the current government/media fashion for saving Africa known as the Year of Africa. The BBC has hosted a special conference about this, just as Blair will host the G8 summit in July with “eradicating Africa’s poverty” as its theme. This is “Britain’s big chance”, wrote Polly Toynbee in the Guardian, “to engage the rich with debt relief, aid, fair trade, carbon emissions and Aids-crippled Africa”. She added: “On debt and trade, Labour has done well.”

The opposite is true. Like the rest of the impoverished world, African countries qualify for Gordon Brown’s enlightenment only if they agree to impose on their people the deadly strictures of the World Trade Organisation, the IMF and the World Bank – such as the destruction of tariffs protecting sustainable economies and the privatising of water and other natural resources. At the same time, they are “encouraged” to buy weapons from British arms companies, especially if they have a civil war under way or there is a tension with a neighbour.

The Law of Silence is applied to crimes committed not by official demons – Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic et al – but by western governments. An Australian Broadcasting Corporation correspondent, Eric Campbell, recently promoting a book of his adventures, described the broadcast “coverage” of the war in Iraq. “Live satellite is a travesty,” he said. “Basically, if [the reporters] are on satellite, they haven’t seen anything. The correspondent is read the stories from the wire and told that is what they have to say on air – that’s in the majority of cases.”

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That may help to explain why the horror of the American attack on Fallujah has yet to be reported by all the major broadcasters. By contrast, independent journalists such as Dahr Jamail have reported doctors describing the slaughter by US marines of civilians carrying white flags. This slaughter was videotaped, including the killing of most of a family of 12. One witness described how his mother had been shot in the head and his father through the heart, and how a six-year-old boy standing over his dead parents, crying, was shot dead. None of this has appeared on British television. When asked, a BBC spokesperson said: “The conduct of coalition forces has been examined at length by BBC programmes.” That is demonstrably untrue.

Similarly, the Law of Silence applies to the likely American attack on Iran. Scott Ritter, the UN weapons inspector who in 1999 disclosed that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction and was thereafter virtually blackballed, has recently revealed that, according to a Pentagon official, Iran will be attacked in June. Again, Ritter has been ignored by most of the media. As Bush’s and Blair’s “democracy is on the march in the Middle East” propaganda is reported uncritically, the Law of Silence applies to the Bush regime’s campaign to subvert and overthrow Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. President Chavez is arguably the most democratically elected leader in Latin America, if not the world (nine elections), and his own “preference for the poor” has diverted the proceeds of the world’s fourth-biggest oil supplier to the majority of Venezuelans.

Last year, I did a long interview with Jeremy Bowen, a BBC reporter I admire, for a programme about war correspondents. Although I guessed that what was really wanted were my tales of journalistic derring-do on the front line, I set about describing how journalists often produced veiled propaganda for western power – by accepting “our” version or by omitting the unpalatable, such as the atrocities of western state terrorism: a major taboo. I emphasised that this censorship was not conspiratorial, but often unconscious, even subliminal; such was our training and grooming. My contribution did not appear.

John Pilger’s film Stealing a Nation, about the expulsion of the people of Diego Garcia, has won the Royal Television Society’s award for best documentary on British television in 2004-2005