

DEATH TV AND DEMOCRACY



It is his enemies, rather than his friends, who have to speak out against the hanging of Saddam Hussein. Saddam was a tyrant and was brutal, but it is too easy to say that he only received the same treatment his regime gave to thousands of others. It is too easy to say his abusers only treated him in the way his own executioners worked. It is too easy to say nothing at all. Those of us who opposed him when he was the West's great ally in the struggle against Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, had wanted him tried on a large number of crimes. But the trial should have been in The Hague, before an international court, not in Iraq, in a process that was always a hanging looking for a trial.

My objections to the Prime Minister's silence about Saddam's execution have nothing to do with closet sympathies for the old tyrant.

It is about the morally vacuous position this leaves Britain in. The Prime Minister can express outrage at attacks on his friends, sadness at the death of television characters and compassion for injured celebrities. But he cannot condemn an execution when Britain's whole international stance is supposed to oppose the death penalty. This is about the defence of a principle not a person.

In the end, it is the silences that do us most damage. When Israel bombed the Lebanon to bits last year, Tony Blair could not bring himself to call for a ceasefire. Craig Murray, our Ambassador to Uzbekistan, warned that people were being tortured (and boiled in oil) at the say so of President Islam Karimov. The response was to recall the Ambassador rather than embarrass a 'friend' in the region.

The truth about moral positions is that you only get to see how deep they go when tested in adversity. Defending your friends and attacking your enemies is easy. But can you do the opposite when the same principle is at stake? Blair cannot. He is a man of easy virtue. When the chips are down he will stick by his allies rather than his principles. What you are left with is the politics of convenience and a morality that is tacky.

Saddam's hanging, and his own dignified part in it, risks turning a tyrant into a martyr. It also throws up huge ambiguities that have yet to be thought through. The charge he was convicted on was the execution of 148 (Shi'ite) Iraqis in the village of Dujayl in 1982. This followed their own trial for involvement in plans to assassinate him. The current Iraqi government executes the same number of people on a daily basis, for their attempts to overthrow the regime. Whether anyone will ever be tried for these offences is another matter.

The trial itself was a farce. Saddam was kept for a year before being given access to lawyers. Three of his lawyers were assassinated. Those who survived only received prosecution evidence at the last minute. The judge in charge of the case was changed on four occasions in the most blatant of government interference. And before the trial ended you had the bizarre spectacle of President al-

Maliki promising a hanging that was supposed to help the Bush mid-term election campaign.

For all these shortcomings, I would still have settled for a conviction if Saddam had been incarcerated in a safe prison somewhere else outside Iraq. Why? Because there were other crimes that Saddam needed to be tried for. Everyone knew this, and it was the real reason why the US and UK wanted him dead.

Saddam was not tried on any charges that would have allowed him to spill the beans on his special relationship with the West. His regime collaborated with the West from the Thatcher/Reagan years onwards. We were the biggest exhibitors at his annual Baghdad arms fair. When he gassed the Kurds, the satellite information for targeting was almost certainly supplied by the US and half of his equipment came from either the US or the UK.

These were the inconvenient truths that the West wanted Saddam to take to the grave with him. This is why the trial charges were constructed so that no such information would come out.

By colluding with an execution and by turning this into a reality-TV, celebrity event, the West has also given perverse endorsement of other public executions that will follow.

I worked intensely with the family of Ken Bigley, trying to secure his release in Iraq. Throughout the process, the messages we were feeding back through contacts in the Middle East was that the public execution of hostages, after trumped up 'trials' by their captors, only served to alienate public opinion. Now, though, we have given warring factions the green light to do exactly as we have done.

Of course neither Bush nor Blair themselves slipped on the noose or released the trap door. But have no doubt that there would have been no execution if either had said 'no'. Iraq's puppet regime is nothing if not compliant with the wishes of its occupying masters.

Perversely we may also have given the last word to Saddam. As his executioner told him to "go to hell", Saddam's reply was that hell was now Iraq. This will be Blair's Middle East legacy. Perhaps that, too, is best contemplated in silence.