

## LOST IN THE MORAL AMAZE



WELCOME to 1994, a world in which over 20 million people live without a country they can call their own; where, even distanced from the refugee crisis, Britain starts the year with three million children living in poverty, spiralling crime figures and with a decision to start a nuclear waste reprocessing programme (Thorp) which could turn out to be our own Nightmare on Elm Street for the next 1,000 years. So, what issue dominates the political agenda, as Parliament reconvenes? SEX.

Far be it from me to stand in the way of a Conservative government on the skids. As one "scandal" follows another and ministers fall like nine pins, national newspapers are having to consider midday editions just to keep pace. But let me offer a world of caution — moral panics do not make for good government.

Don't mistake this as a defence of the minister involved. I simply want to put the issues into a larger perspective.

We have a government that has been "bonking" Britain for almost 15 years. Why are we surprised when this surfaces at a personal as well as a collective level? The Government has had its way with the pits, public transport, council house building, education, pensions, manufacturing industry, jobs and health. No question of a Child Support Act to make them pay for these sort of acts of fecklessness and irresponsibility. It will be left to other generations to rebuild the confidence and self worth of the damaged child we have all become.

We disconnect this morality in the large from morality in the small, only at our peril. That is why I can't get too worked up over the clamour for ministerial resignations and purges. It is the presumption that it would somehow make a difference; that to take a snake out of a nest full of vipers wouldn't still leave you with a sack full of snakes.

Perhaps none of this would have assumed the proportions it has done if the Government hadn't gone out of its way to assume the moral high ground over family life, and to pillory single parent families in particular.

There can have been few cruder examples of Victorian Values than Tim Yeo's claim that his child was different; it would not be a burden on the state, as he had the money to pay.

On this basis sex education begins and ends with the bank manager. If your account is healthily in credit then you can do what you like elsewhere. If not... tough. This version of back to basics still treats children (and everyone else) as affordable commodities and little else. So where does this leave people who bring up children on precious little apart from a Fort Knox full of love?

Perhaps it would be helpful if we began from some humbler starting points. One of these would be the

recognition that it is hard for anyone to claim to be the party of the family and support Parliament as it is.

Parliament is the most anti-family institution you could wish for. Whose children or partner wants to see them when they return from work at 2am? What relationships can be built up around evenings in which even London MPs can't take their kids to the pictures because they don't know whether there will be a vote at 7pm, 8.30pm or 10pm? What are the family virtues of lurching between the crazy world of Parliament and weekends of constituency engagements?

The job that an MP does worst of all is to give their own children the time they are entitled to expect. A more sensible system of government might make for more sensible ways of relating to each other.

A second pointer for a more sensible beginning involves a change of meaning. There is no point in defining the family in narrow and mythological terms. Only in the last couple of decades have we begun to face up to the fact that family, for large numbers of people, was a bleak and brutal experience.

We ought not to make a virtue out of living in a violent, two-parent, household. Nor should we denigrate those who try to be decent parents in single, separate or unconventional households. We ought to be celebrating the extent to which, despite living in the most destructive and demanding of times, people still retain the ability to offer love, protection and mutual support for each other.

What is the point of a purge against a minister when we leave the Child Support Agency intact; when its pursuit of those who have been attempting to be decent parents disregards the catastrophes they create, disregards the interests of the child and operates only as a trawl for the Treasury coffers? What are the virtues in attacking women (and men) who can live together in kindness, whilst pretending that normal couples whose lives are etched through with anger and aggression are somehow better?

If there is a back to basics campaign worth running, then let's begin with the basics of a home, a job, a living wage, a sense of worth, hope and something more than sham opportunities.

I would hate to live in a world stripped of passion and conviction. But, even more, I would hate one driven by a new moralism from the Tory backwoods. The last thing we need now is the same hatreds, greed and contempt for people and the planet, given a veneer of godliness.