Chapter 3

Demoralizing Britain: Ten Years of Depoliticization

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Introduction

In many ways Tony Blair's exit was as typically 'New Labour' as his ten years of leadership had been. In his resignation speech to his constituency in Sedgefield, the rhetoric of grand vision was mixed with personal, 'hand on heart' morality. By way of summarizing the challenges of his premiership he extolled the virtue of 'doing what you genuinely believe to be right . . . to act according to your conviction'. Over the decision to invade Iraq in particular, 'I ask you to accept one thing. Hand on heart, I did what I thought was right.'[1] Should we view this approach with suspicion? For Blair to declare that he did what he thought was right at the time is both banally true and ethically without content. It tells us only that he did what he *wanted to do* given the ethical norms that inform his decisions. It is those norms we should wish to investigate, not the sincerity by which Tony Blair adopts them. The media, of course, have been complicit in drawing attention predominantly to Tony, the man, the moral individual. Thus the Observer's Andrew Marr could speak of the 'moral courage' of Blair's decision to bomb Serbia in 1999. Sion Simon in the Telegraph similarly could call that same war 'the most heroically disinterested intervention in history. . . . This was a uniquely philanthropic war. . . . Blair is now a war leader . . . resolute, decent, brave.'[2] On his leaving, no matter what people had made of his policy decisions, Blair was, in words expressed by many contributors to this volume, a 'passionate' politician; moved by 'moral conviction' (Elaine L. Graham); a natural 'activist' (Paul Vallely) and a 'role model' for young aspiring politicians (Will Hutton). This emphasis on the morality of the individual is definitive of discussions over New Labour's 'faith' and 'morals'. It is a highly significant intervention, since it appeals to one of the very facets of political style which features as a constant critique of New Labour. The media gushing over Blair's moralism demonstrates very clearly, in other words, a preference for presentation over substance. For how else might we actually judge Blair's self belief than by hearing his passionate voice and being swept along in the

praise of its delivery? It represents an appeal to the value of the *private* in lieu of evoking any faith in the *public.*

It may well be impossible to judge Blair on whether the decreases in voter turnouts since he took power are attributable to him personally. But it *is* possible to show that this trend highlights a steadily diminishing sphere of public political engagement. If political disinterestedness is, as Gerry Stoker would have us believe, part of a generally chaotic democratic 'environment',[3] then New Labour is at very least a pioneer of that chaos. For the consequence is what is becoming more popularly termed a system of 'depoliticization', or in other words, the removal of the political from the public sphere. The following study offers some aspects of New Labour's role in these transformations. Of particular interest to me is New Labour's rhetoric of defending freedom and civil liberties in its war against fundamentalist ideologies. There is now a formidable and widespread critique of New Labour's erosion of precisely those liberties since it came to power. For all the encouragement that is offered citizens to 'make democracy work', therefore, we must never forget the huge efforts made by government to prevent this from happening. I offer some evidence for this by highlighting two aspects of the past ten years of depoliticization: the privatization of norms of citizenship; and the criminalization of protest and dissent. Lastly, I offer some suggestions for a further debate on how these relate to a crisis of 'faith' in political life. I argue that today the political is privatized much in the way that religious belief, under the pretext of protection from 'fundamentalism', has been over the past five years. Any dissenting voices, political or religious, that now make unwarranted incursions into the public sphere, that 'dare to take seriously their beliefs' to use Zizek's phrase,[4] are consequently a threat to democracy, not, as was once expressed by the authors of modern democracy, a guarantee of its existence.

Who can we blame for our loss of faith?

[Tony Blair] is the least political person I've dealt with. And I say that out of respect.
George W. Bush[5]

[Tony Blair] is taking the politics out of politics.

Roy Hattersley[6]

Political disaffection, particularly among young people, is today almost taken for granted in critiques of the contemporary 'health' of Western democracies. This is assumed of Blair's Britain as much as anywhere else. General election turnouts dropped dramatically after Labour's landslide victory, with 5 million less people voting in 2001 (59.4%) than had in 1997 (71.4%), and only 61.4% voting in 2005.[7] Party membership in the UK has halved since 1980.[8]

Commentators relish comparisons between the success of voting for reality TV shows like *Big Brother* with the poor turnouts for local and national elections.[9] But what do these statistics actually tell us about what 'politics' actually means to people? Equally common, for example, are the suggestions that the phenomenon of poor voter turnout does not necessarily imply that people in Britain are disengaged from politics. It means, to some, that new forms of engagement have emerged – for various reasons – to take the place of traditional forms of democracy. These typically include the rise of single issue campaign organizations, local community associations and internet-based forms of political interaction in the form of political blogs.[10]

While these observations no doubt have some truth in them, they fail to question how those alternative modes of political expression actually function as modes of participation. Might they not be themselves, for instance, acts of protest and critique at popular disenfranchisement from political life? When over one million people marched in London on 15 February 2003 to oppose war against Iraq, many lauded the event as a triumph for participative democracy. It led to the term 'Second Superpower' being coined by the *New York Times* in reference to the influence of global civil society. Madeleine Bunting of *The Guardian* was even moved to say that 'the decline of democracy has been overstated. What has changed is the pattern of participation; political parties and turnouts may be declining, but intense episodic political engagement is on the increase.'[11] The optimism may have been welcome, but today many look back to that event as symbolic of the new 'Superpower's' impotence, and with some reason. Blair not only ignored the demands of the protesters, but attacked them directly with his inimitable style of moralism. Protesters would have blood on their hands, he preached on the day of the largest public demonstration in British history, if they opposed military action.[12]

What, then, can we say about alternative modes of engagement by civil society outside of the ballot box? Are they born of hope, desperation or mere symbolism? What does it mean to be political in such a paradoxical climate of passion and disenfranchisement? Gerry Stoker has argued that while widespread mistrust of politics and politicians in the UK is commonly placed at the feet of Tony Blair, equal if not greater blame is also due to citizens' inability to use what is available to them. Citizens should not blame government, in other words, but themselves for not participating enough. For reasons that 'predate Blair',[13] critical engagement with politics in Britain is experienced through an environment of 'alienated disengagement'.[14] Stoker is clearly not alone in believing that Blair's government simply stumbled into a political climate of post-modern, disengaged political life. There is a widespread interest, for instance, in the changing face of democratic participation in an environment of media-driven cultural life. Such analyses shed some light on the government's obsession with 'managerial' approaches to policy changes as opposed

to the 'old style' of political polarization of political alternatives (such as left and right). As Malcolm Todd and Gary Taylor put it,

> Politics today has little in common with the passions and conflicts that have shaped people's commitments and hatreds over the past century. . . . This is the age of 'micro-politics'. Politics has adopted the language of technocracy and presents itself through a depoliticised language of managerialism.[15]

Stoker may thus be justified in discrediting arguments that the 'corruption' or 'economic incompetence' of individual politicians leads directly to a disengagement from mainstream politics.[16] He is also right to observe that Britain has seen a reduction of 'activist' political engagement to a minimum of protest and campaigning elites. To a large extent participation in contestational politics is fragmented and 'erratic', delegating responsibility and active critique to designated experts or lobbyists in 'an environment that seems capable of supporting only the most individualized and privatized forms of engagement.'[17] But does the legacy of New Labour not bear *any* responsibility for this state of affairs? Is it enough to declare that our erratic activist behaviour 'puts a burden on the political system and does little to build a wider sense of engagement in, or understanding of, a political process'?[18]

I would like to suggest in response that some trends in governance have been critical in the creation of this atomized political environment. Not only has it been instrumental in silencing 'deep' engagement with the subject of politics itself, but also its replacement with an illusory 'surface' effect of engagement within civil society. It is thus closely associated with the concept of depoliticization, defined by Peter Burnham as 'a process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making'.[19] Burnham makes the case with reference to New Labour's economic policy of market liberalization,[20] its shift towards decentralized 'micromanagement' and the appointment of an unprecedented number of non-governmental PR experts, advisers and lobbyists. In essence this has meant, Burnham argues, a 'reassignment of tasks away from the party in office to a number of ostensibly "non-political" bodies as a way of underwriting the government's commitment to achieving objectives'.[21] But depoliticization can also be seen as a more broadly *cultural* transformation: a strategy of removing questions of policy and governance from the arena of political engagement. Government may, in other words, give the impression of greater transparency at the same time as reducing the sphere of exchange between itself and the electorate. Depoliticization is also a principle of New Labour's political rhetoric. Timothy Bewes for instance observes the rhetoric of 'one nation' politics (not favouring any one section of society), the replacement of 'policies' with 'values' and the constant oscillation between the language of community and individual, rights and responsibilities, public and private.[22] We can talk of the 'removal of the political character of decision-making'

here because the sphere of political leverage, or polarization between positions (left and right, for instance) is simply removed, leaving only a managerial style, or the governance of appearances. New Labour were early pioneers of the manipulation of a 24-hour news culture, a style of news management that takes its cue from the market logic of the entertainment industry. In the context of the declining faith in electoral favour, it has meant only that politicians have become masters of 'infotainment'. They have achieved this by employing the experts of those industries which invented the very idea – PR companies, media management experts and other 'non-political actors' that lurk behind the scenes. Shouldn't an increase in communications experts lead to greater transparency and hence increased opportunity for popular engagement? There has, allegedly, been a 'tenfold rise in press officers to more than 3,200' in government since Blair came to power.[23] But it is the paradoxical 'dumbing down' process of the mainstream media *product* to a lowest common denominator that once again protects genuine political choice or authority from entering the domain of public participation. Given the global dominance of a handful of media corporations (in the UK, News Corporation owns BskyB, *The Times* and *The Sun* newspapers as well as its many international companies) it is little wonder that New Labour made a strategic decision to court their favour, principally by befriending Rupert Murdoch.[24]

The depoliticization process through dumbing down of political information is twofold. Not only is the status of the politician as the guardian of political truth greatly diminished, but the competence of the public is also vastly underestimated. This leads to dimmed expectations and the reduction of its role to a passive observer of the spectacle of social events. *Involvement* is replaced with *observation*. We can now know more than was ever possible about current affairs and government strategy, but do less than ever about it. It is also characteristic of a style of neo-liberal governance that seeks the relatively new terrain of 'commercial citizenship'. In a market economy governed more by unelected bodies such as the WTO, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, the role of the citizen and the expectations of his or her involvement in policy is necessarily tied to relations of public and private ownership. And if public life is increasingly dominated by the interests of private enterprise, the ability for people to intervene is confined to their consumer power. The result is a democracy of sorts, but we should define it not, as Stoker would like, simply to a politics that is 'tougher'[25] for being fragmented and chaotic, but to one that is essentially toothless. As Crouch more realistically puts it, today

> the mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests.[26]

Making politics history: How New Labour tamed the development movement

I am also fond of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. They are kind of the John and Paul of global development . . . Lennon and McCartney changed my interior world – Blair and Brown can change the real world.

Bono[27]

One of the redeeming moments for the state of political activism in Britain has been, Stoker claims, the 2005 Make Poverty History Campaign (MPH), which he says 'successfully brought the formal institutions of governance and the informal power of civil society together'.[28] Stoker is absolutely right to state that there are 'important lessons' that can be drawn from MPH, but for the opposite reasons to those he has in mind. For MPH, I will argue, is paradigmatic of the depoliticized form of political engagement introduced above. Looking in some detail at its organization therefore raises important questions about the scope of 'informal power' available to citizens. It also reveals the subtle but observable production of the *model activist*. The model activist is he or she who, by an extraordinary manipulation and mediatization of the function of civil society, comes to represent an image of the radical residue of government itself, rather than a democratic pressure upon it.

The MPH was officially launched in 2004 as the result of a series of meetings between charities, NGOs and campaign groups in Oxford wishing to formalize a UK wing of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. Their intention was an anti-poverty coalition that would coincide with the G8 summit in Scotland in 2005, the 5-year evaluation of the UN Millennium Development Goals, and the 20th anniversary of Live Aid.[29] On paper, at least, its progress from those humble beginnings represented an astonishing success. By 2005 MPH could boast 540 member organizations and the mobilization of a historic number of participants in its march in Edinburgh. Like the Jubilee 2000 campaign and, to an extent, the Stop the War Coalition, MPH was also significant for bringing to the campaigning table charities, NGOs, churches, trade unions, activists and politicians. And, at least in its original intent, it represented some relatively radical demands: MPH called for increased aid budgets, debt cancellation and fairer trade rules ('fair trade not free trade'). It also arguably forced the G8's rhetoric of change for Africa into popular discourse and scrutiny where before the economic analysis was the preserve of experts. Headed by the two celebrity heavyweights of development campaigns, Geldof and Bono, a star-studded cast of performers in London's Live 8 concert ensured global media coverage.

The white wrist-banded participants in MPH's march in Edinburgh 2005 could thus be forgiven for thinking at the time that they were taking part in an unprecedented incursion of civil society into the corridors of power. Sadly, its demands met a hollow reception at Gleneagles. As MPH itself admitted at

the time, the £25 billion promised in 'increased aid' was not new money but the same promised at finance ministers meetings a month before Gleneagles. Two years on we see how far those limited promises were kept, provoking even Geldof and Bono themselves into calling the 2007 G8 meeting in Germany a 'total farce'.[30] But even putting aside these quantitative failings of MPH's demands, what can be said of its mobilization of a million voices in the name of the poor across such diverse social boundaries? Was this not a direct answer to the charge of popular political apathy? The reality behind the image suggests a more cynical approach. Fronted by celebrities notorious for their allegiance to Blair and the G8, MPH organizers were clear from the start that their strategy was not so much a critique of their economic policies as a demand for more of what they were promised already with the added pressure that the world was watching (though many people, if they were honest, were really watching the historic Pink Floyd reunion). On these terms, unsurprisingly, MPH had the endorsement of New Labour, including Gordon Brown's own participation in the Edinburgh march. Big businesses set to profit from enterprises related to the G8's proposed 'structural adjustment programmes' were of course not ruffled either.[31]

Emphasizing that the biggest historic international mobilization against poverty was in essence a welcome to party to the Group of Eight wealthiest nations is extremely significant. It suggests that mainstream modes of registering disaffection are more like petitioning agencies than democratic voices of critique. Bruce Whitehead, a press officer for MPH put it unambiguously when he said of their 'big day':

> [ours] is not a march in the sense of a demonstration, but more of a walk . . . the emphasis is on fun in the sun. The intention is to welcome the G8 leaders to Scotland and ask them to deliver trade justice, debt cancellation and increased aid to developing countries.[32]

The essence of the strategy adopted by Bono and Geldof – to ensure influence over the G8 by keeping in their good books – may have been well intentioned. But the consequences for the possibility for restoring faith in critical, participative democracy in this country are damaging and far-reaching. MPH had clearly learnt nothing from the mistakes of Live Aid 20 years ago, now widely criticized for portraying Africa as the paradigm of misfortune and wretchedness. Live Aid required philanthropist Westerners to throw their money at them out of a sense of pity, not justice or basic human rights. Despite MPH's rhetoric this time not on giving money but on pressuring world leaders for political change, the sentiment had not changed. By legitimizing the G8 its sphere of action was bound to agendas set by rich nations. It is of no great surprise then, that MPH attracted immediate criticism from some of its potential beneficiaries in the global south. Despite Stoker's description of MPH as a truly 'bottom-up' campaign, starting

from the grass-roots voices, many southern campaign groups distanced themselves from the Global Call for Action Against Poverty itself. Kofi Maluwi Klu, international coordinator of Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign condemned its lack of southern consultation: 'The campaign is overwhelmingly led by Northern NGOs and its basic message is about white millionaire pop stars saving Africa's helpless. The political movement still fighting for liberation on the ground are completely erased.'[33] Anti-capitalist southern campaigners know only too well that the neo-liberal policies crippling Africa as much as debt had created an excuse for the entire northern development movement to wash its hands of the roots of the problem and create the illusion of instigating real 'grass-roots' change. MPH had transformed the energy of millions into a 'movement calling for the relaxation of the terms of oppression'.[34]

It should be clear that all of these criticisms of MPH strategy relate not only to its stated aims but to its self-decoration as a triumph for political participation. The deeper problem, in other words, with an event like MPH was that it used the legitimation bestowed by the established political order. Worse, it used this legitimacy to demarcate the proper sphere of protest for civil society. Bono and Geldof had, as George Monbiot pointed out, illegitimately assumed on behalf of millions of well-intentioned campaigners around the world the role of 'arbiters: determining on our behalf whether the leaders of the G8 nations should be congratulated or condemned for the decision they make'.[35] The damage for a truly radical development movement was thus twofold: First, a genuine critique of power, by delegitimizing the power of the hegemony of the G8 through political gestures have been culled. Second, the G8 themselves won a captured audience for their own PR campaign of being benign philanthropists to the starving world.

The result for hundreds of thousands of protesters who fell outside of this remit of collective action was silence, exclusion, or, as I shall describe later, criminalization and physical violence. MPH proved itself to be authoritarian in guarding the monopoly it had achieved in the message of anti-poverty. It denied the right for other protest groups to stand alongside them – notably Stop the War Coalition, under the naive pretext that 'issues of economic justice and development are separate from that of war'.[36] MPH liaised very carefully with police to form strategies for evicting undesirable activists who might wish to act under banners other than the MPH slogan.[37] What began as a triumph for mass mobilization of people power thus proved in the end to be collusion between celebrity, media and the political elite to stifle the diversity of dissent already operative against the G8. Mobilization against the G8, representing a diverse political cross-section such as the Dissent! network, G8 alternatives and numerous autonomous protest groups, became quickly stigmatized as disruptive by introducing the 'wrong' kind of protester.

The emphasis on Live 8, the organization of concerts around the world to raise awareness for the MPH cause, is also highly significant. Far from

encouraging people to take their voices and protest to the site of power, Live 8 confined their energy to a celebration of celebrity. Once again, maximizing PR came above representing the voice of the poor themselves. Geldof's initial refusal to stage African musical acts in London, consigning them instead to a park in Cornwall was justly cited by the BBC's Andy Kershaw as 'musical apartheid'.[38] Geldof's defence was that the concert was a 'political', not 'cultural' event. The irony is that precisely the reverse was true. Live 8 represented the almost irresistible transformation of the image of 'legitimate protest' into one of the global consumption of 'cultural' media images. The replacement of *involvement* with *observation*, discussed above, is nowhere more evident than in the way that broadcasting dominated proceedings of Live 8. Live 8 was predicted by its organizers to be 'the biggest global broadcast in history', reaching, according to the advertising industry, one-third of the world's population.[39] Geldof's TV company, Ten Alps, which provided the huge screens for Hyde Park, enjoyed 400% increase in profits following Live 8. One of the PR firms organizing Live 8, Freud Communications, is run by Matthew Freud, son-in-law to Rupert Murdoch and one of the most influential PR companies in the UK according to the *Financial Times*.[40] But the PR role in MPH goes beyond mere profit-making (itself a telling indictment of the outcome of mass political participation). It suggests a far more sinister proximity of PR organizing with New Labour itself.[41] Symbolic of this proximity was the appointment of the comedy director Richard Curtis in developing the PR image of the MPH campaign. Curtis, well-known personal friend of Gordon Brown, was deeply opposed to the campaign appearing to criticize Blair or Brown, and instead encouraged the image of Britain leading the way on the campaign's concerns, bravely attempting to bring the other countries on board.[42]

We should, without any doubt, remind ourselves of the positive implications of the MPH mobilization. It showed that people, as Stoker rightly points out, are willing to go beyond a politics of guilt to one of political hope. The public political debate about G8 legitimacy and transparency was amplified and genuine. The subsequent fall from grace of the G8 for Bono and Geldof in Germany, 2007 may show them to be human after all, for having placed too much faith in the promises of world leaders. And yet, we should also remember what exactly MPH achieved in the name of political participation. MPH was fundamentally *not a protest*, not even a show of popular force, but a show of the power of the media. That mobilization harnessed, above all, a conventionalized message on behalf of the powerful and replaced genuine critique with it. Rather than celebrate a diversity of strategies of dissent (from the most symbolic to the most physical, including but civil disobedience) in the representation of people power, it called for a unified voice through the image of the concert crowd. The metaphor is a powerful one: through the performance of the rock star the moment of participation is iconized through the person of the celebrity him- or herself. It is through watching, consuming and mirroring

the sentiment of the rock star that the spectator contributes. In her scream of 'revolution!' Madonna communicates perfectly its new significance. The assurance is that not only will the revolution be televised (and on a scale never seen before) but that the televisation itself will *be* the revolution. As an incursion of the 'informal power of civil society', therefore, MPH confirms the most cynical of Jean Baudrillard's critique of post-modern society: the reality of social communication has been replaced by communication itself. The signified is overrun by the mass format of the signifier. The substance of dissent is replaced by its communication.

Criminalizing dissent

The world should apply what Natan Sharansky calls the 'town square test': if a person cannot walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm, then that person is living in a fear society, not a free society. We cannot rest until every person living in a 'fear society' has finally won their freedom.

Condoleeza Rice[43]

MPH may well represent New Labour's successful monopoly on legitimate protest. If so, the experience of the alternative Edinburgh protests was also typical of its delegitimizing of the kind of protest that falls outside of this format. Not content to stand obediently in front of a TV screen, several different protest groups came to Scotland with a different emphasis. They came to protest at the very meeting of the G8, symbol for many people of the unaccountable 'management' of world poverty through exclusive business deals.[44] Significantly, they did not demand that every other campaigner adopt their confrontational tactics. While MPH events were encouraged within the ranks of these groups, no mention was made by MPH of these alternative events. While the MPH 'demonstrators' enjoyed the sanction of state and law, other peaceful protestors were subject to the latest of a wave of draconian criminal justice and anti-terror legislation. Everywhere 'unauthorized' protesters congregated, travelled and demonstrated, they met with new stop and search powers, arbitrary arrests and detainment. In a particularly symbolic instance, the 'eco-village' protest camp in Stirling.

The uncovering of these police tactics for criminalizing peaceful protest is beginning to attract wider attention with the success of documentary films such as *Taking Liberties* (Chris Atkins et al., 2007). But civil rights campaigners have seen it coming for some years. Since coming to power, New Labour has created over 3,000 new offences, an unprecedented number passed at twice the rate as the previous Tory government.[45] Much of the emphasis for criminal legislation under Blair's tenure has been on strengthening summary justice against

'anti-social behaviour'. But more significantly it has become a systematic abuse of anti-terror legislation. The Terrorism Act 2000 came into effect for the first time in Scotland for the G8 summit, allowing police to detain protesters in purpose-built cells for up to a week without charge. It allows police officers to 'stop and search a person whom he reasonably suspects to be a terrorist'.[46] Applied over 36,000 times in 2006 alone, it has been used overwhelmingly in legitimate protests, something Blair's government promised would never happen. Because the individual orders are authorized from above, individual officers need provide no good reason to stop and search – proving an irresistible temptation to police officers. In a notorious case, anti-war protesters at the Fairford RAF base, in Yorkshire, found themselves stopped and searched consecutively as many as 11 times.[47] Police at that same demonstration stopped, searched, and then forced 3 coach loads of protesters to return to London, an action the High Court subsequently found in a landmark case to be unlawful. Having breached human rights legislation with their legislation on indefinite detention of suspects without trial in 2004, Blair's government then rushed through (parts of it weren't even complete at the time of passing) the 2005 Prevention of Terrorism Act which allowed the Home Office to place anyone it wanted under 'control orders' – effectively house arrest.

A stifling of the right to protest may not provide a direct causal explanation of a lack of political engagement in the UK. But it surely contributes to a normalization of passive, acquiescent society. Security legislation under New Labour has been enacted strategically within a climate of paranoia. Definitions of 'terrorism', like those of 'harassment' and 'anti-social behaviour' are notoriously and perhaps purposefully ill-defined. Corresponding legislation thus provides a green light to the criminalization of virtually anyone the government doesn't like. The eviction and detainment of 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang for saying 'nonsense' during Jack Straw's speech on Iraq at the 2005 Labour Party conference has become just one notorious example. It includes, of course, the policing of speech, with The Terrorism Act 2006 extending the outlawing of free speech to include any speech that 'glorifies' terrorism. The inability for any international consensus over what terrorism means, has led some to suggest that congratulating Nelson Mandela's achievements as a revolutionary or wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt might even break this new law.

New Labour's approach to crime and punishment does more than push the country ever nearer to a police state. It fundamentally undermines an environment of increasing alienation from the process of democratic expression. The parameters of political expression become unavailable and undesirable to the majority. We should see, in other words, the application of new terror laws a style of governance long in the making. Within this style the 'process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making' is applied to the sphere of civil engagement itself. For what is the nature of democratic expression in this climate of paranoia? It is the gradual disaffection with politics that

shows no dramatic underwriting of democracy but the continual transformation of normal civil life as one that has no concern with political critique. As George Monbiot puts it, 'democracies such as ours will come to an end not with the stamping of boots and the hoisting of flags, but through the slow accretion of a thousand dusty codicils'.[48] We might add that for some this 'slow accretion' means in practice the sudden shocking application of new draconian police measures, as peaceful protesters around the world are discovering. For the rest of us, however, the point is that these experiments in quashing civil liberties means a gradual and almost imperceptible shrinking of the parameters of action for civil society itself. Dissent, while becoming merely clandestine for the minority brave enough to pursue it, simply ceases to be an option for the vast majority. And with the persistence of the former, antagonistic style of protest as the meetings of the G8 has attracted, the stakes are simply raised higher and higher. Thus, two years after MPH, the summit in Germany saw the police forces using water cannons, CS gas and baton charges to deter protesters from even approaching the perimeter fence that housed the G8 meetings.

Over thirty years ago Michel Foucault suggested that social institutions (more generally 'technologies of power') describe not only power from above, but a horizontal production of subjects, norms and behaviours. Furthermore subjects learn to discipline themselves, removing the need for traditional modes of repression.[49] Noticing the criminalization dissent over the past ten years reveals, similarly, that *more* than civil liberties are at stake in the traditional sense of upholding certain 'rights' against state control. It means critiquing carefully the production and acceptance of a style of publicness, appropriate political interaction and citizenship. This is an important approach to many facets of New Labour's 'security' agenda that goes largely unchallenged. The intensification of surveillance technology in the UK, itself unparalleled in comparison to other EU countries, is often justified for deterring new and unprecedented threats to national security. It is also defended against criticism by assurance that the only people who have cause to oppose it are criminals, or at least potential criminals. It is the common argument that if you're not 'guilty' your life won't be affected by the proliferation of CCTV cameras or the impending compulsion to carry ID cards. This is of course entirely counter-intuitive, since as a method of deterrence, saturation of surveillance techniques is designed precisely to create an environment in which crime is *unthinkable.* But this is only possible through the perception that every movement is *potentially* watched, assessed and stored as data for future prosecution. Producing a nation of citizens that are under permanent observation, cataloguing and instant identification is not only an act of centralized authority or policing. It is also a process within a wider manufacturing of an illusion of civic cohesion by means of mutual mistrust and fear. This includes the fear, of course, that we are all, as individuals, potentially guilty until proven innocent. Like Bentham's 'panopticon' design for 24-hour surveillance in the

seventeenth century, the exercise of power on the individual is today to prod-
uce a self-disciplining social subject. How does this relate to the policing of
dissent within the wider legacy of New Labour? The right kind of protester
is arguably produced, reproduced, congratulated and empowered to be once
again part of the political process. And in the same move, those protesters
who breach these carefully demarcated boundaries are portrayed as *illegal* and
therefore a threat to social order by definition.

The production of good and bad protesters is thus not only operative in
heavy-handed removal of dissent – as Walter Wolfgang discovered. It is also
in the distancing of protest from sites traditionally associated with power
and therefore as much symbolic as practical. It is telling that world leaders
must today meet behind temporary fortresses, requiring massive investment
in security, policing and surveillance, in order to keep the public away from
the site of political decision-making. It is also telling that the new wave of
anti-protest legislation aims specifically at this *spatial* aspect of social order.
In 2001 the peace campaigner Brian Haw went into his fourth year of per-
manent protest outside the houses of Parliament against sanctions and war
against Iraq since 2001. His constant application of the right to protest had
become an intolerable embarrassment to the image conscious New Labour
and it responded in the only way it knew how – by legislating. The Serious
Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCPA) was introduced in 2005 – in direct
response to Haw's protest – to criminalize 'unauthorized' protest in desig-
nated areas. Section 132 specifically relates to a 1 kilometre exclusion zone
around Parliament Square in London.[50] Its ostensible purpose is to remove
the publicness of protest. Just before the Chinese Premier visited Britain in
2004, Brian Haw was beaten, arrested, and had his peace camp confiscated in
a midnight police operation that he later successfully contested. The price for
illegally removing the public sign of dissent from the public glare had obvi-
ously been worth the price for Blair's government. Like the Terrorism Act,
SOCPA has never been used to arrest or detain actual terrorists. The first
people to be arrested and charged under its legislation were two peace activ-
ists, Milan Rai and Maya Evans. They were arrested for reading out the names
of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers killed in the war on Iraq next to the ceno-
taph, while ringing tiny Tibetan bells.

The strategy has proved highly effective. As physical spaces of dissent dimin-
ish, so does the government's democratic accountability. The appropriate place
for critique becomes increasingly privatized spheres of interaction – opinion
blogs, televised debates and Prime Minister's Question Time. Tony Blair's
favoured personal response to public, explicit protest has been to insinuate
that one should be grateful for the principle of democratic freedoms, and
leave it at that. During an address to the Labour Party conference in 2004,
Blair responded to a lone anti-war heckler, 'That's fine, sir. You can make your
protest. Just thank goodness we live in a democracy and you can' at the same

time as that heckler was handcuffed, arrested, and taken away to a police cell.[51] The point about free protest is precisely not one of gratitude but of demanding and prosecuting an active democratic principle. This is also the significance of Brian Haw's symbolic protest. It is a reminder that freedom of speech is a right that must be exercised tirelessly, not only acknowledged in principle. That New Labour has been so bent upon denying the public its spaces of open dissent shows its unwillingness to acknowledge the alternative forms of polit- ical participation that so many have argued is replacing traditional forms such as voting.

Conclusion: Privatizing belief

The shrinking of public sites of dissent discussed in this chapter reveals a dan- gerous paradox within New Labour's general rhetoric of 'security'. The gov- ernment's challenge has been to acknowledge terrorism as a threat not only from outside the UK but also within its very communities. At the same time, I have argued, it wishes to create a greater distance than ever between private belief and public political expression. This lends itself very well to the crimin- alization of dissent under the pretext of the 'necessary' unfreedom of a state of emergency. But there is good evidence to suggest that a feeling of alienation from democratic debate and the antagonism of British foreign policy for the lives of its citizens (with particular reference to, though not exclusively, British Muslims) is fuel for the very thing it fears – 'politicized' or 'radicalized' dis- sent. The question of depoliticization explored above is thus related to this further question: what forms of dissent *can* contemporary liberal democracies tolerate? What risks are tolerable to it?

Important lessons can be learned here from the privatization of religious belief in the secularization process. For the crisis at the heart of secular liberal- ism today is this: there is a desire to invite tolerance towards a diversity of faiths on the condition that they are *easily* ostracized from social discourse as soon as they begin to deviate from the dominant one. This goes some way to explain- ing the incompetence of many public leaders, politicians and journalists at understanding in any meaningful depth the grievances of young Muslims. Without doubt, this is a hugely complex task. How does one engage with those *so far* outside a dominant political ideology that they are able to take their own lives and hundreds of others with them in opposition to it? In the UK, many reactions to the bombings on 7 July 2005 reflected an incredulity that such an atrocity could emerge from British society itself. The overwhelming desire in that instance was to be able to cast the perpetrators as mad, fundamentalist and bearing no communicable relation to the world-view of the rest of us. This desire for defining the enemy as a completely *outside* is inseparable with the affirmation of what remains on the *inside* – that is, the rational, universalizing

discourse of tolerant liberals 'like us'. As I have tried to argue, today in liberal society the public sphere is pushed into a space that is, for many people literally uninhabitable. It is out of bounds, accessible in principle alone. Within this environment policies that criminalize and punish dissent can only encourage anger and alienation among those most affected by its policy decisions.

Here the crisis in understanding a *locus classicus* of the West's 'outside', the figure of 'radical Islam', relates to a much more general crisis in the acceptance of difference in UK society in general, and thus the criminalization of dissent. For New Labour's reaction, much like that of the US and other prosecutors of the 'war on terror' to the enigma of religiously motivated terror has been characteristic of a rush to 'explain away' the threat of a radically oppositional and *public* ideology. This is done by reference to a private, spiritual version from which the radical version must deviate. Blair, like Bush, was quick to condemn in the wake of the London bombing not Muslims but those whose faith had become radicalized, politicized and 'gone public'. Ever since the birth of war on terror rhetoric, the truth underlying both Bush and Blair's insistence that 'this is not a war on Islam' has been that, on the contrary, Islam has simply become a term suited to reduce complex social grievances to something simpler in their view: 'radical Islam' or 'political Islam'. The presupposition that there is such a thing as good, tamed, universally acceptable Islam such that the bad alternative – fundamentalist, violent Islam – can be universally and uncontroversially rejected has been a powerful effective form for the focus of a new global offensive. It makes dealing with the problem of religious violence a powerfully simple one: religious extremism is a madness which those from a secular liberal persuasion will simply never understand. Thus, Polly Toynbee could write that religious terrorism is 'not about poverty, deprivation, or cultural dislocation' but only about 'religious delusion'.[52] On the contrary, the two might well be more inseparable that liberal secularists would like to admit. For the imagination of religion as something that is acceptable as long as it does not threaten to 'go public' springs, as Russell McCutcheon argues in *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent* from a desire to avoid messiness in our society. It is the refusal to live in 'less than perfect' societies.[53]

The past few years have seen the emergence of self-appointed experts on religious violence, extremism and fundamentalism.[54] Fundamentalist terrorism therefore represents the nightmare that is triggered when religion breaks out of its private realm and defames its 'timeless principles' with 'sadly degraded forms of subsequent *practice*'.[55] But the misnomer of 'political Islam' is therefore synonymous with our perception of fanaticism itself, or the tendency for *any* belief to turn violent given its incursion into public life. McCutcheon's analysis thus greatly illuminates my critique of New Labour and the depoliticization of the public sphere in general. I have asked where it is that dissenters may take their grievances without being tarred with the same brush as 'fundamentalists', 'fanatics' and 'terrorists'. For such, of course is the farcical experience of

anyone who has been arrested under terror legislation for acts as symbolic and peaceful as reading out the names of war dead or for wearing a peace T-shirt. It is also the challenge that confronts every protester that faces the popular castigation of their actions as 'helping the cause of terrorists'. This indistinction between public acts of protest and dangerous incursions upon state security is the same for religious beliefs as it is for secular ones. In both cases there is at play a very powerful manufacture of political 'authenticity' and 'normal' citizenship in social discourse. As McCutcheon puts it: 'Whether in academia, the courts, or on street corners, the discourse on faith, principles, authenticity, and belief act as but one cog in virtually any wheel, making a particular world possible only by allowing marginal groups to gain some sort of acceptance if only they idealize and privatize themselves, thereby simultaneously reproducing and putting up the conditions of their own marginality.'[56] The increasing attitude in our societies is that dissent is acceptable as long as it doesn't take itself too seriously.

Where does this bleak picture leave the possibility for a healthy, dissenting democratic society in the future? Professor Stoker may be right to observe, through quantitative data, that incursions of genuine public political dissent through such mobilizations as anti-capitalist or anti-war protest are rare and erratic, though there is reason to believe even this trend is changing. What those practices also represent, however, is a rejection of depoliticized protest and the symbolic protest of the mediatized 'event'. Unfortunately this may only be possible by *deepening* people's mistrust and scepticism towards political parties in today's 'post-democratic' environment. To redeem a sense of morality in contemporary politics by reference to swearing 'hand on heart' that those in charge believe in what they are doing will do nothing to re-engage the electorate. This approach only strengthens the privatization of 'political faith'. And the debate over morality in politics is vastly poorer if the most we can offer the electorate is to say that politicians, like all of us, make mistakes and sometimes fudge the facts. As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, the point is precisely that politicians *do not* operate by the same rules of moral engagement as we do everyday, and should not be judged by them. Most of us do not make decisions over waging war or criminalizing certain types of behaviour, and if we *did* then we should expect a far more rigorous analysis of how we came to those decisions. For to do these things requires in reality, as is continually revealed to the public, much more than the bluffing, half-truths and white lies of our everyday moral grey areas. It involves a complex and strategic process of shielding truth, debate and protest from the public domain. In the context of the moral half-truths that has so far led to over a hundred thousand Iraqi deaths, Stoker's observation that 'not telling the truth is not necessarily cheating; it can be a way of getting on in a complex society'[57] is both offensive and dangerously misleading.

Genuine democratic participation demands that political life is lifted outside of the private sphere. This might mean that its moral demands of politicians

move beyond those of the 'merely human', to reaffirming once again those political ideals that seem practically impossible, such as the ideal of democracy itself. And at the heart of the principle of democracy is the demand that *dissent* is not only acknowledged in principle but practiced freely, peacefully and without fear. Without it, the fight for a renewed sense of citizenship will always remain on two levels: for the majority, remaining at the level of passive spectators; and for the minority of 'believers', being alienated from the mainstream and viewed as utopians and extremists.

Notes

1   Tony Blair's resignation speech, transcribed by *BBC News*, 10 May 2007 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6642857.stm] [accessed 10 July 2007].

2   Charles Glass, 'Top drawer', *Zmag*, 13 June 1999 [www.zmag.org/ZSustainers/ZDaily/1999-06/june_13glass.htm] [accessed 2 Oct. 2007].

3   Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 47.

4   Slavoj Zizek, 'Passion: Regular or Decaf?' *In These Times*, 27 February 2004 [www.lacan.com/zizek-passion.htm].

5   Quoted by *BBC News 24* [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3269605.stm] [accessed 26 June 2007].

6   John Pilger, 'Kebabing the Tonier-than-thou club', *The New Statesman*, 7 March 2005 [www.newstatesman.com/200503070013] [accessed 27 June 2007].

7   The Electoral Commission, 'Election 2005: Turnout – How many, who, and why?' (London: The Electoral Commission, 2005).

8   Jack Straw, 'The future for democracy – Politics in a spectator society', *The Fabian Society*, 28 June 2006 [www.fabian-society.org.uk/press_office/news_latest_all.asp?pressid=558] [accessed 19 June 2007].

9   Frank Furedi, 'Foreword' in Malcolm J. Todd and Gary Taylor (eds), *Democracy and Participation: Popular Protest and New Social Movements* (London: Merlin Press, 2004) p. xii.

10 Anthony Giddens, interview with Polity Press, 2007 [www.polity.co.uk/giddens5/news/sociology-and-politics.asp] [accessed 21 June 2007].

11 Madeleine Bunting, 'We are the people', *The Guardian*, 17 February 2003. [www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4607202-103677,00.html] [accessed 20 June 2007].

12 Colin Brown and Francis Elliott, 'Blair warns that marchers will have "blood on their hands"', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 15 February 2003 [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/02/16/ndemo116.xml] [accessed 21 June 2007].

13 Stoker, conference paper, *Remoralizing Britain?* p. 15.

14 Ibid. p. 13.

15 Furedi, 'Foreword', p. xii.

16 Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, pp. 47–51.

17 Ibid. p. 102.

18 Ibid. pp. 101–2.

19 Peter Burnham, 'New Labour and the politics of depoliticisation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 2001 (pp. 127–49) p. 128.

20 Burnham's argument goes something like this: Blair's approach to regaining confidence in its economic ability while maintaining a traditional left-of-centre electoral base has translated into an 'arms-length' approach to financial regulation that surrenders certain aspects of state intervention to the markets (such as wages, working hours and other labour rights) as extrapolitical. At the same time the impression is given of retaining ultimate political control of these processes – hence economic confidence against financial crises. Depoliticization therefore represents not a separation of politics from economics but on the contrary a highly politicized strategy of statecraft. It allows government to 'off-load responsibility for unpopular policies' as no longer the realm of popular political concern. Ibid. pp. 127–49.

21 Ibid. p. 137.

22 Timothy Brewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997) pp. 69–74.

23 *The Financial Times*, 13 June 2007 [www.ft.com/cms/s/6dd34230-194b-11dc-a961-000b5df10621.html] [accessed 26 June 2007].

24 See David Michie, *The Invisible Persuaders: How Britain's Spin Doctors Manipulate the Media* (London: Bantam Press, 1998).

25 Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, p. 59.

26 Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (London: Polity, 2004) p. 4.

27 Quoted by Simon Hoggart, 'A sprinkle of stardust on our John and Paul', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2004 [http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour2004/comment/0,,1316054,00.html] [accessed 12 July 2007].

28 Stoker, conference paper, *Remoralizing Britain?* p. 17.

29 Stuart Hodkinson, 'Inside the murky world of the UK's Make Poverty History Campaign', *Spinwatch*, 27 June 2005.

30 Mark Tran, 'Geldof hits out at "G8 farce"', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2007 [http://politics.guardian.co.uk/development/story/0,,2098835,00.html#article_continue] [accessed 14 June 2007].

31 MPH was also the occasion for a wake-up call about Oxfam's (the biggest player in MPH from development agencies) close ties with New Labour and the World Bank. Following the New Statesman's report on numerous Oxfam board members going on to serve as New Labour advisers, such as Justin Forsyth, now Blair's special adviser on international development, some suggested at the time that Oxfam had become a 'feeder school for government special advisers and World Bank Officials' (Hodkinson, 'Inside the murky world', p. 2). With £40 million of their annual income coming directly from government, it is hardly surprising that scrutiny has crept into the ability for an organization like Oxfam's ability to distance itself from the government's own economic policies.

32 Bruce Whitehead, quoted by John Pilger, 'The ghost at Gleneagles' in *The New Statesman*, 11 July 2005 [www.newstatesman.com/200507110004] [accessed 14 June 2007].

33 Kofi Maluwi Klu, quoted by Hodkinson, 'Inside the murky world'.

34 *The Making of an Impoverished History: The politics of Live 8, G8 and the UK Media from an African British Perspective*, August 2000, Ligali organisation.

35 George Monbiot, 'Bards of the Powerful', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2005 [http://arts.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,5220235-116859,00.html] [accessed 14 June 2007].

36 Hodkinson, 'Inside the murky world'.

37 Ibid.

38 Quoted by John Pilger, 'From Iraq to the G8: The Polite Crushing of Dissent and Truth', www.pilger.com [accessed 13 June 2007].

39 Michel Chossudovsky, 'Live 8: Corporate Media Bonanza' *ALAI, América Latina en Moviento* [www.alainet.org/active/8627&lang=es] [accessed 14 June 2007].

40 Ann Talbot, 'Live 8: Who Organised the PR Campaign for Blair and Bush?', *World Socialist Website* [www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/live-j11.shtml] [accessed 14 June 2007].

41 Both Matthew Freud and Elisabeth Murdoch sit on various government committees. Ten Alps is also closely tied to the government, producing through Teachers' TV, programmes for the Department of Education and Skills. Ann Talbot, 'Live 8'.

42 Hodkinson, 'Inside the murky world'.

43 Condoleeza Rice, quoted by Thomas Riggins, 'The immoral clarity of Natan Sharansky' *PoliticalAffairs* [www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/672/1/77] [accessed 22 June 2007].

44 Both the G8 and World Bank represent to most serious development campaigners the principal source of that poverty they purport to 'make history'. At a parallel meeting of the 'Group of 77' world leaders, representing 80% of the world's countries, the Prime Minister of Belize, Said Musa, once put it this way: the economic policies of the G8, representing the interests of the minority richest, represented not, as they argued, the stabilization of economies, but the stabilization of poverty – Roger Burbach, *Globalization and Post-modern Politics: From Zapatistas to High-Tech Robber Barons* (London: Pluto Press, 2001) p. 148. The G8 meeting fulfilled successive previous meetings in the economic conditions it attached to new aid packages. Most significant of these are the demands for greater privatization of natural resources, or 'elimination of impediments to private investment, both domestic and foreign' – deals that will secure business for European firms keen to get a foothold in the 'new scramble for Africa' – David Miller, 'Was the G8 Gr8?' *Spinwatch*, 11 July 2005 [www.spinwatch.org/content/view/3691/8/] [accessed 12 July 2007].

45 Nigel Morris, 'Blair's "frenzied law making": a new offence for every day spent in office', *The Independent*, 16 August 2006 [http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/article1219484.ece] [accessed 22 June 2007].

46 The Terrorism Act 2000 (London: Crown Copyright, 2000) p. 25.

47 George Monbiot, 'A threat to democracy', *The Guardian*, 3 August 2004 [www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1274676,00.html] [accessed 22 June 2007].

48 Ibid.

49 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

50 Chris Atkins, Sarah Bee and Fiona Button, *Taking Liberties* (London: Revolver Books, 2007) p. 35.

51 Nigel Farndale, 'Try saluting, Mr Straw, it's a lot safer', *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 2004 [www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/ 2004/10/03/do0308.xml] [accessed 25 June 2007].

52 Polly Toynbee, 'In the Name of God', *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2005 [http://www. guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1533942,00.html] [accessed 12 July 2007].

53 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent* (London: Equinox, 2005).

54 In the months that followed 11 September bookshops stocked up on a new wave of 'introductions' to Islam and experienced a huge increase in sales of the Koran. As a best-selling post-11September book, *Islam: A Short Introduction* by Karen Armstrong puts it, '(Islam's) power struggles are not what religion is really all about, but an unworthy distraction from the *life of the spirit*, which is conducted far from the madding crowd, unseen, silent, and unobstructive.' – quoted in Ibid. p. 63. Or again, from Salman Rushdie: 'The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization . . . is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern . . .' – Ibid. p. 59. McCutcheon argues that these attempts to 'understand' and stand in solidarity with 'true' Islam fell into a fundamental illusion that religions deposit a unifying, enduring truth over time that we can all grasp through a guided reading of its central tenets and appreciate on the 'spiritual' level.

55 Ibid. p. 37; emphasis in original.

56 Ibid. p. 92.

57 Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, p. 127.

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