
London MPs again on the rampage

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With my adoration of things British, I had always thought of British Parliamentarians as splendid creatures. And I suppose they are, in a way, in that the latest set of effusions puts any exaggerations our Parliamentarians can manage in the shade. Of course the poor creatures are suffering from that well known disease of Parliamentarians, the need to hang on to one's seat, and some British Labour MPs have a heightened form of this, given the proximity of the next election and the current state of Labour in the polls. But even so, the hysterical exaggerations they have engaged in recently deserve our deepest admiration, and perhaps emulation, if Sri Jayewardenepura is ever to match up to Westminster. And since it seems that some releases from the Peace Secretariat have contributed to the mania, I suppose we can also take some credit for these latest examples of the bludgeoning that has replaced the cut and thrust of an earlier age.

We begin with Siobhain McDonagh, from Mitchum and Morden, in South London. She declares that "Every day 150,000 people are being shelled in the Sri Lankan government's designated no-fire zone, and tens of thousands more are trapped in a thin strip of land — just 13 square miles — where the battles are taking place." The woman is obviously completely crackers, since the thin strip of land was in fact the no-fire zone, and by the date she spoke most commentators had agreed that 150,000 was a maximum for those still under Tiger control. And Siobhain naturally made no mention of the fact that civilians were trapped because the Tigers had trapped them — but such niceties are beyond an Irish colleen full of emotion. Before she could finish, up jumped a Liberal Democrat from neighbouring Carshalton and Wallington, to mark his sympathy. Siobhain concurs and takes the opportunity to say how much she admires Tamils for bringing the problems in Sri Lanka to her attention. At her back she doubtless hears the voice of Mr Iddakader, threatening some of her colleagues with losing their seats if British Tamils change their votes, but of course she would not dream of mentioning that. One characteristic of MPs anxious for votes is that they always find good reasons for the positions they take to win votes. It is not possible to be a successful politician without this capacity for self deception. Siobhain, obviously not intending to, then wins several brownie points with her Tamil constituents by mentioning how committed they are to education, and to elitist education too, which she simperingly notes causes her ideological problems. Andrew George, who has actually been to Sri Lanka, then intervenes to make the sensible point that the problem requires a political situation, gently pointing out that he is perhaps exceptional in not having many Tamils in his Cornish constituency. Siobhain rises to the bait magnificently, and says of course she is involved because of her constituents. Simon Hughes, another Liberal Democrat from London, is not quite so transparent, and says that he has got involved not because of his Tamil constituents, but because he has seen the problem coming for a long time. Obviously not aware of what happened in the eighties, to drive so many of his constituents safe into his arms, he says the situation in Sri Lanka has got worse and worse for Tamils. Siobhain agrees, and asks that the British government call for Sri Lanka to be suspended from the Commonwealth. And then she goes on the rampage again, talks of genocide, and cluster bombs, and a thousand amputees who are desperate to be evacuated "but the Red Cross cannot get to them". No one has told her that, over the last few weeks, the Red Cross has evacuated about 3500 patients, and more bystanders, the latter obviously being carried in the absence of more people requiring medical treatment. If they are there, and not allowed out, it is because the LTTE will not allow them out, being in control of the area which Siobhain had so dramatically described. Siobhain perhaps does not know, and if she did she would never mention it, that the Red Cross functions on ships supplied by the Sri Lankan government. Then, to add to the cluster bombs and even phosphorous weapons, Siobhain talks of the civilians being "pummeled by artillery fire". She then quotes the UN High Commissioner's concern for civilians trapped in the Safe Zone, and conveniently omits that lady's plea to the LTTE to allow them to leave. Significantly, Siobhain at no point in her diatribe asks the LTTE to release the people over whom she instead sheds copious crocodile tears at the expense only of the Sri Lankan government. This is the cue for Andrew Pelling, he who was accused of beating not one wife but two, to weigh in. He represents an electorate in Croydon, near Siobhain's, and is now an independent after the Conservative Party sacked him after his last little brush with the law. Since then he turned bulimic, but is now evidently hale and hearty enough to toss Siobhain a compliment for her hard work on this issue, which she promptly returns to him. Such mutual adulation seems thick, but if they keep on saying such things and popping up in turn, surely they will all win even more adulation from the voters they are trying to impress. It must be granted though that Siobhain does cite an old UNHCR report which has some criticism of the Tigers, but she scrupulously fails to endorse this. Significantly, much of what UNHCR says there is no longer applicable, but its criticism of LTTE recruitment still stands, even though Siobhain does not seem to think this important. Then comes a Liberal Democrat from another London suburb, who seems not to have strayed very far from that suburb, for he worries about the extreme cold at night that those under tarpaulins suffer, on the Sri Lankan coast. He then talks about bunkers to withstand the bombs of the Sri Lankan army, something he has never heard of previously in an "intended encampment", which allows Siobhain to talk of the videos of these bunkers taken "by very brave people in the area". Interestingly, the MPs later complain of the propaganda of the Sri Lankan government, never for a moment wondering whether the material presented to them might also be propaganda of sorts. Siobhain then quotes Amnesty International as though it were an undisputed authority, and harks back to its cluster bomb caper regarding the Puthukkudiyirippu hospital to make allegations of war crimes. Her Liberal neighbour then breaks in to mention a war crimes tribunal, trusting that the Sri Lankan High Commission will not "misinterpret what Members are saying". Siobhain seizes the opportunity to claim that many Members "have been abused and insulted by the Sri Lankan High Commission in the UK". As an example of this she claims that "it recently suggested that my hon friend Mr Dismore has a drug problem". Andrew Dismore it seems shares this delusion, and evidently sought to "sue the Sri Lankan government for libel" but found he

could not because of 'sovereign immunity'. This is another example of delusion, since the reference must be to the Peace Secretariat release that suggested he was overdosing 'on imagination'. Similarly Mr Pelling claimed to a Croydon newspaper that he was thinking of legal action against the Peace Secretariat, but we have since heard nothing of that grandiose claim. One somehow gets the impression that these preposterous creatures are touchy enough to run to a lawyer – who swiftly enough disabuses them – when they think their rather tawdry honour has been questioned, but meanwhile think it perfectly all right to make claims about genocide and war crimes and such serious life threatening matters. Ridiculously, Andrew then asks the government to 'bring pressure to bear on the Sri Lankan High Commission to make sure that it stops these attacks on Members when we are simply doing our job', i.e. trying desperately to hold their seats, and hitting out at the Sri Lankan government and forces in order to do this. Siobhain then returns to the fray, with her call for Sri Lanka to be suspended from the Commonwealth, and goes on to say that there is an 'opening for a truce' because 'the political leader of the Tigers has called for a ceasefire and said that the Tigers would negotiate 'without pre-conditions'. Obviously ignorant of the previous history of ceasefires, and the Tiger refusal to negotiate for years, she demands that, 'If Sri Lanka does not take this opportunity, it will need to be forced to the negotiating table through diplomatic means'. The poor woman obviously does not understand English, if she thinks such force possible, but more depressing is the fact that she never thought, over the last five years, to even ask the Tigers to negotiate. She also, like a good Labour MP, thinks the powers of the British government infinite, since she says that they should 'simply state that Sri Lanka should be suspended from the Commonwealth and the process of suspension should commence'. Siobhain then declares that hardly anyone is interested in Sri Lanka except British MPs. She believes most outlets print 'public relations material for the government there', obviously having read nothing of the critiques of the Sri Lankan government and forces that have formed the staple of most British reporting on the country in recent weeks. She makes an exception of Marie Colvin, who she claims lost an eye when she was attacked by Sri Lankan government forces, and now evidently spends her time talking to the LTTE and attacking Sri Lanka, if Siobhain's account of her recent activities is to be believed. She then complains about an article in the Times as evidence for her generalization, and declares that Sri Lanka has 'done a brilliant PR job around the world', which is news to most of us, and most readers of at least British newspapers. Andrew George then makes the salient point that negotiations should include all Tamils. Siobhain blithely agrees, but shows no awareness that the Tigers had opposed this tooth and nail for several years, and indeed killed other Tamils who had a different view. She also claims, giving Mr Nadesan an even more exalted rank which indicates she is completely clueless about how the Tigers work, that the Tigers would abide by a referendum, information to which she seems privy even though it was not in the article. Whether she is privy to why the Tigers avoided elections in the past is doubtful. A junior Minister from West London is then sarcastic about Sri Lankan government propaganda, but Siobhain misses the point and bewails the fact that most MPs are not interested in her campaign to have Sri Lanka suspended from the Commonwealth, an attitude for which, myopic as she is, she blames the propaganda put out by the High Commission. Joan Ryan, she who initiated the last debate on the subject, then raises an objection about Sri Lanka's position on a Commonwealth committee, but Siobhain misses that point too, and instead, in noting that she and Joan had worked together on this matter, makes clear why she was the wrong person to initiate this debate. With a naivete that would be charming, were it not so readily placed at the service of terror, she declares, 'During the 11 years I have been in the House, I have never spoken in a debate on an international issue. I am not somebody who would ever regard themselves as a House of Commons person. I find the environment quite pompous, and I think that people speak for too long – just as I am currently doing.' One can only hope, despite this desperate attempt to hold onto her votes – as the last sentence of her speech again suggests – that the voters will put her out of her misery and release her from the Commons at the next election. Siobhain's speech was followed by that of a Conservative called Lee Scott, who was far less emotional, but also seemed to think that the propaganda of the High Commission had succeeded in suppressing the issue, and it was only the British House of Commons that would save the day for the concerns of their constituents. Sadly, though he did not make wild allegations, he too believes that 'Everyone is calling for a ceasefire', which suggests he knows little about the history of the conflict and about the position of countries more closely concerned with this particular terrorist threat than Britain. Joan Ryan then comes back into the fray and asserts that it was the British who first called for a ceasefire. Interestingly, the Deputy British High Commissioner insisted that it was not a ceasefire the British wanted, but a cessation of firing to let the trapped civilians out, but I pointed out to him that that was not what was said publicly. Now I have no objection to British leaders playing to a gallery, but they should not do so at the expense of a friendly government. Keeping Joan Ryan happy may be important, but a principled approach when dealing with terrorism is much more important, and I hope the High Commission in Colombo will point out how much damage is done to what should be very positive relations by such loose talk, which creatures like Joan pounce on so avidly. Joan then refers to a UN report which she grants was leaked. This is another example of ambiguity that we need to be careful of. When the existence of that report was first made known to us, we challenged the figures, and the UN in Colombo agreed to withdraw the report. However, we have since found the figures quoted widely all over the place. The UN has not bothered however to check on who did the leaking, or to publicly repudiate the false figures, based on extrapolations that we were able to show were quite fanciful. Meanwhile Joan actually claims that the figure is now conceded to have been an underestimation, not the overestimation we proved it was.

Joan then adds her voice to that of Mr Nadesan, to ask for a ceasefire, and says as though it were a great concession that the Tigers are offering this without preconditions. The woman must be mad, unless she is very evil indeed, not to understand that it is through this type of ceasefire that the Tigers were able on several occasions to rearm and renew their terrorist activity. And then the woman goes on to ask that India join her in her crusade, ignoring how much India suffered when they tried to deal with the Tigers. Obviously deciding that the Sri Lankan government will not fall for her

blandishments, Joan then goes on to the war crimes tune, with allegations about cluster bombs and white phosphorous. She also ignores the evidence of the recent ICRC evacuation of bystanders along with the injured and, building on a BBC report that was shown to be false and was repudiated by the ICRC, she engages in a graphic description of the aid agencies able to operate having 'to choose between the most severely injured and the badly injured, and have to leave the badly injured lying on the beach. That cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered humane treatment'. Sadly, the only imagination being stretched is that of Joan Ryan, and despite the elasticity of the stretching I hope she will not jump to the conclusion that we think she is hallucinating. Joan Ryan then talks about a Security Council resolution, and raises the hoary chestnut that Russia might be responsible for preventing this. Fascinatingly, she thinks that the claim of the mid-Western American Prof Boyle, who has taken up Bruce Fein's genocide baton, will provide evidence for Russia to change its mind. Given the British position on Iraq, and the fact that there was no majority anyway for an invasion of Iraq at the time but there was an attempt to blame Russia and China alone for opposing this, Joan Ryan at least should know better than to talk such nonsense. But, after an intervention which indicated the uselessness of her attempt to have Sri Lanka suspended from the Commonwealth, Joan declares that 'the UN seems to have been cowed'. One wonders when the British, or at least a solid left wing MP from what obviously is still thought to be the capital of the world, will learn that the UN should not necessarily be assumed to be deficient if it will not follow the will of the Head of the Commonwealth. But Joan would do credit to Winston Churchill at his most bulldogish. She declares that Sri Lanka has just 'attempted to reject a special representative appointed by our Prime Minister'. She claims that the reason given, that Sri Lanka was not consulted, is nonsense in that Sri Lanka is not consulted about the Prime Minister's other appointments. Evidently the woman is not only hysterical, she is also stupid, since obviously a special representative needs to be accepted if he is to do any good. More tellingly, even the British government claims that it did consult, and it is conceivable that there was misunderstanding about whether the appointment had been accepted or not. Joan, ignoring all this, declares instead that the Sri Lankan government's argument is outrageous, 'We have seen them do that and the UN needs to take steps', it now evidently in her book being the business of the UN to ensure that Sri Lanka accepts poor Des Browne. Joan then asserts, lying through her teeth, that the Sri Lankan government 'have accepted that there is no political solution'. That sort of outrageous claim would lead one to suggest that she be asked to wash her mouth out with soap and water, were she not a member of the Mother of Parliaments. Certainly the rhetorical questions she then indulges in suggest hysteria, as do her 'four immediate goals' – suspension from the Commonwealth, a ceasefire, a UN monitoring mission and a resumption of peace negotiations. In short, the woman obviously sees herself as a nanny, wagging her finger while hoping anxiously that the bosses, the UN and India, will keep her in employment. Simon Hughes then engages in his usual confusing performance, claiming to cite a message from the Bishop of Mannar which was 'passing on a message from a parish priest in Northern Sri Lanka who said that the bishop requested me to communicate the message to you', ie it is not clear whether this is the Bishop's message or that of an unknown individual claiming to speak for the Bishop. The message is also confusing because it talks of Tamils being mutilated and thrown into camps, which must be a claim about the government controlled areas, but then it seems the informant is in the Tiger controlled area. Similarly, Simon's quotations from the UNHCR, which he grants is selective, also confuses the two areas. In short, Simon is up to his usual game of deliberate obfuscation, though thankfully he then goes on to worry about the Commonwealth and what he sees as British governmental inadequacy in putting the case there. Then we have Andrew Dismore, who at least noted that the LTTE was holding people trapped. He then complains about being libeled, suggesting that he too cannot understand English and thinks an overdose of imagination refers to some exotic drug. He then goes on to criticize the Conservative spokesman Dr Fox, evidently ignoring the possibility that Dr Fox is as concerned about humanitarian issues, but is much more consistent about the dangers of terrorism. Andrew was interrupted by a Labour Minister who is also obviously ignorant, because he has no idea about the political solution that was shattered by the LTTE in 1987, and he talks of a recent political solution, whereas the LTTE withdrew from negotiations. He also claims that there was 'a multi-party, multi-faith, multi-ethnic Government in place and that it was the deeply regretted rise of Sinhala nationalism that shattered that consensus'. It is that type of ignorance from a government Minister (and gratuitous and meaningless insult) that makes it so difficult to trust either the bona fides or the seriousness of the British government. Fortunately Dismore does not take that bait, and instead refers to the need for a political solution, obviously unaware that that is precisely the government of Sri Lanka position too. Andrew was followed by a Conservative, Stephen Hammond, from yet another London suburb, who again was misled by the fraudulent BBC report that the ICRC repudiated. He also talks about a mercy ship, obviously unaware that this was arranged by the London head of the TRO, who has now taken on another avatar, following the British discovery that the TRO was a front for the Tigers. Then, while he is quite right to talk about a political solution, Stephen confuses this with a ceasefire, as the British following Tiger imperatives tend to do, and declares that the British must impress on Sri Lanka that the ceasefire 'must include not only the LTTE, but all sections of the Tamil community'. The man obviously does not know that it is the Sri Lankan government that has all along been pressing for inclusiveness, and that the LTTE not only decimated other groups during the last ceasefire, but has continued to insist that it is the sole representative of the Tamil people. Once again, one realizes that a little learning is a very dangerous thing, especially when accompanied by British pomposity. The Liberal Democrat from next to Siobhain said much the same as the rest, with greater emphasis on the need for UN action, this time pointing a finger at China as well as Russia, but actually claiming that Britain too had opposed the matter being placed on the agenda. This is strange, because the general assumption was that Britain had in fact been behind the move, but perhaps a British MP who knows little about Sri Lanka at least knows his own country better, and we need not be quite so worried about the British approach. Joan Ryan, however, seems to have disagreed with him, as part perhaps of her new found adulation of the Prime Minister. Finally, after some largely sensible remarks by a Conservative Shadow Minister, Bill

Rammell, the Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, himself representing a London constituency, responded. Rammell's comments were on the whole unexceptionable, though some of the statistics he used were misleading, and he was ambiguous about some of the allegations made against the government. However he was unambiguous about the crimes of the LTTE, and seems finally to be inclining to the position, the obvious unquestionable position, that the civilians now in the safe zone would be out of danger if the LTTE released them. That is as much as can be expected now from the British, but it is a pity that a less equivocal approach was not attempted, so that Britain could profitably exploit the enormous goodwill for that country that we still cherish, despite the silly MPs who persist in lies for their own benefit, and convince themselves withal that they are being altruistic. It is no coincidence after all that those who are most desperate about this matter come from London constituencies. But induction was never something the British were very good at, and the House of Commons, given political priorities, can be much less rational than most when national interests are not at stake. Prof Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process