

### Why the conspiracy? (Part Two)

Democrats are always intrigued by Government malpractice, especially when the Government in question (like Mr Blair's) purports to be wholesomely democratic. On February 2 (page 137 above) this column was headed "Why the conspiracy of silence?" Obviously I am not going to abuse my readers by repeating here what I wrote there, but it did raise this vital question. Why are our well-established laws against criminal conspiracy not being used by the authorities to curb the criminals who organise unlawful animal rights protests?

I return to the topic now because the House of Commons returned to it on March 12. The hare was started (if I may so put it) by Dr Ian Gibson, Labour MP for Norwich North. He is an interesting man, this Dr Gibson. A biologist, he is a doctor of philosophy who once worked at Indiana University. That is where the late great Alfred Kinsey so strenuously studied the sexual habits of the human male (and the human female too, but he was rather more interested in the male).

Dr Gibson asked the Home Secretary about his discussions with trade unions representing workers engaged in animal experimentation about their intimidation by animal rights fanatics. Mr Straw said he had recently had a meeting with the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF), which represents employees in the biotechnology, pharmaceutical and medical research industries. Officials were also in contact with the MSF when preparing measures to combat animal rights extremists that have been included in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill.

**Mr. Straw:** My hon. Friend is right to say that unfortunately many of those involved in extremist animal rights movements are . . .

**Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham):** Poisonous.

**Mr. Straw:** Poisonous and worse - and willing to go in for any kind of totally unacceptable tactics against people who are simply carrying out lawful and important duties. I have been very anxious, at an institutional level but above all at a personal level, to offer the support of the Government - and, I believe, that of the whole House - for the work that those people are undertaking. As I have said before, without that work many important scientific and medical advances would never have been made, and many people would have died prematurely or not been able to maintain the quality of their lives.

**Fiona Mactaggart (Slough):** Is the Home Secretary aware that it is not merely scientists who have been the targets of these vandals? The Horlicks factory in my constituency, for example, has been invaded by animal rights extremists. Will the Home Secretary congratulate Thames Valley police on their vigorous action against those responsible for the attack?

**Mr. Straw:** I have no idea quite how targeting a Horlicks factory can help to propagate their aims; none the less, it was dangerous. I am very pleased, however, that Thames Valley police responded as they did.

**Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton):** The Home Secretary might like to know that only last week there was another incident in my constituency, directed against individuals working in the pharmaceutical industry. This is intimidation verging on terrorism.

**Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow):** When the chief executive of Huntingdon Life Sciences came to an all-party group, some of us were dismayed to learn the extent to which the cars of even relatively junior staff members had been vandalised. What can be done to protect junior members of staff? May I also ask, in the light of the Home Secretary's last answer, whether the Government are happy about the lack of backing from some who might be expected to show more courage in this matter, such as the Royal Bank of Scotland?

**Mr. Straw:** To deal with the last point first, I am certainly not happy about the response of some of the United Kingdom's financial institutions, which I believe were pusillanimous in the extreme. If financial institutions give in to that type of intimidation, it will wholly undermine those who are on the front line of that very important scientific research.

I return to my opening question. Why are our well-established laws against criminal conspiracy not being used by the authorities to curb the organisers of unlawful animal rights protests?

An answer of a kind was delivered by the Home Office Minister Charles Clarke MP on March 14 when he said (I believe erroneously) that the present law only covers the people who actually carry out the harassment, not those who plan it. On that day the Government put down a new clause to the Criminal Justice and Police Bill with the sidenote "Collective harassment". It proposes to amend the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 to cover aiding, abetting, counselling and procuring. This is a step in the right direction, but leaves my opening question still unanswered.

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