

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

It is a convention of modern politics that cuts in public spending must be made sorrowfully. Etiquette seems to demand that phrases like 'unpleasant task' and 'sharing the pain' be used. Just before writing this, I heard Francis Maude on the *Today* programme deploying such terms with studious moderation. But one notices that most top-quality politicians, including Mr Maude, actually take some professional pleasure in the work. They are right to do so. It should be an absolute condition of taking money from the public through taxation that the person taking it minds wasting it. It is an absolute certainty, given the amounts of money taken, that huge amounts will be wasted. In the Gordon Brown years, it was wasted more than ever before. So it should be a satisfying task to find the waste and get rid of it. Few gardeners say how agonisingly sad it is for them to trim their hedges or pull up weeds. A surgeon does not protest that it pains him to cut up a patient. The tasks are part of the work. Mr Maude, in particular, is identifying huge amounts of money frittered on government advertising, consultancies and misapplied IT projects. He is tackling the scandal of redundancy terms so generous that civil servants cannot be sacked. It is wrong to crow when one is making decisions which deprive some people of money, but it is fine to say that what one is doing is not so much unfortunately necessary as positively good.

If one does not argue strongly for cuts one cedes the rhetorical advantage to one's opponents. This is now beginning to happen. The Labour party and the TUC are finding a voice, because they are 'against the cuts'. Theirs is a stupid position, since they do not yet know what most of them are, and they cannot propose what they would do instead. This debate was avoided at the general election. Even now, with the advantage of two parties, carrying 60 per cent of the vote between them, agreeing the cuts, the government is shy. I am not pretending its case will be wildly popular, but I do suggest that it is underplaying its hand.



Given the global fuss when Pastor Terry Jones and his minute congregation threatens to burn the Koran, I wonder what would happen if any of our theatres dared to perform *Tamburlaine the Great*. In this once-famous play by Christopher Marlowe, the conqueror Tamburlaine captures modern Iraq, shoots the governor of Babylon ('now he hangs like Baghdad's governor./ Having as many breaches in his flesh/ As there be breaches in her battered wall'), and then orders that the Koran be burnt ('and all the heaps of superstitious books/ Found in the temples of that Mahomet'). Rather in the way that the crowd tormented Jesus on the cross by telling him to get God to save him, Tamburlaine taunts Mahomet: 'Why sendst thou not a furious whirlwind down/ To blow thy Alcoran up to thy throne...?' Of course it is Tamburlaine, not Marlowe, who incites what Muslims would see as a blasphemy, but, in the current climate, would any theatre dare bet on fanatics accepting this distinction? One notices that modern theatre, despite its love of being 'edgy', tends to attack safe political/religious targets, such as George W. Bush and American Bible-bashers, rather than genuinely dangerous subjects, like extreme Islam. Also, the mere act of burning the text, even for stage purposes, would be violently opposed. Anyone brave enough to put on the play should send out advance publicity saying, in large letters, 'No Korans were harmed in the making of this production'.

As the Pope arrives in Britain, there will be some Christians who wish to distance themselves from him. I feel that, in current conditions, this is a mistake. I tend to adhere to Bart Simpson's ecumenical doctrine, promulgated shortly after, to his mother's dismay, he converts to Catholicism: 'It's all Christianity, people. The little stupid

differences are nothing compared to the big stupid similarities.'

We spent last weekend in west Dorset. The view from Lewesdon Hill over Marshwood Vale across to Golden Cap must be as good as anything that southern England can offer. What I can never quite decide is whether the landscape of northern or southern England is the more beautiful. I am fairly unusual among people I know in having spent at least one night in every county in England. (The one exception is Cornwall, which I have visited only for the day, and of which I have the presumably unfair impression that it is packed with tourists from end to end.) This is because journalism, broadcasting and speechmaking have taken me to the towns, and field sports, friends and a general love of exploring have taken me to the country. The case for the south is that, in the west at least, it has more sweetness, more small, hidden things, more hedges and combs. It also — Lewesdon Hill is a classic example — has a wonderful relationship with the sea, which adds a touch of drama to an otherwise very domestic setting. The north, on the other hand, has a more bony quality which is exciting. You rarely get the sense, which can be stifling in summer in the south, of being trapped in too much vegetation with too limited views. You feel more on top of the world. Even in drawing this north/south divide, I am conscious of slighting the Midlands — which do not fit into either category — where places like Staffordshire and Leicestershire are much more attractive than people think. So perhaps my comparison is odious. The only county hard to praise is Bedfordshire.

We have a camera which does 'face recognition', cleverly discerning the human face in a scene and focusing on it automatically. A student I know tells me that he and some friends went to a fancy-dress party where lots of the girls wore bustiers. One girl was particularly notable for what Sir Peregrine Worsthorne would call her *embonpoint*. Their camera decided that her breasts were faces, and zoomed in on them like a drunken lecher.