

Tory coalition. After all, the left's present ideological and moral disarray owes a lot to the desire of Professor Hobsbawm and his comrades not to "get into trouble", not to dissociate their socialism unequivocally from tyranny and suffocating state bureaucracy. We have all been damaged by the version of "socialism" represented by the Soviet Union. Many people think socialism has nothing else to offer.

So advice to the left from Eric Hobsbawm is like offering measles as a cure for mumps.

At at least there's a ready reply: "Horse shit!"

## Times lapse

THE *FINANCIAL TIMES* knows Nottinghamshire exists but thinks others might not be so well-informed.

"The problem," announced a special Nottingham and Nottinghamshire supplement on January 25th, "... is not that (Nottinghamshire) is poorly perceived. It is that it is not perceived at all."

If fortunes are to revive, we were told, the city and county must promote themselves more vigorously.

But we do have a few advantages, such as the "stability" of the workforce. This is because "the county has one of the best industrial relations records in the UK. Moderate, even conservative, in their views, Nottinghamshire folk are not given over to excitability. There have been no real signs of revolutionary tendencies there since the middle of the last century, when the Luddites burned down Nottingham Castle in protest at the introduction of power looms."

Plausible psychology (perhaps), lousy history!

For the record, Nottingham Castle was burned down in 1831 (not quite the middle of the century) by Reform Bill rioters (or a drunken Goose Fair mob, depending on how you look at it). The Nottinghamshire Luddites were active nearly twenty years earlier, from 1811 to 1816, and were protesting not at the introduction of power looms but at the use of the existing hand-operated machinery to produce inferior goods. The first steam-powered loom was introduced in Nottingham in 1851.

Apart from that, the *FT* got it more or less right.

## Superstructures

IT WAS BRECHT who advised the East German government to dismiss its people and elect a new one. In recent years we too have grown used to the idea that we are not quite good enough for our government. In the doghouse in February were developers and architects, not for the usual reasons, but for failing to give fitting embodiment to the spirit of Thatcherism.

"Why is it," asked Housing and Planning Minister William Waldegrave in a speech to the Royal Fine Art Commission, "that the present period of sustained growth in the wealth of Britain seems to be finding no monumental

expression? Where are the great buildings of the 1980s?"

"Seldom have our construction firms had longer order books or greater profits. And yet, with honourable exceptions, most firms and most individuals are playing safe; most architects are selling quite respectable second-rate, safety-first designs, sometimes interspersed with the whimsical."

Each characteristic period in a nation's life, he suggested, "should find some who will risk trying to build the monuments which will embody the best aspirations of the age and carry some message to the future."

Docklands, he thought, might be one area where the RFAC could use its influence to "end this century with a fanfare of spectacular building".

One begs to differ. How could the "present period of sustained growth" find more perfect expression than in the eczema of buildings already going up in those same Docklands - a developers' free-for-all which is, as the government keeps telling us, the glittering success story of Thatcherism.

So Mr Waldegrave doesn't like the results - but blaming developers and architects for not showing a fairer vision of Thatcherism is like blaming the mirror for reflecting your face.

FOOTNOTE. (On the subject of buildings reflecting their origins) *Architects' Journal* recently published a photograph of a model of Nottingham's new City Technology College, now going up on Sherwood Rise. The design was described as "highly conservative".

Surely not!

## Whopping Wapping

IF YOU THOUGHT YOU'D heard the last of Rupert Murdoch and Wapping, consider this report from *Contract Journal* of March 3rd.

"What will emerge from Rupert Murdoch's extension to his News International plant in Wapping when the presses go into action in late 1989 is a mystery; all that is known is that the publisher's already enormous printing capacity will be doubled by the new works. When phase two is completed, the building will house the largest printing works in the world."

Like its predecessor (the famous Fortress Wapping, completed in 1983, with what consequences we know), the new £50 million plant was designed and built by Wimpey Construction. (Food for thought for those who like fine moral distinctions is that Wimpey did similar design-and-build jobs for the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* when they moved out of Fleet Street.)

What seems fairly certain is that the plant won't be producing a new popular left-wing daily or a resurrected *News on Sunday*.

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# Flypaper

NUMBER 1 19 MARCH 1988 10p

## "We wish to be effective"

AT ABOUT TEA-TIME on Tuesday 1st March, the House of Commons debated a little measure called *The Unemployment Benefit (Disqualification Period) Order 1988*. It was a modest piece of legislation, extending to 26 weeks the maximum period for which unemployment benefit might be withheld from those judged to have left employment voluntarily, or because of their own misconduct, or to have refused a reasonable offer of work or training.

This was the second extension in less than eighteen months. In October 1986, the period was changed from 6 to 13 weeks - the first alteration since 1911, when the penalty was introduced as part of the original unemployment insurance scheme.

Social security benefit is also liable to a 40% reduction, or to be withdrawn completely, during this 6 month period.

### Numbers rose

The Minister for Social Security and the Disabled, Nicholas Scott, explained the reasons for the extension:

"Following the 1986 change one would have expected the percentage of unemployed people claiming benefit in situations of 'voluntary unemployment' to have fallen. On the contrary, the absolute number of instances where a disqualification or deduction was imposed rose, and that was at a time when, because of a strengthening economy, there was much work around and total claims for benefit from unemployed people were dropping significantly. The Government have concluded that more effective measures are required to discourage voluntary unemployment. Hence the increased maximum period that we are proposing."

In other words, the government thinks there are too many skivers around (more than at any time since 1911), and the way to discourage them is to make them destitute.

Here is a selection of what MPs said about the proposal.

Robin Cook (Lab.) "I have never taken so much pleasure in rising to oppose an order in the House. I regard this order as brutal and vindictive, and the Minister's speech as intellectually indolent and morally in a state of paralysis."

"This is not a fringe matter; 400,000 people suffer from this rule every year. That is a number equivalent to the population of Edinburgh or Bristol. Most of those who have the rule applied to them lose all entitlement to benefit. A minority succeed in getting social security benefit in place of unemployment benefit, and they then have 40 per cent. of that social security docketed for the period of the penalty. What makes these numbers so scandalous is that there is clear evidence that in the majority of the cases the rule is

applied in error.

"... I have not used the word 'evil' before in the House, and I do not use it lightly on this occasion, but the order is evil. It has been introduced by Ministers who have given up any pretence that their job is to protect the unemployed against poverty and who are determined to ensure that the unemployed are kept in poverty."

Dame Jill Knight (Con.) "When the Government came to power, Britain had reached a dangerous point. More and more the ethos of 'Why bother to work? Why bother to save? Why bother to act responsibly?' had taken hold. It is absolutely true that more and more people were saying, 'Why do I bother? If I do not bother, I am not going to starve or be in any trouble, so why bother?' The welfare system was increasingly seen not as a safety net for the luckless, but as a bed for the shiftless. That is what the Government have addressed themselves to. Thank God the majority continue to work, to save and to act responsibly."

Eric Heffer (Lab.) "This is one of the worst things that I can remember any Government doing. I sometimes wonder whether the whole of my life has not been wasted when I see the destruction, one by one, of the good things that we have achieved over the years, the important things that we have done for society as a whole, the things that we have done for working people because we are part of them and they are part of us."

"This is the last straw for me. It puts the character of the Government in a nutshell. The Government want to return to the position where workers will accept any job. It is a form of slave labour that they want to introduce. It is unforgivable and almost unbelievable."

### Further pressure

"... there is a lot of difference between six weeks and six months. The Government are talking about taking people's livelihood totally away from them. These people cannot live on nothing."

"... The reason for the move is simple. It is a way of putting further pressure on working people to accept jobs which, in normal circumstances, they would not accept. That is the truth of it. When workers would like to say that they have had enough of a particular foreman and what he is doing, no longer will they protest; they will bow their heads even further. They will get a little further on to their knees and accept the treatment rather than place themselves and their families in such a situation."

Henry McLeish (Lab.) "The real issue is how this measure fits into the Government's increasingly sophisticated and ruthless strategy to cut the number of people on the unemployment register. The order has nothing to do with protecting

the national insurance fund. It has more to do with state coercion - a phrase not often used in the House."

Alice Mahon (Lab.) "I do not accept that the 420,000 people who have been disqualified made themselves voluntarily unemployed ... What will the unemployed live on for six months if they receive nothing? What will happen to them? I ask the few Conservative Members who are present, how they think the unemployed will live? ... This order will lead to more family breakdowns. My mother taught me that, during the 1920s and 1930s when poverty came in, love went out. I grew up with that expression. There were breakdowns then and there will be massive breakdowns now. The Government will pay for this vindictive measure."

Michael Portillo (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health & Social Security) "We wish to be effective. That is the difference between

the Government and the Opposition and that is why I commend the order to the House."

As Alice Mahon indicated, there weren't many Conservatives in the chamber during the debate. But there were plenty in the Division Lobby and the order was approved by 274 votes to 219.

### Supporting government

Among those supporting the government were local Conservative MPs Richard Alexander (Newark), Martin Brandon Bravo (Nottingham South), Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe), Michael Knowles (Nottingham East), Andrew Mitchell (Gedling) and Andy Stewart (Sherwood). Voting against were local Labour MPs Graham Allen (Nottingham North) and Alan Meale (Mansfield). Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw) and Frank Haynes (Ashfield) were absent, as was Jim Lester, Conservative MP for Broxtowe.

## Clause 29 analysis

AS WELL AS CAMPAIGNING against clause 29 of the Local Government Bill, it's worth looking closely at the wording - which is not all that it seems. The nub of it is section 2A:

- (1) A local authority shall not -
  - (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
  - (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

(2) Nothing in subsection (1) above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.

(3) In any proceedings in connection with the application of this section a court shall draw such inferences as to the intention of the local authority as it sees fit.

The purpose of (2) and (3) is obvious. (2) is a conscience-clearing exercise; (3) is an invitation for judges to go on a legal safari and lawyers to order their next Lamborghini.

### Side of caution

(1)(a) is similar. It also introduces the famous word "promote", a term so vacuously imprecise that it will have to be tested in court to find out what it means - which is doubtless the point, because most local authorities will err on the side of caution rather than risk legal action by a homophobic ratepayer.

(1)(b) is at first sight more straightforward (assuming a definition of "promote"). On closer inspection, however, and if the English language means what it says even in a court of law (a dubious proposition, admittedly), then subsection (1)(b) is actually saying the opposite of its

presumed intention.

First, let's note that "family" is not the unambiguous word the drafters of the clause seem to believe. Raymond Williams, in *Keywords*, describes its long and complex history, and shows that neither in origin nor in present use does it refer exclusively to a genetically linked group of parents, children and other relations, and certainly not exclusively to the cosy little nuclear group of mum/dad/kids assumed by the clause.

This more restricted usage is, in fact, only one of those available. Historically, it coincides with the industrial revolution and the need to define a worker as an isolated wage-earning unit with responsibility for maintaining a wife and children, rather than as a member of a wider society for whom that society might have to take some responsibility. (Significantly, in this context, Margaret Thatcher has said that "there is no such thing as 'society'. There are only individuals and families".)

Most dictionaries include a definition of the family as a group of people, not necessarily blood relations, who live under the same roof; and, of course, there are even wider definitions in common use. "The family of man", embraces the entire species (if you accept the sexism), and all the terms of the family relationship are used to express associations not of blood but of authority, comradeship and common humanity - examples include the labour movement's brother/sister (and mother/father of the chapel), and the wide use of mother/father/sister/brother in the Christian church.

### Deep need

These types of usage are very old and cannot be regarded simply as metaphors of the genetically related family. They have an independent life of their own and reflect a deep human need to express common sympathy and purpose beyond the narrow bounds of the biological family.

Would Clause 29's undefined "family" stand up

in a court of law against the centuries-old tradition of these centrifugal forces? Do judges interpret the presumed intention of the legislators, however inadequately expressed, or do they base their judgments on what is actually said?

Still more perverse (if that's the right word) is the use of "pretended". Consider what is actually being said. If local authorities may not promote the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship, then the implication is that they may promote the acceptability of the opposite - the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a real family relationship.

### Word superfluous

Thus if a teacher said, "Homosexual relationships are not real family relationships but only pretended ones," then this would break the law.

But it would be permissible to say the contrary, that "Homosexual relationships are not pretended family relationships but real ones."

For the purposes of the clause's promoters, in fact, the word "pretended" is superfluous. It was included, presumably, because of the irresistible temptation to add a gratuitously insulting perjorative adjective. What a marvellous irony if, in doing so, they have subverted the entire purpose of the clause!

### FOOTNOTE

And if you're wondering why such a morally and legally dubious measure is sailing through Parliament with so little resistance, here are two reasons, one from each side of the House.

(1) When Labour environment spokesmen John Cunningham and Jeff Rooker were asked by some members of the shadow cabinet to move an amendment to the bill stating that homosexual relationships are not inferior to heterosexual, they refused. Said Rooker: "Jack Cunningham and I are fighting the next general election for Labour, not the next elections to Labour's national executive. It is not part of Labour policy - and is not going to be part of Labour policy - to promote homosexuality."

### Doubts shared

(2) When a delegation from the local branch of the National Council for Civil Liberties went to ask Nottingham East MP Michael Knowles to oppose Clause 29, they were interested to find that he shared many of their doubts. However, he was convinced that it wouldn't have the effect its opponents claimed, and that if it did it would soon be repealed. He blamed it all on Tory backbenchers reacting to provocation by left-wing councils. (The clause was introduced by backbenchers at committee stage and was not part of the original bill.)

So would he oppose it? Ah well, there was a whip on the entire bill, you see, and he wasn't going to lay his career on the line for Clause 29. (Mr Knowles is Parliamentary Private Secretary to William Waldegrave, Minister for Housing and Planning.)

## Doormat hits back

HAPPILY, THERE ARE STILL a few Tories who haven't joined the doormat tendency. Among them is Gedling Borough Councillor Wendy Golland. Cllr Golland isn't at all enamoured of Nicholas Ridley's habitual sneers at local government and any form of planning. More unusually, she said so in public at the Tories' Local Government Conference in London on March 5th, drawing unfavourable comparisons between the performance of Secretary of State Ridley's Department of the Environment and her own planning department at Gedling.

"We're proud of our achievement in issuing 80% of our planning decisions in eight weeks," she said. "Unfortunately our record cannot be matched by that of your department."

And she pointed out that an appeal lodged in 1986 in Gedling which had gone to public inquiry in February 1987 was still awaiting a decision from the DoE. Mr Ridley promised to look into it as soon as he got back to the office on Monday morning.

She also reminded him that she was still waiting for an answer to a complaint she made at last year's conference about lack of support from the government on out-of-town shopping centres: "If planning authorities give way under the pressure, our inner cities will die," she warned.

But Cllr Golland is on a loser there. Mr Ridley is on record as believing that local authorities have no business telling developers where to put their shops. Rumour also has it that he told councillors and council officers in Nottingham that if developers wanted to build all over the Market Square, then it wasn't the council's place to stop them.

## Mucking out

FOR THE LAST SIXTY YEARS, Soviet communism has been as much of a recommendation for socialism as Adolf Hitler for a career in house-painting.

So what do we make of Eric Hobsbawm, intellectual, historian, jazz critic, occasional guru to Neil Kinnock, CP loyalist for over fifty years, and advocate now of reformism, accommodation, coalition?

I admire much of Hobsbawm's work (though his trilogy on the nineteenth century seems overpraised - a chronicle rather than the synthesising masterwork it's often claimed to be). But I was somewhat taken aback by his recent confession in a *Guardian* interview:

"For many years, being a Marxist and a Communist, I wasn't anxious to write about Russia - because you'd get into trouble. You couldn't write without actually deciding that the official line on most things was horse shit. We know that. So it was easier to keep off it."

Horse shit! Now he tells us! Such honesty! Such moral fibre! Such fearless regard for the truth!

But it's logical enough that Professor Hobsbawm should now be a leading enthusiast for an anti-