

How's this for a Liberal view? Let's lock away drunks



The Malcolm Richards Column

Confession time: the truth will out. I must plead guilty, (if you have not already guessed), to being a bleeding-heart liberal, an ineffectual dove, a limp pacifist, a wet sofite verging on the red beans and sandals.

My friends – among whom number readers of the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph – view me as well meaning but misguided.

Let's be clear about how serious this is – I would send to prison only violent offenders; I would withdraw troops from Iraq and Afghanistan (unless they were under UN control); abolish private education; increase income and inheritance tax; and exclude private cars from town centres.

Yet (and I suspect like many other fifties children who lived through the Second World War, sympathised with the Aldermaston marchers, campaigned to

abolish capital punishment and legalise homosexuality) I am in favour of former New York Mayor Giuliani's zero tolerance of petty street crime.

Furthermore I would reintroduce some form of strict but non-military national service for teenagers who behave badly – even if not convicted of a definable crime.

This is particularly apt in a week when a Home Office committee under the chairmanship of Tory MP Edward Leigh (a former GLC member for Richmond) has declared that many city centres are in danger of becoming no-go areas.

The loutish behaviour which is now commonplace in areas of Richmond and Hounslow has swung me and many of my compatriots to territory generally occupied by the extreme right.

I know rough justice in the town centres – flinging apparently out of control youths into Black Marias without conclusive evidence of a crime being committed – would be an infringement of civil liberties. (Though an undeserved night in a latter day dungeon would not do anyone any lasting harm).

I can foresee the pages of the Richmond and Twickenham Times being filled with the angry protests of aggrieved parents about their offspring being forced to languish overnight in dank police cells for little more than youthful high spirits.

But example is the finest teacher and news would soon spread after a few hundred over exuberant revellers were batted down for the night and forced to sober up in a miserable coal hole.

We have caught the Californian disease – adopted the religion of Youth Culture – and are now experiencing the grim symptoms.

One of my literary heroes, Clive James, once wrote that young people in San Francisco are so pampered that they not only believe it is their right to reach out and pick an apple from the nearest tree – they think

someone should be employed to place it into their outstretched hand. We see some of worst effects of teenage indulgence in this affluent corner of south west London.

Its roots go back a long time. When I first became editor in the seventies Richmond had a Jekyll and Hyde reputation.

Genteel middle aged and middle class folk occupied the streets between 9am and 6 pm (media types, office workers, twinset and pearls shoppers). Rowdy and laddish outsiders moved in from 7pm until 2am (Under 25s from Hounslow, Feltham Wandsworth, wreaking havoc in the streets and many finishing up in Richmond Magistrates' Court the following morning.)

Despite the best efforts of our patient but tenacious constabulary, things have got steadily worse over the decades.

The fact that young women have joined the ranks of the lager brigade together with the brood of the hedonist middle class has fanned the flames.

So enter stage right New York's Republican super hero, advocates this leftie.

Start a lock-em-up-before-they-get-a-chance-to-cause-real-trouble policy is the considered opinion of this survivor of the Flower Power era (though I must stress we were too busy lobbying for peace to vomit in the streets or abuse policemen).

If you know you are likely to be incarcerated for putting a tiny foot one inch wrong – or are even perceived to have put a toe wrong – and will be detained overnight for little more than dropping a bottle on the pavement or urinating in a shop doorway – behaviour patterns would change.

At the beginning of his premiership Tony Blair advocated a similar approach – marching young hooligans off to a cash machine. Unfortunately, like so many of his knee-jerk reactions, it was ill judged and not thought through.

Like poll tax it would have hit the poor harder than the rich and would have been

impossible to administrate.

His government always refused to put trust in the professionals – whether they be teachers, social workers or policemen.

Overnight detention of anyone viewed as antisocial cannot be defined by precise legislation. It requires putting power into the hands of the bobby on the beat.

It will be tough on some innocents and powers of detention need to be limited to 24 hours at a stretch. But it did work in New York and makes sense when dealing with a generation of teenagers who regard themselves as Masters of the Universe and still believe they are young enough to know everything.

All power to the elbow therefore of Richmond police commander Rick Turner who has warned that people who drink a lot and cause a nuisance are not welcome in his borough.

He needs to be given the power to demonstrate this dramatically – to rugby fan, partygoer, disco fanatic, late night drinker – who oversteps the mark – regardless of whether there is enough evidence to charge them with an offence.

A night in the cooler would achieve a lot. Several nights thus detained would qualify for conscriptional national service – a form of boot camp if you like, as an excellent leading article on the subject in this newspaper recommended a couple of week ago, where you rise with the sun and are sent to your bed when it sets and beer and cannabis are out of reach.

How's that for a card carrying opponent of corporal punishment and a life long Civil Rights advocate?

If the local Conservatives take up this idea I might even consider canvassing for them next time round.

And that would be revolution indeed.

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