

Tough on kids; tough on the causes of kids!

Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Jack Straw, who recently proposed a curfew on children, opens his heart and mind to Patrick Avakuum

AS Tony Blair's team waits impatiently to cross the floor of the House of Commons and show that they can outdo the Tories, Jack Straw, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary has emerged as an unexpected Front Bench star in this brilliant company.

For a long time Straw — "straw in name, straw in his mouth, straw between his ears" as someone once unkindly said — was regarded as the village idiot of the Front Bench. Not any more. Straw has come into his own.

Like others, such as the ever-impressive Harriet Harman, Straw was a bit of a lefty in his time, when that was indicated. Times changed, however. The left divided. On one side stood the old incorrigible, prattle-festing unteachables such as Tony Benn and the late Eric Heffer. On the other re-grouped, the serious anti-Tories. Jack Straw took his place in their ranks. He knew where his priorities must be.

Unkind people still spoke of him as "dirty Straw", or as "that pompous, stupid little prick — comments attributed, no doubt falsely, to the envious Tony Benn. But they had got it wrong; Jack would soon prove just how wrong.

Jack knew that in the 1990s you get nowhere with "I don't want to win" fastidiousness and Old Labour scruples and residual decencies. He understood that Labour had to make itself distinct from the Tories even while in essence copying them; and he knew that it couldn't be done from the left: the Tories could only be defeated from the right. He grasped the essential point of modern British politics: that the country is irredeemably Tory; therefore those who lead it must be Tory also. More Tory than the Tories, where that is indicated. Jack was ready for Tony Blair's signal when it came.

Today he has the Tory's Tory, Home Secretary Michael Howard, on the run, with his relentless pursuit of the incisive ultra-Tory sound bite. Whatever Howard says, Jack Straw goes one better. His recent proposal to place children under curfew had lock-em-up-and-cut-their-hands-off Howard dazed with envy and chagrin. On Howard's face during the exchange in the House of Commons you could see creeping awareness that against Home Secretary Straw, there will be nothing for him to do in opposition! New Labour will be the natural party of Tory government!

I went to see Straw in the House of Commons and sat, not without awe, across a table from him in a tea room.

His specs gleamed with visionary blue light as he expounded his ideas. "You have to understand," Jack said to me, "that this business of kids goes to the heart of everything: kids are at the root of all evil... er, of all our problems..." adding mysteriously, "even of the beef crisis." He smiled suddenly and stroked himself on the back of the neck with the private pleasure of a man of ideas who has just seen a logical extension of an exciting seminal idea:

"Do you know, that if it were not for kids, Britain would not have an education problem? In fact Britain would have one of the best education systems in the world! It's not the Tories, it's the kids. And they grow up to become vandals, muggers, squeeze-whatsits, homeless vagrants, recipients of welfare benefits and social housing. They are both cause and victims of BSE," he added.

"Eh?" I interjected, hoping he'd stop and explain, but he didn't, swept along by the force of his own cleansing passion.

"Every one of these recreants and parasites, these pieces of human debris clogging up the natural workings of the social market — street sleepers, beggars,

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buskers, single mothers — every one of them began as kids. Utterly unproductive and pre-post modern!" he muttered with sullen vehemence, biting his lip to control his anger.

The well-chewed yellow strand of straw, through which he'd been drooling spittle, had inadvertently fallen to the floor. Mastering himself, he bent down, picked up his trade mark piece of straw and put it back in the side of his mouth.

Opening his briefcase he took out a pamphlet, which from its type style and layout I could see was very old and probably precious. I caught a glimpse of part of the title "... *Modest Proposal*" before he flattened the cover on the table and began carefully turning the pages.

"Here," he said, "is the answer. One of the greatest thinkers in the history of political economy — and he has been ignored for 300 years! I can't understand why no one else has found this man before now. Here is the Copernicus of social science;

Malthus with a sexually liberating solution to the problem he propounds!" he said chuckling in fond appreciation.

"Back to Victorian values? Tory half-measures! Back to Queen Anne and George I, I say! This man" he said, indicating the pamphlet, "understood 300 years ago things we have not caught up with even now!" This is the antidote to the permissive society; the logical counterpart to the sexual revolution of the '60s!

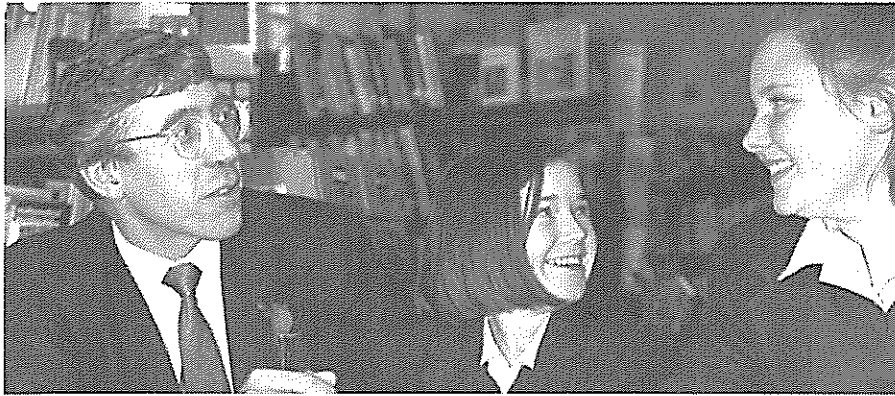
Straw looked up with an abstracted air and then, fixing me straight in the eye, said: "the truth is that there are *far too many* children. They are everywhere! It's a self-multiplying nightmare that will grow worse, generation after generation, if it is not tackled now!" He banged the table for emphasis. The straw in the side of his mouth bobbed up and down hypnotically as he talked. "If it had been tackled 300 years ago, we'd be in a better position now, I can tell you that. But, unfortunately there was no New Labour then.

What do I advocate? That we change our dietary and self-replicatory habits." He rolled the big words like gob-stoppers in his mouth. "What do I propose?" he asked again. "*Eat surplus children!* We should eat at least half our children! Poor people tend to have too many children anyway. And not enough proper food," he added, pausing to let it sink in.

"Under present conditions, children are an underused and therefore under-appreciated commodity. Yet they are a capital resource in almost every family if the market for them is allowed to develop. The time has come for rigour and logic. Old Labour sentimentality has so far held us back. Listen". He looked down and after a moment's pause read from the pamphlet.

"I have been assured by a very knowing American of my Acquaintance in London; that a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, as a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and, I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a Fricasie, or Ragoust.

"I do therefore humbly offer it to publick Consideration, that of the Hundred and Twenty Thousand Children, already computed, Twenty thousand may be reserved for Breed;... the remaining Hundred thousand, may, at a Year old, be offered in Sale to the Persons of Quality and Fortune, through the Kingdom; always advising the Mother to let them suck plentifully in the last Month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good Table. A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter.



"Turn a problem into a solution", says Straw, New Labour's deepest thinker

"I grant this Food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords; who, as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children."

He stopped and looked at me again, eyes gleaming: "There, isn't that a tremendous, breathtaking idea? Such clarity! Poverty amidst overpopulation always carries its own solution! This is one of those ideas which, once conceived, hits you and transforms the way you see everything.

"What are the obstacles to it? Squeamishness! But that can be overcome: people get used to anything, as Mrs Thatcher proved when the cit-izen-ry" — sardonically smiling and drawing out the word in mockery — "quickly learned to accept homeless people sleeping in the streets. They were all young once too!" he said, mouth clenching. Somebody's kids — some idiot mother probably once cuddled each of these crud now sleeping rough on London sidewalks."

I must have looked unconvinced, for now he put his hand on my arm and talked eloquently and earnestly. "Think of all the benefits, man! We would have a new, eternally self-replenishable source of cheap nourishing human food — the chicken of the new millennium. The slogan possibilities are breathtaking. Learn from the Americans! Roosevelt campaigned success-

fully with the slogan 'A chicken in every pot!' New Labour? 'A nice plump crowing baby in every pot', perhaps. What do you think?

"In any case, culling an unwanted nuisance, we would save immense sums in education. With less children we could concentrate on the things that really matter, like putting British schools at the top of the international league tables. With less unruly kids, we would have less crime, and policing bills would go down too, freeing scarce resources for other things. Or, again: think of the effect on youth unemployment.

"And think of it, think what it would do for school and home discipline! There would have to be an upper age limit of course — 10 maybe — but you could instil discipline for life long before that age if you laid it on the line for them early: behave or you go on the menu! School meals, especially in the slum areas would in part be generated within the schools. Think of the savings! We could perhaps avoid a return to corporal punishment in school and dispense with it in the home."

"Get to the root of it, eh?" I said.

"Exactly! Think of the beneficent effect on family life," he said, with renewed excitement, seeing another branch budding on the Big Idea: "Every family would value its children; a curfew might not prove necessary after all! Farmers don't let valuable sheep roam in city streets at night, do they?

It would go a long way towards solving the problem of single mothers. Each unmarried mother could, by signing a contract, secure a small assured income at no public cost in the crucial period! Credits could be extended on the basis of expected earning power calculated according to the projected weight and size of the baby: an Unmarried Mothers Loan System, so to speak. Some of them might like the work and get jobs on battery farms: once a market developed such things would come. That would dent the unemployment figures.

"There is a strong ecology vote out there and with such a policy it would keep Labour in power for a generation.

"Think of the effect on Third World poverty if Britain could go to the UN with such a proposal, or better still, example: it would have tremendous effect on the fight

against Third World poverty! A bit of judicious *modern*" — emphasising the word — "cannibalism would do no end of good over there. Again, think of the effect on the housing crisis — not in a generation, but now! Single mothers would not need to queue-jump.

"Or again," — his glasses glinted with jerky enthusiasm as he grinned suddenly — "think of the effect on football hooliganism: Britain could export it when young!" He chuckled at his own joke.

Somewhat dazed, but beginning to be infected by his enthusiasm, I asked: "You said earlier that it might be a solution to the beef crisis. You mean as a substitute meat?" He looked at me, smiling like a benign schoolteacher who has set you a favourite puzzle and is empathising with your attempts to work your way through it. "Well yes, but — No!"

"Then I can't see it."

"Can't you man? Can't you?" Beaming and showing his teeth, he looked more than a little like the Joker in Batman. He paused waiting to see if I'd get it and then, like a maths teacher unfolding an inexorable bit of logic, he said "We could process the head, brain, heart, bones and guts for cattle food! Better than bits of sick sheep and pig! We wouldn't need to feed them diseased animals any more. The number of kids as yet with BSE is infinitesimal. There is no scientific evidence that cows can catch it from humans anyway — there'd be no problem. It would put British farming on a new basis — dish the Tories in the shires.

Suddenly the grin of the enthusiast keen to unfold for you the ramifications of his idea froze on Jack Straw's face. "But no, maybe not," he said, thoughtfully. "That might be taking it a good idea too far. It might make the basic notion harder to sell. Reversing the age-old relationship between humankind and kine might trigger a gut Old Conservatism, and play into the hands of the Tories. Look at how people misunderstood the Dunblane massacre. Bad public relations there!" Jack Straw said thoughtfully. "Shame," he mused, "Waste is a sin, you know?" Then he brightened. "Maybe later, when people have got used to the basic idea."

But now he looked at his watch pointedly and I realised that my exhilarating ride in tandem with Straw up and down the slopes of visionary social policy was over. "I must go". He stood up, took the trade mark piece of yellow straw — I noticed that it was artificial, plastic, fake straw — out of the ashtray where he had for a moment propped it, put it back in his mouth and was gone.

I had to make my own way out through a throng of uniformed primary school children who had come with their teachers on a school trip to see Parliament. One of them bumped into me — deliberately I thought — and grinned roguishly, not a bit sorry, thrilled and giddy to be there in the Mother of Parliaments. Smiling thinly to myself, I turned my back on him: "Just you wait!", I muttered, "Just you wait!"

Jack Straw is anxious to hear from anyone with information about the author of this pamphlet. Write to him c/o the George I Values Society, House of Commons