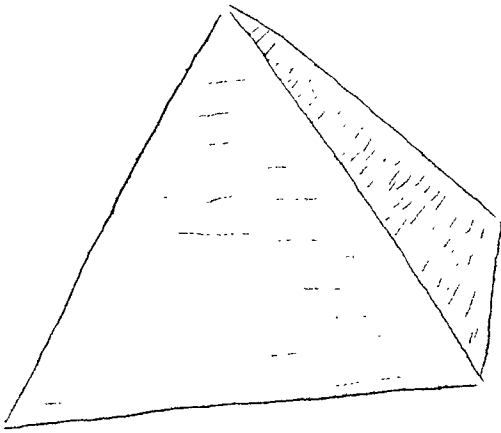


The (47) on the Mat



"I was so impressed,
I bought the company."

Hello and Wibblecombe to another episode in the continuing series of 'Mental Breakdowns - My Way' by Peter Doubleday, B.O. Er, A. This is the Thing, characterised by Derek Sutherland as follows: "Think of it in the same way as you would pay £1 for a (largely boring) copy of Punch."

Yes, this is the tingly boring Thing on the Mat, and it costs
£1 for three, £2 for eight and £5 for twenty.

It incorporates, in a purely metaphysical way, Chris Spall's Slap and Tickle, but not this time, sunshine.

In addition, and at no further expense, every now and again the wandering Jew appears in the form of Mark Smith, editor infraordinaire of The Hitch-Hiker. One Bernard Emblem thinks I am hoist by my own petard in having a fledgling under my wing whose zine name derives from HHGttG. Think again, sweetums. As any fule kno, The Hitch-Hiker is a Rutger Mauer fanzine dealing in terror and existential symbology. Mark has translated it from the original American of The Hitcher.

Anyway, he isn't present either.

But Peter is, and Peter lives at 302 Lordswood Rd, Harborne, Birmingham B17 8AN.

The next deadline is Saturday 23rd August. This may seem a little short, but wait 'til you see the games ... Sopwith orders are optional by this deadline. Nothing else is. The next issue will be free, so you can think of it in the same way as you would pay nothing whatsoever for a (largely mind-blowing) copy of The Watchtower (yes, I know, only in your most dreadful nightmares).

Peter is wondering if he has missed anything out, and the only thing he can think of is the CoA:

Pete Bates, 33 Means Drive, Burradon, Cramlington, Nthumberland NE23 7NS.
(091 268 3998)

Nick Simpkins: 41 Austin Place, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 1LT
(and not at Lucca Drive, as previously advertised)

There, that should be embarrassing enough. One more thing, for players in Game Fifteen: Rowland has sent me some corrections. He is right to say that I owe BoB 12 for Manhattan and Brooklyn. I have checked this on an RGR report, and it is the correct procedure. That will teach me to go thinking that, just because a 'town' has brackets around it, it must be different in some way, such as being merely a suburb; although I still fail to see the rationale behind it. He might be right about Neanderthal owing PRIC 1 for the junction at H34, but since that is before round 4, I do not care and am not going to check up. He is definitely wrong (hooray!) when suggesting that he only owes Eagle 2 for H24-H25 - junction at H25 costing one, plus two half-hexes parallel, innit?

An important notice for all subscribers and traders, under the Data Protection Act. Though I do not have a computer, and in fact can truthfully say that, at present, I would not take money even to touch one, it is an indubitable fact that I possess what is, in effect, an informal database. To wit, I have stored your names, addresses and credit on a set of file cards. Since the DPA was brought in so that ordinary citizens might be able to check where and when this sensitive information was passed from a permitted database to a rogue one, it follows that I am morally compelled to inform you of this fact. After all, information can as easily pass from my file cards to the subscription list for White Power Weekly, Punch, The Watchtower or The Readers Digest as it could from yer average home computer, bereft of modem. Unless you inform me otherwise, therefore, I am going to take your card and burn it, having first drunk your subscription.

Oh, by the way, there's a bible on the front page, in invisible ink - the lemon method. Just hold it over a flame to read it.

No contents. Barthes would love this.

REAL EDITORS DON'T

... try to explain brussels sprouts ...

The only point of an English garden, it seems to me, is that it is perfect for growing raspberries in. For ten months of the year, the garden is submerged beneath snow, permafrost, hailstones, anti-personnel raindrops, next door's footballs, and cat-piddle, but for two fitfully sunny months in the middle of the summer, when the brats next door are away and the cat has collapsed in a heap with furballs, the garden is perfect for growing things that need equal shares of sun and moisture. The raspberry rules supreme in this field. It is my favourite fruit (no comments please). Of course, the English being who they are, they tend to prefer growing vast quantities of grass in a pathetic attempt to convince the next-door neighbours that they really are country gentlemen, honestly, and that domestic beasts such as cats, dogs and in extreme cases, children, require grass to sustain themselves over the long pasture months. One day I hope to team up with my geneticist friends and create a cow which stands two and a half hands high - we'd make a fortune selling it to these people. And a whole collection of doll's house-like accessories - twee little bells, bovine petticoats (you've heard of cowslips, sir, haven't you? Wouldn't want your prize heffer to be mounted by the labrador, would you, in front of the whole neighbourhood? Well, there you are then), and rubber tweezers for milking purposes. Hours of fun for twisted psychopaths everywhere. However, in the meantime, I can only marvel at people who waste all that lovely fertile soil growing grass, begonias, and tedious, inedible things like that. There is something demented about spending an hour a day manicuring something so sickly that every form of fungus, moss, toadstool or mushroom, which might happen to drift over from its proper place disfiguring the yards of working class nonentities. The English are, in short, a nation of law'n' order freaks. (I've said it before, but I like it, so I'll say it again.)

Mind you, all is not well at Raspberry Mansions, 302 Lordswood Rd. For a start off, my parents are also under the delusion that grass means class - consequently, we have something out there which resembles the Russian steppes minus interesting things like firs and boyar massacres. However, we do have our own collectivised raspberry farm, positioned cleverly in the windiest corner of the garden so that all the canes have fallen down in the wind and forced tight into the fence so that it is impossible to gain access to fifty per cent of the stuff. Needless to say, this fifty per cent is precisely where the most raspberries grow. I now have the scars on my wrist to prove this, although anyone looking at arms dyed bright red with juice might conclude something rather more sinister. Irritatingly enough, my parents have chosen to go on holiday at the precise moment when a plurality of the raspberries ripen, relying on my greed and obsessiveness to overcome my laziness far enough for me to pick the little baskets. As a result we now have the almost pavlovian sight of me rummaging around the wilderness, salivating madly, cursing roundly and damaging the delicate balance of our garden ecology in the pursuit of this wretched but compulsive fruit.

Which is why I mention brussels sprouts.

It amounts almost to a parable, really. Grasshoppers and ants are all very well, but what really brings home the futility of relying on others to do your work for you is the struggle between fresh fruit and frozen vegetables. Here we are, in God's Own Second Country, with just enough rain and sun to ensure bumper crops of wonderful raspberries, and what is the English cuisine famous for? Brussels sprouts. Here I am with a freezer-full of goodies to stuff into my gob every time the pangs of hunger set in, and what have I got for vegetables? Peas (hmmm), chips and brussels sprouts. Yecch. Brussels sprouts, the only vegetable in the known universe to have monosodium glutamate built in. It is almost possible, with supreme concentration, to eat a mound of brussels sprouts without noticing the appalling taste and greasy texture, but it is definitively impossible to avoid regurgitating the said taste at intervals of ten minutes for the rest of the evening. I have tried stewing them long, stewing them short, and even on one occasion barbecuing them (an accident, actually), but no matter what I do with a brussels sprout I cannot help wondering about the sanity of a nation which can market them in economic quantities.

And I confidently expect the part of the garden which isn't lawn to be turned over wholesale to the bloody things next year ...

ROYAL SEX AIDE IN NIG-NOG MERCY DASH

There are two questions that arise from last week's Constitutional Crisis. The first, of course, is why on earth we have such a dreadful press and whether we can lay claim to having any sort of educational system at all when a supposed 'quality' newspaper like the Sunday Times can concoct such a wilful mess of misrepresented gibberish and then splash it over the front page as an 'exclusive'. Well, that's two questions already, isn't it, mush, but I'm counting them as one. After all, there would be little danger in having a lobotomised press if people paid it no attention at all; but, sadly, people do tend to believe what they read in newspapers and even to adjust their view of the outside world to place what a newspaper thinks important over what a newspaper disregards entirely. Of course, this is an oversimplified view. Actually, what happens is that a newspaper shapes itself to fit popular prejudice and, ah, 'taste', and only then begins to manipulate its data to create Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt amongst its readers and thereby sell copies. One could claim that Joe Gormless would take exactly the same view as the average newspaper columnist if presented with the same putative facts. Indeed, I would so argue, so one is quite right. However, this begs a question (question, please, maestro): do we expect newspapers to do a little basic thinking on our behalf, or do we expect them to spout questionable 'common sense' at us? The answer is, from an anticipatory view, that we expect the latter. But in the sense of 'expect' that refers to exhortation, I would have thought that any responsible person would be worried when the press fails to do the former. It's much like Burke's theory of representative government. Writing on behalf of the educated classes, Burke pointed out that the ideal form of government would consist of everyone taking an interest in everything, reaching a conclusion in each case, and voting for some measure to be taken. This being impractical outside anarcho-syndicalist communes, which young Edmund wouldn't have understood anyway, we have representative government, which is to say not a government in which a representative is delegated to perform the will of his constituents and nothing but that will, but one in which the electorate chooses individuals which it trusts to make vital decisions on their own bat. If you disagree with your MP, as I am bound to do with Jill Knight on almost everything, you cannot complain that she should be doing what you want, because that isn't what she's there for. She is, in fact, there to do what is best for you. If you don't like the preponderance of her decisions you can vote her out next time, or in my case move down the road a few hundred yards and go through the whole miserable experience again with some right-wing Labour scumbag.

Burke's theory applies also to newspapers, as any follower of Carlyle and the 'Fourth Estate' would realise. In kind, they are much the same as a government. They have political influence both up and down the ladder of electoral process. They have roughly the same access to information pertaining to any political question; in theory, they are composed of roughly the same degree of intelligent and articulate people who can make points and reach a consensus in the same way as can a parliament. 'Course, it never works like that ... but then, parliament is not exactly a model reflection of Burke's theories, and on the whole we can put up with it because it is based on the general thrust of those theories...

In other words, to stagger back to my original question, we should indeed expect newspapers to act in a responsible and intelligent, and preferably in an educating, manner, and when as is the present case we find them operating in the contrary manner, we should scream blue murder. We should, in short, become a nation of Outraged of Tunbridge Wells. Much good it would do us, of course, but all I'm saying is that anyone pooh-poohing the importance of newspapers and the worrying implications of their degeneracy should go and wash his head out with nitric acid.

However, this is not what we were going to talk about here ... and so we come on to my second question, which is why this article is titled as it is. What exactly is wrong with a monarchy anyway?

The general thrust of every paper to comment on this 'Constitutional Crisis' has been

that the queen, by indulging in actual politics, is endangering her throne and the love and esteem in which all her subjects hold her. Consequently, the argument runs, she should shut up and get on with the business of breeding corgis. This is why we have a constitutional crisis (or in fact do not have, since the whole basic assumption that she was about to run Thatcher through with a toasting stick has been demolished). Of course, the argument is utter tosh. Constitutionally, it is a thick-headed piece of misinterpretation.

Constitutionally, in fact, we are still living in the age of the Glorious Revolution. The Glorious Revolution, so called because orange is such a pretty colour and for no other reason, gave us a bundle of paper guarantees of our constitution such as the Bill of Rights, the Triennial/Septennial/Quinquennial Act governing the duration of parliaments, and the lovely and enlightened Act of Succession which will no doubt soon be repealed so that Prince Harry can marry Grace Kelly's grand-daughter with the Pope officiating and thus double our GNP for the year. To this you can add late accretions such as the various Acts of Union which set down a unified monetary system and ironed out certain administrative difficulties in ruling the newly united kingdoms; the Act that created the Civil List and left the crown's estates to be managed by parliament; and one or two johnny-come-latelies such as Lloyd-George's Peerage Bills to restrict the influence of the Upper House. All these are fairly trivial in limiting the power of the crown; indeed, if one wanted to be Hobbesian about it, one could claim that what the crown has once granted, the crown is quite capable of taking away. Of course, in practice it isn't quite like that, but the essential point remains that all this rot we talk about the British Constitution is based on customary usage, established institutions and sentiment, for the most part, and very little on a paper basis, giving restitution in law.

And why is this important, you may ask? Quite simply, because if the queen should want to do something not specifically forbidden her by the written constitution, she can damn well do it and no P's and Q's about it. Specifically, the royal prerogative so far as I am aware still embraces full control of the Royal Household, the creation of unlimited new peerages, the command of the armed forces and, of course, an arbitrary freedom on choosing an Administration. At one extreme, the queen is entitled to call out the army for a military coup if, say, she thinks unilateralism is a dangerous nonsense. (Not very likely, I agree.) In between the extremes, she can tell Mrs Thatcher to go and play with her voodoo dolls somewhere else and try to form a new administration. And before you start crying that this is a demented throwback to a barbaric age of authoritarianism, consider just how 'representative' a method we currently have of choosing governments. Nobody elected Mrs Thatcher; they merely elected her party. Even less so did anyone choose the present cabinet, for all the good it might do with their current state of wimpy inaction: Mrs Thatcher not merely chose them personally (with some regard to the effects on the party of eschewing the wets altogether), but is now in charge of a cabinet almost entirely different to the one she had when the voters gave her a 'vote of confidence'. We do not, in fact, in fact, have a system allowing us to elect 'governments' at all; the most we can do is to veto them five years after the event.

Now consider the last example of monarchical government in an active sense, namely the early reign of George III, before he went off and lived his life talking to trees. Here, we are looking at a period of political crisis in which cabinets changed wholesale every two or three years, dependent upon international events, changing moods in the Commons, and the need to boost the economy at various points (notably during wars). Now, we may not want a political crisis. As distinct from a constitutional one, however, this is precisely what we have got at the moment, and it's no good sticking our heads in the sand pretending that it is not the fault of the system. It is. There is at present almost no recourse to changing the complexion of the government, however wacky and dangerous its policies may be. Similarly the crises of the period 1760-1787 would have been crises with or without the king's rather inept interventions; but the thing to note here is that, despite an almost congenital lack of ability to get the administration right, George III was nevertheless forced by the realities of the political system under which he operated to select cabinets which operated on a proper consensus basis (not this current farrago of "I do what I want and you agree with it!")

and which, on the whole, put the right parliamentary talent in charge of solving the right problems. Effectively, parliament acted as mediator between the political nation and the executive. If Mrs Thatcher had been Prime Minister in the 1760s, we wouldn't have a commonwealth because we wouldn't have the legacy of an Indian empire; we wouldn't have industry to destroy because the cotton mills would never have got off the ground; and we wouldn't have an EEC because France would now rule the whole of Europe. It is a measure of the unreality of most current conservative thinking that all these would be regarded as successes ...

Coming back to newspapers for a moment (and yes, it is relevant), have you noticed the full extent of the Sun's insidious influence on Fleet Street, or, as I suppose we shall now have to call it, the East India Docks? Even the Telegraph now has a Page Three. No, honestly. Of course, the print quality is so abysmal that, in my copy dated July 29th, Smamfa Fox looks like Joan Ruddock (a considerable step up in my humble libido's opinion). However, of the seven main stories, the following are sex-related: "See-through blouse lure at Dr Jaffe's"; "Manager 'squeezed' my breast"; "Family doctor 'fondled his lover's daughter'"; "Sex ration wife loses cash appeal". Of the other three, two are sensationalist - "Axe killer woman to be retried"; "Woman killed by her grandson's friend" - and one, "Phone tap on CND", is an excuse for the rather fetching picture of Joanie. All the rest of the paper is as boring as usual, if not descending into hysterical closet fascism, but page three, now that's another matter: there is now a tradition to be kept up.

However, we are not concerned with free advertising for Dr Jaffe. No, I bring this up because of the national press's obsession with sex and the royal family. Novel? Recent? Not a bit of it. The king's sexual proclivities have been a major topic of informed discussion for centuries. The interesting thing about this is, many, if not most, of the crises which have led to the gradual decrease in the monarch's power have been sexual in nature. You might think that politicians would have based their calls for reform on something a little more substantial, such as national bankruptcy, say, or imminent apocalypse, but no: when George III's ministers tried to get rid of the reformer John Wilkes, he hit back with scurrilous press notices advertising a supposed liaison between George's mother and his chief minister. When parliament passed the Regency Act during the napoleonic wars, one of their main worries was to curb the power of the future George IV, who couldn't be trusted on account of his hanky-panky with Mrs Fitzherbert (aka Susannah York, tellie-pickers). Nobody thought much of Edward VII because he spent as much time as possible boffing actresses. Edward VIII made a hash of the monarchy's reputation by running off with an American commoner, and ... well ...

We may, by now, have legitimised royal sexual behaviour. Not only do the hoi polloi accept it nowadays, they positively wallow in it. I strongly suspect that any Windsor would be elected by a landslide if they were able to stand for parliament, and part of this is because, despite being rather dull people on the whole, they catch the popular imagination by their sexual exploits. I bring this up merely as an example of popularity, because they have quite enough power at their disposal without resorting to one of the few violations of the constitution they are capable of. The fact is, most of the transfer of power between what is still in theory the executive of this country - the monarch - and the legislative body - Westminster - has been nem. con. and the result of sexual scandal. Being on a purely personal basis, it has never been ratified by statute. If a future monarch should wish to regain some of the lost ground, I can see very little except a massive popular turnaround standing in his way.

So, why not the monarchy? On the whole they're good folk, passably well educated, secure enough in their own position not to structure manifestos according to the need to be re-elected next time. They are sympathetic to some of the more moderate worries of the British, such as child poverty, property developers, and conservation. They even have a vested interest in international affairs, which is one of the major weaknesses of present British governments. They could start by overhauling the judiciary, which is constitutionally their department, and by actually influencing Royal Commissions, which might thereby produce results instead of crappy documentation.

And if all else fails, they can always return to acting as the nation's panda bears, eliciting an obsessive instinct in their breeding habits.