

Wolfgang highlights deeper disquiet

Analysis

By Nick Assinder

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Headlines about an 82-year old Jewish escapee from the Nazis being manhandled out of Labour conference for daring to yell "nonsense" at the Foreign Secretary is probably not the way Tony Blair wanted to end this rally.

But, for many regular conference visitors, this was far from a surprise.

Ever-tightening security and a distinctly intolerant attitude towards "interruptions", as the prime minister called them, meant this was a headline waiting to happen.

There have been a few examples of it in the recent past.

Most notably, the prime minister was mid-speech last year when a hunting protester attempted a freestyle heckle only to be instantly grabbed by "burly bouncers" and helped to the exit.

No one who was there will forget the incongruity of the prime minister telling the man he was lucky to live in a free society where such things were allowed - just as he was being bundled out of the hall surrounded by stewards.

Fury

The picture of veteran peace campaigner Walter Wolfgang - "Wolfie" as he is now universally known - is far more powerful, some here describing it as a disturbing echo of the authoritarian regime he once fled from.

Tony Blair, Jack Straw, Ian McCartney and just about everybody else in the Labour hierarchy have now apologised to Mr Wolfgang through the media.

Although Mr Blair has no plans to meet him face-to-face.

Meanwhile, some delegates were expressing their fury at the man's treatment, claiming it was just the latest example of the control freakery and stage management that has characterised these events for many years now.

Previous leaders of all parties once believed dealing with hecklers was all part of the job and having the skill to do so with some panache was seen as a distinct personal plus.

No one liked it, but all accepted it was one of the downsides of free speech.

'Mistakes'

Those days are long gone and everything is now about control and eliminating every opportunity for the rogue heckler or unscripted and unvetted member of the public getting through to the leader.

Mr Wolfgang, being welcomed back into the conference by apologetic Labour bosses, has described his treatment as trivial compared to the big "mistakes" of invading Iraq or holding nuclear weapons.

"You cannot stifle debate by hiring heavies. A party has got to be open to the world. The Labour party must get back to its culture of being open to argument. Let's hope this is a step on the way back," he said.



Mr Wolfgang emerges into the full glare of the media

“ The timing of this latest incident is particularly difficult for the prime minister as it comes as he is already facing opposition allegations of authoritarian tendencies ”

And the timing of this latest incident is particularly difficult for the prime minister as it comes as he is already facing opposition allegations of authoritarian tendencies over his proposed anti-terror legislation.

When defending plans to hold suspects for three months without trial, or introduce the offence of glorifying terrorism, he insists "common sense" will prevail.

Authoritarian

Everyone knows what these planned laws mean and most people believe the government should place protecting the innocent far above worrying about the rights of terror suspects, he argues.

But both Liberal Democrat and Conservative spokesmen have suggested that is part of the problem - that judges will have to look at the letter of the law not work on the basis that everyone knew what ministers mean when they drafted it.

Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy, in particular, has spoken of the government's authoritarian instincts and the heckler incident is seen as an example of just what those instincts are or, perhaps more worrying, what happens when you draft rules that give security people their head.

Veteran Labour MP Austin Mitchell has already complained of precisely that after having his digital camera removed from him and all photos of the conference queues deleted.

The prime minister, on the other hand, insists with some passion that the public expect him to do something in the aftermath of the 7 July bombings.

Fears

The security threat is higher than possibly ever before in recent memory and it is his duty and responsibility to do everything he and the security services deem necessary to protect the public.

He was accused of the same dangerous tendencies, even of whipping up unnecessary fears, before 7 July, only to see those fears tragically realised.

But the prime minister has nonetheless admitted there needs to be a debate about civil liberties.

And he has signalled his proposals on detention and glorifying terrorism may be up for discussion and change.

But this relatively small incident of Walter Wolfgang has undoubtedly played into that debate, quite possibly to the government's cost.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4293502.stm