

Comment

The Observer

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Victory is only the beginning

We must now build a free Iraq

ONE MONTH after Saddam Hussein's statue was toppled in Baghdad, the deposed Iraqi dictator and the weapons of mass destruction which were the *casus belli* of action against Iraq both remain elusive. But of even greater concern is the danger that the country's post-war reconstruction is faltering.

Security, along with sporadic looting, remains a major concern. Coalition forces have yet to ensure that humanitarian aid can be delivered unimpeded. Half of Baghdad remains without regular power, with electricity services at pre-war levels in only nine of 27 major cities. Water supplies are being restored only slowly. The World Health Organisation last week reported a suspected cholera outbreak in Basra.

The difficulties in re-establishing basic services do not augur well for the much more difficult tasks of economic reconstruction and building an Iraqi-led administration. Shia civil society has already moved quickly to fill the power vacuum.

Last week's draft United Nations resolution preparing for postwar Iraq, drawn up by the United States, United Kingdom and Spain, does little to bear out Tony Blair's confident pledge that the UN would be granted a 'vital role'. Leaving such onus on the 'occupying powers' is risky when there is little evidence they will show the sticking power for the task. Yet failure to deliver Iraqi reconstruction would do long-term damage, fuelling cynicism about Western motives and undermining hopes for a new era of freedom and democracy.

None the less, whatever its limitations, the speedy passing of a UN resolution is vital, both to expedite the lifting of sanctions on Iraq and to help repair some of the diplomatic rifts in the international community. Iraq's human capital and natural resources mean it can have a stable and prosperous future. Yet much depends on the US and Britain doing more to fulfil their postwar responsibilities – or Iraqis will continue to ask why the speed and efficiency of the military campaign has been so little in evidence since the war ended.

Pledges made to Iraqis about their future will not be discharged by replaying a sterile debate over the legitimacy of the war. And it is no longer enough for coalition leaders merely to point out that things were worse under Saddam's tyranny.

The real casualty

Cheating on targets shames the NHS

IF YOU OWN a small hotel in Gloucestershire, you do not expect Egon Ronay's hotel inspectors to ring you up a month in advance to tell you the date they will be visiting your establishment. Yet that is effectively what the Government does each year, when it informs NHS chief executives of the exact week during which their casualty waiting times will be measured.

The current Government target stipulates that 90 per cent of all patients who are brought into Accident & Emergency departments should either be sent home or admitted within four hours. It means that a hospital trust could be treating only 50 per cent of its patients within four hours for 51 weeks of every year; yet if it spends hundreds of thousands of pounds on extra doctors and nurses over the right seven days and hits the target, that is all that matters. And meeting the target determines its future funding and stature within the health service.

As we report today, there is now widespread 'fixing' of this indicator. Sometimes operations are cancelled to ensure free beds for admission of A&E patients on the crucial days. Wanting patients to be seen within four hours is an admirable intention, but this is a ludicrous way of gauging whether it is really happening.

Politicians know that targets focus minds, and force NHS managers to think about how they can deliver services more efficiently. But there need to be fewer of them, and those that remain have to be set far more intelligently.

If Health Secretary Alan Milburn does not inject some realism into the process, the public will start to lose faith in these measurements. Moreover, they will doubt the assertions of hitherto reliable experts such as Sir George Alberti, the NHS emergency director, that the hospitals are improving. Our casualty departments are gradually stepping out of the Dark Ages of 15-hour trolley waits, but using targets which encourage blatant manipulation is no way to prove it.

A deathly silence

Potters Bar bereaved deserve answers

A YEAR AGO THIS weekend, seven people died at Potters Bar. What has exacerbated the grief of the bereaved is that no individual has, as yet, been found culpable for this railway catastrophe.

Two separate inquiries have found no evidence that 'sabotage' caused the disaster, a suggestion made by maintenance contractors Jarvis at the time. The Health and Safety Executive ordered Network Rail, the successor to the hapless Railtrack, to consider replacing the type of points used at Potters Bar. However, Network Rail now claims the crash was 'unique' and that it has no such intention. Late last year, the Government shelved promises to overhaul corporate manslaughter laws so that company directors involved in disasters could face prosecution.

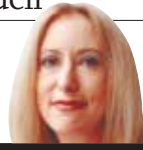
Meanwhile, blameless Jarvis's chief executive Paris Moayedi has received a 66 per cent pay rise, taking his earnings to £595,000. The pay package of chief operating officer Kevin Hyde has soared by 71 per cent to £352,000. Steven Norris, their co-director, will stand next spring as mayor of London. This is the way we live now.



Young, gifted, but black

Unlike Ryan Bell, most poor African-Caribbean children will never get even one escape route

Mary Riddell



SAVING PRIVATE SCHOOLBOY Ryan, a fable for a meritocratic age, began in hope and ended in a vodka-induced stupor. Ryan Bell, a Harry Potter for social improvers, became the star of a fantasy in which a poor and 'unteachable' black boy excels at Britain's oldest Catholic boarding school. Last week, the dream expired. Ryan was expelled from Downside following the drinking episode, despite shining at rugby and coming top in biology and Latin, a subject he had never studied in Lambeth. He is back there now, living with his mother, Jaqui, a former waitress, in bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

Plenty of people had a stake in the future of Ryan Bell, plucked from his estate to become a symbol of what a divided society could achieve. Channel 4's *Second Chance* series last month charted a year in the life of a clever, edgy 16-year-old who fitted into his new school without compromise or awe.

Whatever the flaws of television fairytales, only the most sour social determinist or genetic bell-curve could get any joy from the collapse of this one. So who failed Ryan Bell? High among the suspects are the Downside monks, whose Christian charity, enlightened teaching and ritzy dormitories got ample free airtime before Ryan was removed.

His previous two sins, spraying graffiti and removing a mobile phone, seemed far from mortal. As for drink, teenage binges are so familiar, in Downing Street and all habitats of the affluent, that it is possible Ryan was taking on the rites of passage of his adopted class. If every pupil who got legless on Smirnoff was excluded, Britain's class sizes would be well below the 16 seen as optimal at Downside.

Perhaps a new head, Father Leo Maidlow Davis, held a stricter line than his

predecessor, Dom Antony Sutch, might have done. Maybe the fee-paying parents got fractious. It is even possible that Ryan took the view, common among left-wing adults, that boarding schools are horrible places or thought, like the Education Secretary, that classics are rubbish.

The signs are that he was not so subversive, and that his mentors let him down. For pious educators to abandon a child with so much at stake betrays all they are supposed to venerate. What are God and education for, if not to help the vulnerable?

The media blame publicity for Ryan's downfall, but destiny television is nothing new. Pygmalion shows such as *Opportunity Knocks* produced Lenas and Bonnies in the 1970s, long before they propelled Will and Gareth to fame. Trading places, the conduit from nonentity to stardom, stretches from the Grimm Brothers to Hollywood. Even *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!* is salvation street for obsolete Cinderellas who, in return for getting covered in mealworms and annoying the Culture Secretary, can reclaim some clapped-out fame.

Recently, a new genre of social makeover show has emerged. Jamie Oliver's attempt to turn unemployed teenagers into chefs led to charges that the poor get horribly patronised or, alternatively, that they are ungrateful deadbeats. The only consensus is that altruism burnished Oliver's reputation.

TREVOR PHILLIPS, whose production company made the Ryan programme and put up £15,000 a year for the school fees, has a different take. Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality and the father of two privately educated daughters, had invested belief as well as money in Ryan's success. Others support him. Charles Clarke is said to be interested in boarding-school places for children in care.

Such visions do not distract from the implications of re-engineering one boy's life. The conundrum is that Ryan would not have got his chance but for a television stunt tainted by risk. In *Brave New World*, the estranged son of the hatcher director is rescued from a 'savage' environment and introduced to structured

society. It is only when a filmmaker arrives that his life becomes intolerable.

While Downside bears no comparison to Huxley's dystopia, Ryan's lifestyle transplant fits with other myths. From Mowgli to Casper Hauser, the nineteenth-century German innocent who grew up in a cave, societies have loved wild children, the blank slates waiting to be chalked with the runes of civilisation. Putting even a normal teenager like Ryan under the constant eye of television cameras must have struck his manipulators as a perilous experiment, despite the tractable nature of their subjects.

Ryan's mother is intelligent and caring. He is a personable boy who can explain why he was once rude and disruptive. You could search the blighted council blocks of Lambeth forever without finding a more telegenic candidate. The failure of even sanitised salvation leaves questions not just for monks and television producers but for a society blind to its ambivalence. The British public is not as keen on redemption as it thinks. The rehabilitation of James Bulger's killers, seen by many as an affront, may soon be an impossibility. If the Home Secretary's new sentencing guidelines survive, children who commit murder will face a minimum 15-year term identical to the illegal tariff imposed by Michael Howard on Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. Had that penalty held, they would still be in prison.

For other youngsters, exits from deprivation get blocked. Kids Company, commended as a potential model for its work with wayward black boys in the wake of Damiola Taylor's murder, was last month ordered to leave its premises after complaints from neighbours. Word is that pupil-

referral units hailed by Estelle Morris as the solution for rising numbers of school excludees are dreadful. The inhabitants of such institutions disproportionately fit Ryan's profile. Black pupils, in particular teenage boys, get banished at 13 times the rate affecting Indian children, and African-Caribbean pupils continue to squander their potential and do abysmally at school.

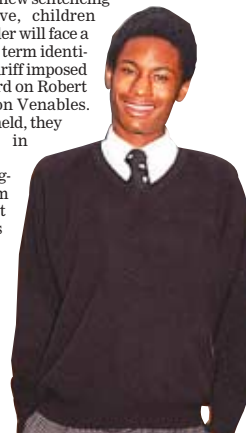
THOSE WHO agonise over Ryan rarely dwell on such hard reality. Nor is there much anguish that, in a country besotted by equality, there is scarcely any room at the top for the poor. The bankers' sons at Downside will emulate their parents' success and affluence, as surely as the dispossessed of Lambeth will take the no-hope route. Education serves them badly and authority deems them dangerous. Any time now, the police may be along to hassle Ryan and his London friends for congregating on street corners, an occupation outlawed in the new antisocial behaviour Bill.

There are other queries. As Matt Ridley asks in his book, *Nature via Nurture*, will the world be fair when the brightest child, even from the slums, gets a place at the best university and the finest job? In a society stratified by intelligence, the rich would still get the comfort and privilege.

Such hairsplitting is premature when Downside monks, television executives and society conspire against any meritocratic future. Wanting success for Ryan, however genuine, is part of a more general delusion. Dreams of enrolling suitable candidates in the Eliza Doolittle Academy, on scholarships for the deserving poor, do more for middle-class consciences than for social inequity. Intractable problems are never going to be solved by tokenism.

On the hopeful side, Ryan may thrive. Despite rejection, he is still watched over, still the lucky one. For many of his peers, there will be no second chance.

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Ryan was not subversive so was he let down by his mentors?

More on the Ryan Bell case
www.observer.co.uk/education

If I ever find that elusive butterfly, I'll pull its wings off

Euan Ferguson



A PROGRAMME TO be shown this week, entitled *The Day Britain Stopped*, purports to show the way in which planes can rather easily start falling out of the sky because of one tiny motorway accident.

It is, apparently, a fine piece of docudrama. It takes a number of existing facts – an incident of one minute's duration can cause a pile-up of more than an hour, thanks to the design of motorways, and rain, and the psychopathic make-up of the kind of person

who is able to close a marketing deal in less time than it takes to say: 'Fraudulent bouffant crappist', but completely unable to work out that when three lanes are forced to turn into two we are really not filled with silent admiration at the way he races up to the very last metre and then tries to nose his foul Mondeo into our line by sheer force of aftershave or the fact that we should obviously feel sorry for him because of the micropenis; and also that our air traffic controllers are, by definition, trying to get to the airport, so the late ones will mean even more empty seats left beside the seats rendered empty through corporate greed and governmental buffoonery; and the fact that everyone ever responsible for Britain's modern transport strategy, and there aren't enough inverted commas on my keyboard to do that phrase justice, is now rotting in some Stygian underpass,

forever cloacal with exhaust fumes and heavy black stupidity. It takes these facts, and mixes them with chaos theory, which is that thing about one flap of a butterfly's wing leading to a tsunami at the other end of the world, a theory for which I had little time until last week, when an apparently idyllic trip to the Seychelles was coloured by the worst cyclone to hit the islands in a quarter-century, and just you wait till I get my hands on that sodding butterfly.

And we'll watch, and nod, and if there's any justice, some transport supremes will be taken out and publicly humiliated, something involving goats, and we'll feel better until the next time we're in a jam, gazing on our fellow commuters with that British mix of pity and hatred. But it won't encapsulate the full nastiness of trying to get around this country, the worst aspect of which is the thieved minutes.

This is what used to happen, about eight or 10 years ago. You had to meet someone, somewhere. You mused, during the shower, how finely you could cut it, because you sort of assumed that at least some things would work. You left your flat at the last minute, jumped on the next Tube, stuck your card into a cashpoint to get money, spent it on a train, spent more on a taxi at the other end and arrived, at the most, a sweet 10 or so minutes late with some white-lie excuse. Today? Today, if you miss the right Tube, you're stuffed. The cashpoint will be broken. You'll look for another and miss the train. There are no taxis. You will arrive three hours, or days, late. You have only one option: to leave in good time, to forgo, forever, the joys of cutting it fine. I used to steal those beloved little minutes from life; now they are being stolen from mine. Leave in good time? I'd rather buy a Mondeo.