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Diary

News and curiosities

by prospect / May 4, 2009 / Leave a comment
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The Economist prepares for a lengthy legal battle

The Economist is being sued by a little-known but very rich oligarch and his secretive oil trading company, according to Russian business daily Vedomosti. The man in question is one Gennady Timchenko, who runs Gunvor, a trading firm that has risen from obscurity to dominate Russian seaborne oil exports. Gunvor's rise followed the demise of Yukos, once Russia's largest oil company—and the Economist said as much in a wider piece about corruption in Russia which, evidently, Gunvor and Timchenko thought libellous. (Coincidentally, former Yukos boss Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was imprisoned in Siberia in 2005, is back in court facing more charges.) Timchenko denies rumours that he is a friend of Putin. But the FT, the Wall Street Journal, Reuters and others have written about Gunvor, Timchenko and their special status in Russia's oil export business—and Vedomosti says the court might require Timchenko and Gunvor to disclose information to show who the company's real owners are. This one could run and run: and just after the Economist finally defeated Silvio Berlusconi in another titanic libel suit.

Cherie Blair uses her head in the fight against crime

Political opponents of Cherie Blair's stepmother Stephanie Booth, who was recently embroiled in an ugly "vote rigging" row during her efforts to become an MP, should hope that she doesn't take after her QC stepdaughter. Between 1980 and 1986, council records show Anthony Blair and Cherie Booth lodged in Mapledene Road, Hackney—a scenic part of east London to which author and self-described "psychogeographer" Iain Sinclair recently dedicated an entire book, Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire (Hamish Hamilton). Exploring the early days of Britain's future first family, an acquaintance of Sinclair's offered the following insight into their departure: "Why did they leave [Hackney]?" Sinclair asks. "The usual," he is told. "After the fifth burglary we get nervous about putting our key in the lock. Cherie, who was the real politician, was doing her thing in the free legal advice centre. But while she was haranguing the old bill about the treatment of one of her clients, the same guy was turning over her Mapledene gaff. [Later], a neighbour, an executive at London Weekend, had to physically restrain her. She was trying to nut the thief who was in the grip of two or three unusually prompt coppers." It seems Cherie, who last year chaired the Street Weapons Commission, may have learned a thing or two about street justice herself.

Why ministers tremble at Brown's black balls

As Richard Reeves observes in this month's Political Notes (p10), the defenestration of Damian McBride has made public the inner workings of Gordon Brown's court. Those hungry for further evidence of scheming, meanwhile, need look no further than the recently published diaries of Labour MP Chris Mullin, which recount the attempt in March 2002 to bar Frank Field MP—a hate figure for hardcore Brownites—from the House of Commons public accounts committee. Mullin writes: "To everyone's pleasant surprise the filling of the vacancies on the committee went through easily… [Chief Whip] Hillary [Armstrong] finally got the message that she wasn't doing herself any good, and simply caved in, pausing only to profess her innocence of any jiggery pokery. No one believed her. Jean Corston said afterwards that she remarked to Gordon Brown that everyone believed he was behind the attempt to blackball Frank. Far from denying it, he had smirked and said, 'fancy that.'" Fancy that,

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Paxman beware: pinko satire may be out to get you

Among the odder sights at the recent G20 protests: anti-capitalist marchers cheerily handing out free copies of the Financial Times. It seemed a sad outlook for those hoping to bring down the system—until the presence of headlines like "capitalism isn't really democracy" revealed that this particular pink 'un had been put together by a slightly different editorial team.

This latest line in news spoofing follows a similar mocking of the New York Times last year. And according to the editor, Raoul Djukanovic, who spoke to Prospect after the protests, the fake FT is just the beginning. Dubbing his group the Army of Notional Liberation, he characterised the 25,000 mock newspapers as "the opening salvo in a war against apathy in newsrooms," which would also include a bold "hijacking" of a BBC flagship current affairs show. Djukanovic continued: "most stories get framed with government spin, or what business want. Recently, the real FT reported that the 'drive for growth will "ruin" the planet.' We want to hear that daily, before it happens." The G20 fake was certainly a top quality product, with features on "Celebrity culture rot," the new "BBC swear quota" and advice from an agony aunt in "Dear Floozy." Perhaps the original could even pick up a trick or two?

Not exactly President Obama's cup of tea

In 2003, two years into George W Bush's first term, Republican columnist Charles Krauthammer coined the term "Bush derangement syndrome" to describe the condition suffered by "hysterical liberals" following the outbreak of the Iraq war. After barely three months in office, President Obama now inspires a similar condition among right-wingers. On 15th April, conservatives joined a supposedly spontaneous (but in fact carefully choreographed) series of national "tea parties," inspired by the 1773 Boston protest against British tyranny. On a date chosen to mark America's deadline for filing tax returns, more than 250,000 freedom-loving attendees across the country held signs demanding an end to the president's new tyranny—in the form of his stimulus package, budget and plan to raise taxes, slightly, for rich Americans.

Such eyebrow-raising allegations about the president's intentions are now fairly common in conservative circles. Popular Fox News talkshow host Glen Beck even went as far as apologising for previously claiming state socialism as Obama's ultimate aim; fascism, he now thought, was more likely. Other commentators went even further, variously claiming Stalin, David Koresh, Charles Manson and Saddam Hussein as apt historical antecedents for America's 44th president. But the collective loss of conservative sanity has some right-wing standard-bearers worried, with author David Horowitz and former Bush speechwriter David Frum both distancing themselves from recent protests. As one lifelong Republican told Prospect: "It's embarrassing. It took the lefties a good five years out of power before they turned into victimised paranoid moonbats." Embarrassing it might be, but it's certainly been good for ratings. Since Obama's inauguration, Fox—unofficial cheerleaders for the tyranny-bashing tea-lovers—have seen their ratings jump by 23 per cent.

How not to beat Islamism: youth clubs and football

It has been a busy spring for British Islamic extremism watchers. April saw Met chief Bob Quick inadvertently revealing plans for an imminent anti-terror swoop on his way into Downing Street. Quick was speedily given the boot, but not before his colleagues had arrested 11 Pakistani students, claiming to have foiled a "very big terrorist plot"—only to let the suspects walk free for lack of evidence. Next, the Quilliam Foundation, a moderate Muslim think tank, reported that the SNP had endorsed Britain's first Islamist parliamentary candidate. The candidate, Osama Saeed—now Alex Salmond's man in Glasgow Central—is a former spokesman for the Muslim Association of Britain, which Quilliam view as a front for the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's largest Islamist movement.

Most importantly, the government chose March to launch its updated counter-terrorism push, Contest II—a follow-up to 2006's Contest I and, confusingly, its third stab at a coherent anti-Islamist strategy. Politicians promised a hawkish turn, with measures to "challenge" not just extremists but also conservative Muslim groups who see Islam as incompatible with democracy—many of whom took state counter-extremism funds under Contest I.

Will the new tack work? Extremism watchers are sceptical. Contest II seems silent both on how to identify subversive Islamist groups and which types of projects are effective at stopping them. Without this, many fear a repeat of the projects funded under Contest I, which doled out millions to local authorities without much guidance. Some invested directly in prominent Muslim institutions, some with ties to extremist groups, while others invested in capacity-building projects, youth clubs, workshops, and inter-faith dialogues—all inoffensive enough, but unlikely to make much of a dent in grassroots radicalisation. One London authority even funded "opportunities for young Muslims to attend accredited coaching and football sessions with Tottenham Hotspur FC." Al Qaeda beware.

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Cheney and the perfidious Miliband

Britain's son-of-the-manse prime minister and America's liberal bête noir ex-vice president seem cut from very different political cloth. But Gordon Brown and Dick Cheney share at least one trait: a distrust of David Miliband. Cheney's beef, as revealed in a recent New Yorker essay by respected investigator Seymour Hersh, kicked off when Miliband, anticipating an Obama-induced improvement in middle east relations, took the road to Damascus in November 2008. The trip, which included talks with President Bashar al-Assad, represented a thaw in British-Syrian relations—somewhat frosty since the Syrians allegedly bumped-off former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. Miliband's journey won breathless reviews, with the Dubai-based Khaleej Times calling the visit "epoch-making." Such enthusiasm, however, was less evident in the Oval Office. For Miliband had forgotten to tip off Cheney about the trip—leaving the vice president railing in a White House meeting against this "stab in the back" from a typically disloyal representative of "perfidious Albion." Poor Milband. Brown suspects him for his ambition. But Cheney saw in his actions a still graver sin: an attempt to run a foreign policy vaguely independent of the US.

There's no such thing as bad news in the UAE

This June, the Venice biennale will feature its first ever Arab pavilion—and its organisers have even agreed an unusual non-censorship clause with the normally censorious United Arab Emirates, allowing them to display a series of photographs showcasing "scenes from the region's one star hotels"—a side of the Gulf state not usually seen in public. Such openness was less evident, however, in a recent overhaul of the UAE's already restrictive press freedom laws. One new clause stipulates a fine of up to 500,000 Dirhams (about £93,000) for "whoever publishes news misleading the public opinion and harming the national economy." The ruling, widely interpreted as a ban on reporting negative business stories, leaves the region's financial journalists in quite a fix. With the UAE's stock market collapsing, its exuberant property bubble bursting and its skyline dotted with abandoned skyscrapers, there are precious few positive stories to report. The biennale, then, couldn't be more timely: expect Gulf newspapers to have unusually large art sections for the foreseeable future.

China leads the carbon rebellion

China has famously overtaken the US as the world's largest carbon emitter, writes Harvey Cole. Now, heated arguments are ongoing about whether carbon reduction schemes should be based on national totals or pollution per head, and whether earlier-industrialised countries should have past emissions brought into the reckoning. But Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao has recently set a cat among the carbon pigeons. Why, he asked, should China's carbon dioxide total be singled out, when it is partly caused by the manufacture of consumer goods exported to the US and other western countries, often from American or European owned factories? Why indeed? If national carbon accounts were debited with imports, while exports were credited, a very different picture would emerge—and all those cheap jeans and T-shirts would start looking a good deal more pricey.

John Maddox: RIP

John Maddox, who served as the editor of Nature for 22 years (between 1966-1973 and 1980-1995) died on the 12th April, at the age of 83. A distinguished editor, science writer and the first ever honorary fellow of the Royal Society, he was Prospect's first science columnist and a regular contributor to the magazine. Maddox was also a fierce defender of rationalism—and a tireless foe of sloppy analysis and pseudo-science (although notably relaxed, on several occasions, about such minor concerns as magazine deadlines). As he wrote in his last piece for Prospect, "Most scientists in any field are not reflective. People hang on to the conceptual baggage with which they are familiar… but science is a factual business; [and] experiment is a tyrannical king." In these giddy times, his passionate scepticism will be sorely missed.

What's coming up

1st May International labour day
4th May 30th anniversary of Margaret Thatcher coming to power
7th May Eastern partnership summit in Prague, aimed at boosting EU relations with eastern Europe
9th May The Buddha's 2446th birthday
16th May Results of India's general election
17th May International day against homophobia
27th May UEFA Champions League football final in Rome
28th May 250th anniversary of William Pitt's birth

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