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Those in power tread a crooked moral line

Torture is always wrong, but before we judge our security services we must understand the complex world they inhabit

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Exercising power is tricky. Before you have it, you may entertain shockingly naive notions about how easy it will be, the way it will feel and what you're going to do with it.

Naturally, you have fantasies of perfection. Choices, you think, will be simple. Right is obviously right, after all, and wrong is very definitely wrong. Unsurprisingly, this imagined world collapses very quickly: it can't survive what comes with control.

One point about power is that it can stop you doing what you really want to do. Does anyone believe, for example, that most government ministers truly thought we should lock people up for 42 days without charge? Does anyone think Barack Obama sincerely believes in the death penalty? Or that when Bill Clinton interrupted his presidential campaign in 1992 to go back to Arkansas to sign the lobotomised Ricky Ray Rector's death warrant, he really felt he was doing the right thing?

Putting Clinton tactfully to one side, none of this necessarily implies great wickedness. Indeed, fundamentalism, certainty and power share an uneasy relationship, to express it mildly.

The only absolute difficulty lies in gauging where principle is non-negotiable. If you set this totem in the wrong place, you're an extremist. Put it somewhere else and you may be amoral.

Recently Jonathan Evans, the estimable Director-General of the Security Service, spoke about torture and safety. Although he didn't make the link between Blair's war, national risk and the current criminal investigation into the MI5 officer who interrogated Binyam Mohamed in Pakistan, others might. They might wonder whether an investigation into the possibility that a single government employee broke the law is really worth anyone's time and money. Apart from anything else, how could this process possibly be fair?

We can all understand the Government's shunting this task over to the Attorney-General, but is she really going to expend much energy deciding how this inconvenient agent got himself overseas to interrogate a supposedly abused suspect?

Anyone can damn a functionary, but by and large public servants do what they are told; if he went, we may safely assume it was because he was following orders. To state the blindingly obvious, the real question here is not whether a single individual was somehow solitarily complicit in torture. It is, rather more seriously, whether Tony Blair's Government was guilty of developing something close to a criminal policy.

I don't mean to say that any of this is easy. When I was Director of Public Prosecutions, I met the parents of a young man who had been shot by the police. In the grip of a psychotic episode, he was striding down the slip road towards a busy motorway service station claspng a collection of knives and a sword. His father had phoned the police to warn them. He thought that they would protect his son. But instead of disarming the boy, the police killed him.

After a lot of thought, I overturned a decision that these officers should be charged with murder. I concluded that, however wrong they were, they had only done what they thought was necessary to protect the public. As awful as it seemed, they hadn't committed any crime.

But this young man was like your son or mine. A charity worker, idealistic and honest; anyone would have been proud of him.

And if you had described his case to me before I became DPP, I expect I would have been appalled by the decision that I went on to make. I would probably have thought it unspeakably wrong. The boy's parents, who brought a heartbreaking photo of their dead child and propped it on my desk as we spoke, certainly saw it this way.

The difference is that when you find yourself possessed of power, accountability quite suddenly broadens in the most alarming ways. This is very disturbing. Opinions are easy to express when they matter only to you. When they matter to everyone else besides, life gets a lot more complicated: you can find your moral certainties growing surprisingly promiscuous.

So, what of torture, an ultimate abuse of state power? Of course, the practice is always beyond law and salvation, and yet the line between using material obtained this way and complicity in the crimes that create it is more crooked than we'd like to allow.

What are we to do, for example, with information of sinister provenance that could prevent a terrorist attack in London? Clearly, if we get it, we've no choice but to use it. Of course, we might lose some self-satisfaction in doing so, but that's probably better than the legs, arms and torsos other people might lose if we don't.

And this is the territory that the security services inhabit every day. It is, of course, a great shame that the Government has wildly devalued their dilemma by pretending that the choices we face are starker than they usually are: the elevation of security paranoia to attack our constitution for purely party political advantage was a particular disgrace in the Blair years.

It is a shocking degradation of left-of-centre politics that this cowardice failed to make us any safer and simultaneously encouraged foolish disbelief in the State itself.

This doesn't mean that helpless outrage at the reality of the world we inhabit should gain hard currency. Britain may not be an island of perfection, and we may not always admire the company she keeps. But if we spent less time creating false phantoms and more effort defending the liberalism much of the world still sees in us, perhaps we'd all be more comfortable in our skins.

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