

No doubt it was the couple of little bombs that came through our window on St Patrick's day that directed our minds to the hazards of journalism. (They were, it seems almost certain, part of an end-of-term celebration by inebriated young gentlemen of the officer class, but naturally we are putting it about that they were a savage riposte to our Fearless Editorial Stand on, say, Brazil/Communion in the hand/Independence for Northern Ireland/Ecumenical baptismal services/Abortion/?) Anyway, from amidst the smokeless ruins and several genuine pieces of broken glass, it was entertaining to observe the only slightly less farcical troubles of another religious journalist; to watch the reactions from Rome to Fr Peter Hebblethwaite's characteristically well-informed and valuable articles in the *Observer* about Archbishop Benelli. The explosions in Rome were, like our own, noisy but harmless; the Curia has learnt a little about English Catholicism during the last decade and was careful not to put its foot anywhere where it might get stuck, but it was fascinating to see how, as so often, the authorities fell over themselves to verify the charges against them. Fr Hebblethwaite said he thought the Archbishop was 'concerned with prestige and pomposity' and the reaction was almost solely concerned with prestige and quite extraordinarily pompous.

But this takes us to the much more serious journalistic affair of Mr Peter Niesewand of the *Guardian* and the BBC whom the Rhodesian 'government' had detained for some time without trial and now, after a secret trial have imprisoned for a year. Let us first of all agree with practically everybody in this country that this was an atrocious act, evidently aimed at intimidating those journalists who have been presenting uncomfortable truths about that squalid regime. There are, however, other things to say as well. Nobody who has ever glanced at *New Blackfriars* will suspect us of any sympathy with the gang of thugs who, by violence and the threat of violence, have taken control of that unfortunate country. One of the first political issues raised in this journal, back in 1920, was the present and likely future misery of Africans in Rhodesia. Nevertheless it would be hard to find a more nauseating piece of self-righteousness than the debate in the House of Commons in which Mr Smith was condemned. What bothered both Mr Wilson and the Prime Minister was, apparently, that Mr Niesewand had been imprisoned after a secret trial, that the charges against him were not revealed, and so on. A stranger listening to speech after pompous speech of high moral indignation would hardly have guessed that this same government and parliament had recently agreed to keep *two thousand* people in prison without any trial at all and that at the present moment there are a few hundred kept in prison indefinitely after a secret trial.

The kind of selective judgment involved here is something we have discussed before, but in the face of so blatant an example it seems

right to say it all again. The truth of the charge against the Rhodesian regime is not diminished by one hair-breadth because it is levelled by men who are guilty of the same crime, what is diminished is its force. The British are simply disqualified from complaining about detention by secret trial so long as they maintain the Northern Ireland prison camp.

It wasn't long ago that we had an equally absurd piece of selective judgment from America. We go all the way with Miss Jane Fonda in her attitude to the American war in South-East Asia, but how can she possibly *know* that American prisoners of war were not tortured in North Vietnam. Given the record of official American pronouncements during the war it is entirely possible that the story is a pack of lies. Prisoners who gave information or behaved in other un-American ways could be tempted to exaggerate the pressure put upon them. But, apart from this, it is hard to see what American interest would be served by inventing the story. It might, on the contrary, be argued that air-crew captured after the slaughterous attacks on towns and villages were lucky not to be lynched out of hand like some bomber pilots during the Second World War, so stories that they were ill-treated are not implausible; nothing suggests that the Vietnamese are more virtuous or law-abiding than others. The Brazilians, British, Greeks and Portuguese torture people, why should we imagine that the Vietnamese are incapable of similar abominations? The question is not one of likelihoods and possibilities, still less of which side you are on, it is a question of truth. Torture is so vile a thing that we ought to investigate extremely carefully before we dismiss allegations that it has been used. It is much easier for governments, armies and police to cover up the evidence than for the victim to produce it. We should fear to be wrong in this matter, we should fear to be in collusion with torturers whatever side they are on. Whatever side it is, it cannot be the side of man.

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