

Human Rights Day Balloon Debate: who is the greatest of the 20th century?

Old Theatre, LSE, 8 December 2005

Conor Gearty

George Orwell

I realise that I am at a disadvantage in this balloon, surrounded by so many eminent doers. What am I, a mere thinker and writer: you might think that this is nothing compared to the activism and determination of Gandhi, Mandela and the rest of them. But I have the largest claim to be kept in this balloon because my claim to human rights immortality in the twentieth century is greatest of all. Let me explain why.

First, I have always understood that human rights is about dignity and that the first stop on the road to dignity is an end to human cruelty. Cruelty and humiliation are in my view the great enemies of human rights. And if you want to understand them completely, then look at my book *1984*. I knew about torture and about its effects long before the world woke up to its impact, *Ladies and Gentleman*. In the second half of that book, and in much of my other writings, I have analysed the effect of cruelty on human kind. I am the chronicler of cruelty and in describing it have helped to make it more obviously wrong than it was before, helped in others to achieve a reduction in cruelty. And while my action has been through words rather than deeds I have reached a greater range of people, across greater time, than my illustrious but time-bound colleagues here in our balloon. As the cliché has it, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’, but it is also mightier than any merely moral act.

Second, while understanding about human dignity, I have also known how to get there. A belief in human dignity and a hatred of exploitation led many well-meaning people of my generation to back a particular political horse, communism. Now I appreciate this ideology has had a certain appeal – Joe Stalin over there is already charming many of our friends in the balloon and that is exactly what I expected. But I have never been fooled. I saw this in Spain in the 1930s and I have never forgotten it. Communism, Stalin-style (and is there any other form?) is just another brand of totalitarianism. I wrote about this in *Animal Farm*, and my goodness was I not savaged for it by the Left? But I am prouder of that intervention than of anything else I have done: I stuck to my position and I was proved right eventually – by the people under Communism themselves, in 1989.

People say that I should not have told the government here in the UK about my concerns about certain of Stalin’s fellow-travellers in this country. Why not! The United Kingdom, or England as I prefer to call it, is a democracy, and one moreover that has delivered human dignity via the ballot box (and the Attlee Government). Why should I allow to remain unhindered those who would transform us into a nation of

Gulags and controlled speech? I would do it again, and am only sorry I did not do more.

The space for my political beliefs was once thought to be non-existent: a socialist who believed in democracy and social justice and who was equally sceptical of the dehumanising effects of capitalism and communism alike. I wrote about this in many newspaper articles and in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. That is the past. Things are different now. With the end of the Soviet Bloc and the horrors of US-style globalisation there for all to see, there has been a resurgence of support for the position that I was the first to mark out. These days we talk less about justice and socialism – but the position is exactly the same. Today it is the human rights position, and it is one that – alone, ill, isolated, maligned – I helped to create. I am proud of that and you should be on my behalf as well.

Two final points. I went to Eton but hopefully you won't hold that against me. I gather the school is back in fashion. Second, as I say I am ill, but if I am kept in the balloon I will almost certainly get the kinds of medicines that will save my life. I am young compared to some of these people here. They have done their great work. Mine is just beginning. I have more *Animal Farms* and *1984*'s in me – there is the Bush presidency that is nearly beyond satire but I could do such a book – please give me the chance to write it!