

Jonathan Aitken



British Mean Streaks

DEMONIZATION IS AN UNPLEASANT blood sport, especially when its quarry are people you admire. I have been getting upset in London this summer because two American heroes of mine have between them been vilified in a political soap opera, a scandal, a real opera, a play, and a whirlwind of hostile media coverage. The targets for this opprobrium are Philip Anschutz and Richard Nixon. The causes of the hostility towards them are different in nature, time, and place. Yet their two cases are worth examining because they raise such head-scratching issues of faith, hypocrisy, and judgmentalism by the liberal media.

I last wrote about Philip Anschutz in this column six months ago, praising him for backing *Narnia*—the movie of C.S. Lewis's epic children's book with a Christian message. Anschutz could easily have lost his shirt on this \$50 million venture, but bucking Hollywood's anti-God trend he made yet another fortune and is re-investing his well-gotten gains in more "family-values" movies. His next production is *Amazing Grace*, the story of William Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade. It will be screened early next year, with worldwide premieres timed to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Abolition Act. Having seen the rushes of *Amazing Grace*, I confidently predict another box office success for Mr. Anschutz—but at a price.

I made a mistake in my previous column about Philip Anschutz when I described him as "a reclusive billionaire." Not anymore he ain't. His billions may be

safe, but his reclusiveness has been blown to smithereens by the great British media whose intrepid reporters have been swirling around him like piranha fish scenting blood.

So what has Mr. Anschutz done to get the piranhas so excited? Answer: He had a walk-on part in a British political soap opera known as the John Prescott scandal. Prescott is a dinosaur from the Jurassic Park of Britain's organized labor unions, a sort of George Meany figure but without old George's looks and charm. Prescott is deputy prime minister to Tony Blair, yet has no discernible effect or influence on government policy. He is a purely titular figure like U.S. vice presidents used to be in the days when John Nance Garner declared that office to be "not worth a pitcher of warm spit."

One way Blair keeps Prescott busy is to send him traveling. A few months ago Prescott arrived to Anschutz's ranch in Colorado, staying there for a weekend of all-American hospitality. According to Prescott, their discussions centered on cowboys and William Wilberforce. According to the British piranha fish, what Anschutz really had in mind was getting a casino license for a property complex he is developing in East London known as "The Dome." This is a white elephant of government misplanning that might just as well be called Britain's Teapot Dome since it looks like an upturned teapot and pours out nothing but scandals, similar to President Warren Harding's Teapot Dome unpleasantness. One of Mr. Anschutz's companies called AEG was

thinking of investing \$600 million in "The Dome" but the returns weren't all that mouth-watering, apparently. So someone had the bright idea of asking John Prescott's department whether a casino license could be included in the price tag.

In reality, this idea was not at all bright because as everyone east of Colorado knows, neither John Prescott nor his department has a say in allocating Britain's casino licenses. That should have been the end of the story but for the fact that Prescott is currently sinking into the quicksands of several other scandals. The juiciest of these is that he was caught *in flagrante* with his nubile diary secretary—the British Monica Lewinsky, according to the headlines—who has now sold the gory details of the 67-year-old deputy prime minister's sexual prowess to the tabloids.

OF COURSE, none of this has anything to do with the blameless Mr. Anschutz. However, since any friend of Mr. Prescott's is currently an enemy of the liberal media, many thousands of column inches have been devoted to dishing the dirt on Anschutz. What dirt? Well, according to the gospel of the piranha fish, he's a friend of George W. Bush and an evangelical Christian. The latter ecclesiastical activity allegedly makes Anschutz (hold the front page!) a HYPOCRITE because evangelicals should not be asking, let alone "bribing," deputy prime ministers for casino licenses.

To put it mildly, there are a few weaknesses in this demonization of Philip Anschutz. For starters, as your "High Spirits" columnist made clear some time ago, he is not an evangelical. He did briefly attend an evangelical church in Colorado some two decades ago, but he hasn't been back there for years. One of his closest friends, Bob Beltz, describes Anschutz as "a religious moderate," a spiritual stance British reporters should pray includes the gift of forgiveness; otherwise they'll get sued. For there's not a scrap of evidence that Anschutz ever asked Prescott for a casino license. In fact, the asking was done not by any Anschutz company but by an unconnected casino operator—which leaves Phil Anschutz looking whiter than white. As for the so-called "bribe" in this story, this turns out to be a pair of cowboy boots and a Stetson, which were probably handed over to Prescott simply to bring him up to scratch for the dress code at home on the range on the Anschutz ranch. Naturally, Prescott is getting

demonized too for failing to declare this "very lavish gift" in the register of Members of Parliament's interests, but that's about all the great Prescott-Anschutz scandal amounts to. Only in hypocritical Britain could this show run and run.

Alas, it is no use patiently explaining to liberal journalists or to the liberal *bien-pensants* of the arts world that iconic right-of-center figures of their time like Richard Nixon and Philip Anschutz have more than a few redeeming features.

Two other shows that are running and running in London involve that well-known American demon Richard Nixon. He was no saint, but two episodes in his life in which it would be hard to call him a sinner were going to China and giving an uncharacteristically candid post-resignation TV interview to David Frost. It is unfair to have a go at Nixon on either of these fronts, but this is what is being done at the English National Opera company, which has brought back a summer series of John Adams's *Nixon in China*, and at the Donmar Theatre Company, which has launched a new play, *Frost and Nixon*, that its producers hope will transfer to Broadway later this year. Both the opera and the play have many fine artistic qualities, particularly Frank Langella's masterly performance as Nixon at the Donmar. However, my grumble about these productions is that they both demonize the 37th president for a lot of vices that, as his biographer, I know were not true of him.

Alas, it is no use patiently explaining to liberal journalists or to the liberal *bien-pensants* of the arts world that iconic right-of-center figures of their time like Richard Nixon and Philip Anschutz have more than a few redeeming features. The liberal mindset is determined to paint its villains in monochrome black. In my book, that's a curious mixture of homage and hypocrisy—using Rochefoucauld's definition, "Hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue." Anschutz and Nixon deserve more thoughtful treatment, in print and on stage. ❧

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