

DIARY

Carla Powell



Few state visits can have stirred up more advance controversy than Pope Benedict's, though I do recall *Private Eye's* cover ahead of the visit of the Japanese Emperor in the 1960s: 'Nasty Nip in the air'. There was the child abuse scandal, the juvenile antics of the Foreign Office planners, the stories that the Catholic hierarchy were trying to keep Irish gypsies away, and Cardinal Kasper's late own goal in labelling Britain a third world country on the eve of the visit. At least the Vatican still knows how to arrange a diplomatic illness, which they did to avoid the embarrassment of bringing Cardinal Kasper to London. I suspect he will be playing for the Vatican reserves for some time to come. Two things saved the day for me. First, the elegance, warmth and sincerity of David Cameron's welcome to the Pope: now there is a man who knows how to behave. Second, I bumped into a bunch of expat British Catholics at Rome airport, who were flying to Edinburgh to see His Holiness. I saw such joy and anticipation in their eyes.

Whoever decided that Westminster Hall was the best place for the Pope's main speech was right. The Papacy can trump most institutions when it comes to antiquity, but the thousand years of British history that flow through Westminster Hall were enough to keep the Vatican from being too uppity. The Pontiff is used to highly choreographed occasions but this one must have appealed to his German sense of *ordnung*. Somehow the Brits managed to strike just the right note: history without the histrionics, magnificence without flummery, dignity without excess. When the state trumpeters of the Household Cavalry sounded off, even the Pope must have wondered whether he had arrived on the other side. His speech matched the setting. He dwelt on how Christianity is entwined with British history, taking a scenic route to circumvent embarrassing incidents such as Henry VIII and the Reformation. Here was a historian and a scholar in his element and speaking from the heart. Vatican watchers will comb the text for coded messages. But sitting in the hall, I found what he had to say

straightforward: secularism does not have exclusive rights over public policy; there is a role for God, too. And laws should be based on moral principles, not just short-term political strategy. You have to be pretty blinkered to disagree with that.

Despite the heavy shadows hanging over the Vatican, it's reassuring to know that a sense of humour remains,

particularly with regard to the Church's bureaucracy. The other day, swapping jokes with a Vatican insider, I heard a good one: the Pope summons all the Roman cardinals to his private quarters overlooking St Peter's Square. As the prelates wait for the Pontiff to appear, one of them looks out of the window and sees Christ mounting the steps of St Peter's. He calls the other cardinals over and they confirm it is indeed the Son of God. They rush to the Pope. 'Holy Father,' they ask. 'Jesus Christ has come to the Vatican, what should we do?' 'Look busy,' the Pope replies.

It's hard to believe that most international conferences are of any use at all. But one not to miss is the Ambrosetti Forum — Italy's answer to Davos. It is held in the magnificent Villa D'Este on the shore of Lake Como, just as the first autumn colours are appearing. The debates are about everything from credit crises in Europe to nanotechnology in medicine, and the participants are an eclectic bunch, ranging from Shimon Peres to Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia. This year's star was Mr Jean-Claude Trichet, head of the European Central Bank. Even if, like me, you don't have a clue what he is talking about, he oozes the sound judgment one looks for in a central banker.

Back in Rome, while the Pope was away, Signor Berlusconi's government began to fall apart. One of his main coalition partners, Gianfranco Fini, has pulled out of the government. Fini was fed up with Berlusconi's attempts to change the law to save himself from prosecution. Berlusconi's papers have retaliated by digging up an allegedly dodgy Monaco property deal involving the family of Fini's mistress. British political scandals are third-division stuff by comparison. If Berlusconi falls, one group that stands to benefit is the separatist Northern League, which wants to turn Italy back into a collection of independent statelets, as it was before unification in 1870. What a shame that our civilised country must put up with such political squalor.



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