



# Mad Cows and Englishmen

A big-time beefeater reports from London.

**T**he Spanish Armada couldn't manage it. Neither could Napoleon, or Hitler. But where they failed to bring Great Britain to its knees, a cabal of McDonald's, Burger King, and Wimpy's has reduced Little Englanders—this once happy few, this previously legendary band of brothers—to a bunch of mendicants. Conspiring in tandem, a triad of hamburger chains (not to mention the vengeful wogs across the Channel) has banned U.K. beef, the pride of this off-shore island's cuisine, and called for the burning of twelve million cattle. We may soon witness the largest backyard barbecue known to mankind... to which nobody will come.

Desperate Tory politicians, running a consistent 30 points behind nearly-new Labour in the polls, have been shuttling to and fro between London and Brussels, denouncing the intrusive EU bureaucracy at home, while pleading with it on the road for baksheesh of many billions of pounds. During the last bovine scare, at least, the traditional British sense of humor prevailed. There was the High Street butcher who posted a sign in his window that read "The Only Mad Cow Here Is My Wife." But now it is the spirit of free-market enterprise that is most evident in post-Thatcher Britain. Goodfellow Rebecca Ingrams, a City wholesale broker, has come up with a policy dubbed Human Mad Cow Insurance Protection.

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For an annual premium of a mere £10 it offers £25,000 worth of coverage against Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), and the maximum protection available is £250,000, payable once the disease is diagnosed.

In this continuing crisis, bewildered Tories tend to float increasingly dotty solutions, my favorite the suggestion that the cattle should be ground up and their minced remains dumped at sea, eventually infecting the fish stocks as well, no doubt. Mad salmon. Loonybins Dover sole. The mind boggles.

The pity is that the optimum solution is readily available, courtesy of the former jewel in Queen Victoria's crown. Leaders of the World Council of Hindus have approached Health Secretary Stephen Durrell, offering sanctuary in India for all those cows due to be "executed." Hasmuth Shah, spokesman for the British branch of the council, which has the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party, India's main opposition, has promised to provide loving care for twelve million cattle. "It is immoral to slaughter these cows," he said. "Compassion is the rule of the day and the cows should be allowed to lead natural lives."

Rubbing it in, I fear, the council's parent group, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has pronounced the BSE crisis a manifestation of "divine displeasure" at the slaughter of cows for beef. In a daredevil mood, and eager to prove undying loyalty to Queen and country, although a mere colonial myself, the next day I went to lunch with a toilet-trained native, and we both ordered Angus sirloin steaks. Furthermore, clicking glasses, we resolved to continue kissing

girls who used the indigenous foundation cream, never mind that it possibly contained deadly beef extract. But then Canadians always did have the right stuff. The last time Great Britain stood alone, during the darkest days of the Second World War, my aunts knitted ferociously for Bundles for Britain, and to this day I shudder at the thought of all those khaki sweaters unraveling in the foxholes.

It has been estimated that the slaying of the entire herd would cost a total of £20 billion, but the benevolent Hindus would take them off the United Kingdom's hands for £1 billion transportation costs. If only they would accept Fergie, a.k.a. The Duchess of Yuk, as part of the deal. A recent *Daily Mail* headline asked, reasonably enough, "Fergie: Has She Got Mad Cow?" But possibly what really ails the Duchess, no longer Her Royal Highness since her divorce, is her speed-like diet of fenfluramine and phentermine pills that she has been prescribed by a New York doctor. Certainly she is the most vulgar and avaricious of a generation of incredibly dim royals. Most recently the ridiculous 37-year-old duchess twice changed her flight plans in horny pursuit of Thomas Muster, an Austrian tennis star nine years her junior, whom she has followed from Melbourne to Florida.

Not so long ago tabloid readers feasted on unflattering topless photographs of Fergie having her toes sucked by her financial adviser, which is rather more, come to think of it, than my bank manager has ever done for me. That attentive adviser, one John Bryan, is now suing her for a third of her purported multi-million dollar contract for a projected series of *Budgie the Helicopter* books for kids, an idea which some cynics insist was pilfered from the earlier *Hector the Helicopter* juvenile, which was written by a mere commoner.

In the brave new world of trash publishing, the scheming Fergie, lumbered with a £3 million bank overdraft, is also reported to have signed a £6 million deal for a yet-to-be-scribbled memoir about her four-and-a-half-year bonking interlude with Bryan and the breakdown of her marriage to the pathetic Prince Andrew. Meanwhile, Bryan has been accused of a £900,000 fraud in Germany.

I spend five months of the year in London, my refuge from the loopy tribal politics that prevail in my native Quebec. This year we have had to do without spring and, even as I write, early in April, the unseasonal chill, as well as endless bad news, is still with us. Take, for instance, the front page of the April 5th *Daily Telegraph*. The banner headline read, "Britons Among 930 Adrift on Crippled Cunard Liner." The 37,845-ton *Royal Viking Sun*, second only to the company's flagship *QE2*, had struck a reef in the Gulf of Aqaba, and Cunard has since been fined £15 million by the environmentally responsible Egyptians.

And this country that invented gunboat diplomacy now trembles at the hint of displeasure from an Arabian absolute monarch. Having inadvertently admitted Dr. Mohammed al Massari, a prominent Saudi Arabian dissident, who has had the bad taste to call for democracy in his homeland, they were eager to dump him on little Dominica, lest they lose some valuable defense contracts. Saudi Arabia's ambassador to London has warned that the British would jeopardize hundreds of millions of pounds in contracts unless they deport Dr. Massari, but this, he says, is not blackmail: "Blackmail is when you do something illegal. We are a sovereign country. We can buy wherever else we want."

Guided by the shining principle that the customer is always right, Home Secretary Michael Howard was more than willing to oblige the Saudis, but was temporarily stymied by the Chief Immigration Adjudicator, who found that the Home Office had no right to refuse to consider Dr. Massari's application for asylum, and strongly recommended that Mr. Howard do so within a month. And now the Home Office has had to beat a retreat.

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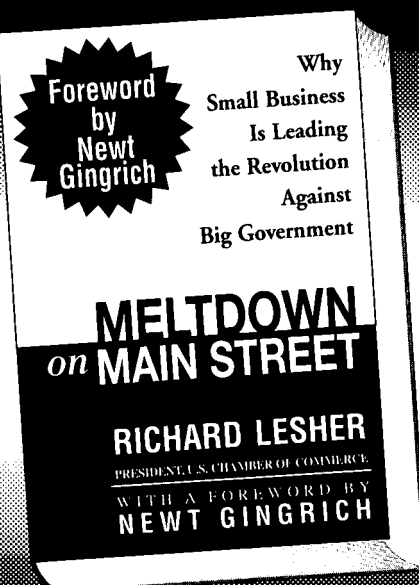
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The government has reluctantly ruled that Dr. Massari may remain in Britain for the next four years, where he has been placed under no obligation to muffle his criticism of the Saudi government.

Even so, it does seem that the once fierce British lion has lost its teeth. After all, what is to be said about an off-shore island that advertises itself abroad as a source of cheap labor. Where the surrounding seas have been just about fished out by a second armada of Spanish marauders, and where a good deal of the automobile industry is now owned by either the Japanese or the Germans. Speaking in London recently, appropriately enough in a wax museum—Madame Tussaud's, to be precise—Virginia Bottomley, the National Heritage Secretary, proclaimed, "Tourism now earns more for the UK than North Sea oil or financial services. It is the industry of the future." Yes, indeed. And, looking into my crystal ball, I can foresee the day when Disney buys up the island, lock, stock, and barrel, dresses the natives in *Sense and Sensibility* or *Middlemarch* costumes, and runs it all as an amusement park. Sail into gunfire with Admiral Nelson on the Trafalgar Pool. Shoot the breeze with Dr. Samuel Johnson in Ye Olde England Pub. Feeling lonely? Call the Fanny Hill Escort Service. Looking for a giggle? Lock up your wife in the Tower of London. Experience the thrills and

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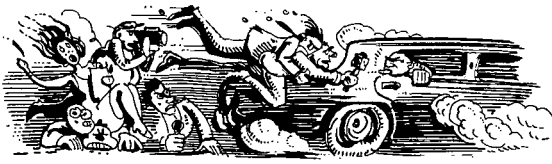
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 DUTTON



by Mark Steyn

# Dubroff Debris

Today's lesson is taken from *Airplane!*, for as pilot Peter Graves and doctor Leslie Nielsen so memorably put it:

"Surely you can't be serious?"

"I *am* serious—and don't call me Shirley."

We'll never know how serious little Jessica was. But her father Lloyd Debris—sorry, Dubroff (how quickly the names fade)—was deadly serious, and, if you'd called his daughter Shirley, he wouldn't have minded at all: Jessica was sold to us as a Shirley Temple for the nineties, a plucky, pug-nosed moppet with a can-do spirit. As things turned out, her can't-do ending made a much better story, at least for everyone except li'l Jess: when her single-engine Cessna splattered the drab asphalt of a suburban driveway—or, as her mom put it, "their beautiful bodies touched the beautiful earth"—all kinds of stock figures from American life, from New Age earth mothers to old-time stage mothers, seemed to fuse and mutate into one almighty mother of a story.

Jessica bounced the Unabomber from the top of the evening news, and made him look sane by comparison. Death is supposed to be the great leveler and, when it has so cruelly exposed the gulf between reality and illusion, we should be humble enough to recognize our folly. Instead, clergymen who should have been modestly ushering her into the Lord's Temple were instead abasing themselves before the Shirley Temple, conspiring in the myth that Jessica had soared above the vulgar flight of common souls. "God bless the mother, God bless the father, and God bless the flight instructor who taught that

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girl to dream," the Rev. Reggie Cleveland drooled at a service in Cheyenne. "An even greater tragedy would be never to dream at all," the Rev. David Rockwood gushed at her funeral in Pescadero, California. Bad weather prevented her nine-year-old brother (or was it the three-year-old sister?) from making a ceremonial fly-by, but the mourners (if that's the word) enjoyed a fine rendition of "I'll Fly Away."

Maybe they should have opted for "Free Bird" by fellow plane-crash victims Lynyrd Skynyrd instead. Or "Careless" by Glenn Miller. Or "But You Love Me, Daddy" by Jim Reeves. Or "Baby, I Don't Care" by Buddy Holly. Or maybe, of the many American pop stars who failed to live long enough to cash in their frequent flyer miles, it's Patsy Cline who should have provided the soundtrack to Jessica's funeral: a solo rendition of "I Fall to Pieces."

Every age finds its symbols. In the nineteenth century, the railroads helped build a country. In the twentieth, the plane may yet come to symbolize our national disintegration. It is, to be sure, the perfect emblem for an age that demands instant gratification: it gets you there quicker. For Lloyd Debris, the plane was supposed to get his daughter to fame quicker: short-cut celebrity. So they took off in April, because May would have been too late: Jess would have turned eight, and the flight would have been merely a flight, not a "historic first." And they flew out of Cheyenne in a blizzard because they had to make Massachusetts in time for the "Today" show.

Yet even if they'd made "Today," we'd all have forgotten her tomorrow. That's why those wimpy clergymen's fudging of the issue is so grotesque. "Dream" is one of the most potent words in the American vocabulary, the noun to which the adjective

"American" is most particularly applied. But the "American Dream" used to be something realized by very down-to-earth methods. We all know the old joke about the tourist and the New York cabbie: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice." Nowadays you can forget it: practice was for the steam age. Li'l Jess wasn't a violin prodigy; she couldn't sing and dance like Shirley Temple; she hadn't put in the hours. She'd dabbled in piano and trumpet and horse-riding, just as she'd dabbled in "flying" for the last four months of her life. To quote from "When You Wish Upon a Star":

*If your heart is in your dream  
No request is too extreme.*

Jessica fails that test. But, undeterred, her dad decided to fake her into the history books anyway—or, at any rate, into a TV movie (he was trying to sell the rights). They said she didn't know the meaning of the word fear. But that's more to do with the deficiencies of her mom's ad hoc "home schooling" program: she didn't know the meaning of the word aardvark, either.

This story's so crazy that the only one who behaved with anything approaching normalcy was President Clinton. "To visit you at the White House would be wonderful," Jess wrote, and then offered to take him for a spin. "Clearly to pilot an airplane that you would be in would bring me even greater joy." It must have been a tough call for the old photo-opportunist, but, if he ever read the letter, he was shrewd enough, unlike the rest of America, not to inhale. Instead, he reacted like a commuter who finds himself sitting opposite the nut on the bus: he declined to acknowledge her. A child of the sixties, he nevertheless had no desire to join the glorious pantheon: Buddy Holly, Lynyrd Skynyrd, William Jefferson Airplane Clin-