

# The world as village gossip

BY MARTIN THOMAS

Will Kate McCann become another Lindy Chamberlain? The only reasonable answer is that we have no way of even making an intelligent guess.

But posing the question, and knowing that we can't even guess the answer, tell us some important things about the mass media which saturate our world.

Lindy Chamberlain was sentenced to life imprisonment in Australia in 1982 for the murder of her baby daughter Azaria, who had mysteriously vanished one night in August 1980. The chief evidence was blood traces in the family car.

With further tests, it was proved more or less conclusively that Lindy Chamberlain had not murdered Azaria. She was formally cleared in 1988. Probably — though it is rare for dingos to attack humans — a dingo seized and killed Azaria.

It was not just that the court system miscarried. So did public opinion. As the case was pushed by the mass media into almost everyone's daily conversation, most people, even liberals, democrats, and socialists, came to say that they believed Lindy Chamberlain guilty.

It was partly because Lindy Chamberlain was a strange and unprepossessing character, an



Gerry and Kate McCann

adherent of Seventh Day Adventism (a fundamentalist Christian group who believe that the Second Coming of Christ is due any time soon, and insist on the Sabbath being Saturday not Sunday) and wife of an Adventist preacher.

Maybe Kate McCann, apparently a more "mainstream" person, will do better with public opinion. The point is we can't know; yet we are deluged with pressure from the mass media to deal with the McCann case as with the Chamberlain case — as if we are village-green gossips dealing with a village drama in a society

which has not yet developed "abstract", objective legal procedures.

It is, I think, of a piece with the way politics is covered by the mass media. The media give us very little information on the real political issues which we can and must make judgements about. They give us a flood of personal information — or "information" — about Blair, Brown, Cameron, and the rest, of the sort that might be relevant if we were choosing between them as village elder in a pre-political society.

Probably evolution has hard-wired human

brains to conceptualise things most readily on the model of the medium scale — village or clan sized human communities, objects and processes not too big or too small or too fast or too slow to be readily seen, touched, smelt, or tasted.

We can rise above our hard-wiring. That is why science exists. It takes an effort. That is why science is difficult, especially the science of the very big, very small, very fast, or very slow.

To understand society and politics in the proper terms — not as another soap opera, or episode of reality TV — also requires a scientific effort, too. It can be done. It has been done.

Yet there is constant counter-pressure from the mass media and the image-spinners of bourgeois politics. That counter-pressure gains ground in an era, like the present, where the mechanisms that allow for proper objective discussion among the working class of society and politics — lively, structured discussions within trade unions and working-class political parties, a lively working-class press which strives to educate — are shrivelled.

The primary job of socialists is to educate, and that includes educating ourselves to know when we do not know and cannot know.

## National Service? No thanks!

BY AMINA SADDIQ

THE Tories are trying to bring back a toned down version of National Service. The original version, under which all young men had to do two years military service, was abolished in 1963.

David Cameron is advocating that all 16 year olds should take part in a six-week programme of charity work and physical activities after their GCSEs — whether they plan to stay at school or college or get a job afterwards. This will help people develop pride in themselves and in Britain, strengthen national identity, tackle anti-social behaviour blah blah blah...

Let's list the reasons why socialists should oppose this nonsense:

1. It will very likely become compulsory. When Cameron first floated the idea, at the start of 2006, he argued that the scheme would have to be "universal". This is the an attack on the rights of young people to do what we want. (And even if the scheme doesn't become actually compulsory, there will clearly be a lot of social and institutional pressure to buckle under and be a good citizen.) Why should the state be able to order us to go and do what capitalist politicians consider "good works"? Cameron, Brown etc are worried is how to crack down on "NIWOTs" (youth "not in work or training").

2. "Volunteers" will be used to as cheap labour for the state and voluntary organisations on projects which should be publicly funded and create decent, secure, well-paid jobs — boosting the

drive to privatise services by handing them over to the voluntary sector, and the drive to push unemployed youth into doing crappy jobs at half the cost (or, in this case, for free!) Witness Cameron's first pronouncement on the subject last year, in which he cited "helping with social services in Stepney" as something that people might do.

3. It is a substitute for, an excuse for not, providing the options that young people really do need: decent jobs, more and better benefits, housing, services and facilities, free and properly-funded education and so on. We want to live in a nice flat without paying too much rent; have a fulfilling, well-paid job; get real access to education; and be provided with the services we need to live and enjoy our lives — not be pushed into

a yet another scheme. As governments continue to hack public sector provision to bits, they will cite national service as proof that they really do care about young people's needs.

4. As you might expect from a throw back to the 1950s, it is an ideologically reactionary throw back to concepts of national identity, militaristic discipline and so on — concepts that bourgeois politicians are incredibly keen to promote, but we must be ready to oppose.

5. The Tories said it! Disgracefully, the National Union of Teachers has apparently signed up to help Cameron develop his plan. Socialists must get the labour movement to oppose it and fight for the real alternatives that young people need.

## Swedish model will fail UK sex workers

BY HEATHER SHAW

THE government is considering proposals to prosecute men for buying sex; in this they are following the model of "vice control" used in Sweden.

Government statistics suggest that 85% of women in brothels are from outside the UK and whilst the people that bring these women into Britain are often prosecuted for trafficking, the men who pay for their services escape without charge. Eight years ago in Sweden legislation was passed so that the men who paid for sex would face criminal charges instead of the women selling it.

Other proposals being debated are the "naming and shaming" of men who buy sex through kercrawling, something which is already illegal in Britain.

But such reactions are not going to help the vulnerable women within the sex industry; in fact, they can actively endanger them. The *Guardian* on 10 September quoted Cari Mitchell, of the English Collection of Prostitutes, denying the theory that the Swedish model improves the conditions of women in the sex industry: "Criminalising clients forces prostitution further underground. Women have even less time to check out men fearful of arrest.

Instead, women are pushed into more isolated, less well-lit areas where they are more vulnerable to attack. Whatever anyone thinks about men paying for sex, safety should be the priority."

There are also reports of migrant sex workers in Sweden being arrested and simply deported. Alongside these concerns, the increased pressure on sex workers in terms of time per client and ability to be selective about clients decreases their agency in terms of negotiating safe sex and communicating about problematic clients. The measures increase the risks of sex work in these and many other areas. Safe, secure, legal and unionised environments are surely the only circumstances where sex workers can truly be safe and consider all these aspects of their work.

The criminalisation of clients is not a solution to the dangers of trafficking and prostitution and shouldn't be considered as the only alternative to prosecuting the women who sell sex. Cari Mitchell goes on to highlight what should be addressed in the debates surrounding this issue: "poverty, debt, rape and domestic violence, lack of housing, cuts in benefits, and low wages in other occupations which force women into prostitution and which the government itself found in its review of the prostitution laws".

## Feminism's not dead!

### Feminist Fightback 07 Saturday 20 October

**B**ACK for a second year, the Feminist Fightback activist conference is organised by a group of socialist feminists, including the Education Not for Sale student network. It aims to bring together feminists from a wide range of perspectives to debate ideas and develop practical strategies for fighting women's oppression and exploitation.

Fightback 07 will build on the success of last year's conference, attended by over 220 people, which gave rise to several activist initiatives, including the March 3 2007 Torch-Lit March for Abortion Rights.

This year we will continue our campaign to defend and extend abortion rights and our discussions will include...

- IS SEXY ALWAYS SEXIST? FEMINISM, LADS MAGS AND PORNOGRAPHY
- ECOFEMINISM
- FEMINISTS AGAINST BORDERS
- ISLAMIC FEMINISM
- RACE, SEX, CLASS

- THE GENDER PAY GAP, LOW PAY AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE
- WOMEN AGAINST SWEATSHOPS
- INTRODUCTION TO SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Plus film showings...

- LOVE, HONOUR AND DISOBEY: A FILM BY SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS
- A PLACE OF RAGE: WOMEN IN THE BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Feminist Fightback's supporters include the National Union of Students Women's Campaign, the RMT Women's Committee and the International Union of Sex Workers.

The conference will be held at the University of East London Docklands campus (Cyprus DLR). For more information, or to register, ring 07890 209 479, or email [feminist.fightback@gmail.com](mailto:feminist.fightback@gmail.com).