

Capitalist aristocrats

ISN'T it the Hans Christian Andersen's story of the ugly duckling, the despised little gosling duck among other ducks who turned out to be a swan — but here in reverse, and with an unhappy ending?

This duck swanked around like a swan but he was a swan only in his own mind. Poor Conrad Black, the runty little multi-millionaire thought he was a billionaire. A mere baron (since 2001) in Britain's near-expiring House of Lords, he sometimes thought he was a pre-French Revolution nobleman, as he put it himself, defending what he thought were his prerogatives: "I am not prepared to re-enact the French Revolution's renunciation of the rights of nobility. We are proprietors, after all." Not quite. A mere minor nobleman he sometimes seemed to think that he was Cardinal Richelieu (picture), who once ruled France.

In any case, Lord Black of Crossharbour, was hopelessly confused, delusional, even. Going in for a bit of chiselling (a mere \$60 million — loose change to a real billionaire) to finance his pretensions, he got his come-uppance last week in a Chicago courtroom. After a three-month trial he was convicted on three charges of fraud (not for \$60 million as charged, but for \$6.5 million), and of obstructing justice in trying to cover up the fraud. He was only a runty little multi-millionaire after all.

Just as in France before the revolution there were very severe laws against a commoner impersonating a nobleman, so in the US Plutocratic Republic there are severe laws against a mere chief stockholder in a company like Hollinger, behaving as if he owns the whole company and all its assets are at his disposal. The prosecutors talk of a 15-20 year jail sentence for Black, who is 62, now faces the possibility of spending the rest of his life in an American jail...

Black's Marie Antoinette, a once-poor, plebeian East London Jewish girl, is a journalist who briefly, in her youth, had been a Stalinist. Barbara Amiel wasn't



Conrad Black as Cardinal Richelieu and Barbara Amiel as Marie Antoinette at a fancy dress party in 2000

million dollars on a private jet holiday in the South Seas. Extravagant? Black didn't think so. "It is a total fraud to think that I lived with any particular extravagance. I had certain ideas about how the chairman of a big newspaper should behave", he said two months ago. But was Black really delusional in his vision of himself? Surely he was not.

This man controlled a vast conglomeration of newspapers. In Britain, his company bought control of the *Daily Telegraph*, Britain's best-selling serious broadsheet newspaper, and the *Sunday Telegraph*, in 1985. He thereby brought a tremendous influence on British public opinion, on the minds of a sizeable chunk of the British electorate. He was thereafter enabled to buy skilled conscience-free hack writers to make propaganda in his papers. A literate right wing ideologue, who has written a couple of books, he did it himself too. Barbara Amiel did it in his papers, with a neo-con brutalism that was sometimes almost refreshing.

This "nobleman of the bank account" did not have the feudal "right of the first night" but, like all the press barons he had the unlimited right to fuck with the minds of the readers of the newspapers he controlled! So do all those who control newspapers and TV and radio stations — the Rupert Murdochs and the Richard Desmonds. As owner of the *Express* newspapers Desmond is now running a vicious and irresponsible campaign against immigration and asylum-seekers (and inescapably, against Britain's immigrants and asylum seekers). According to accounts of those who worked for him, Black as press Lord wasn't too bad, as such people go.

It's a fact that he sometimes registered disagreements with the *Telegraph* — by way of a humble letter, as from a reader (deliberately projecting a "democratic" image of himself, most likely).

Black, like all of them, had tremendous power over our lives.

LEAVE aside the fantasies of his own "nobility" and the all too real "nobility of the bank roll" that in fact was his so long as he obeyed the

rules of the capitalist mafia, of which he was part. The dispute between Black and the other Hollinger shareholders was a quarrel between robbers over sharing out the loot. As Black himself put it: the goose just kept laying "golden eggs"; and as Sarah Sands, a former Black newspaper executive put it: their job on the *Telegraph* was just to make money, and send it on. What is striking here is the reminder of what the law forbids and what it takes as normal.

The law is coming down crushingly on Black for pilfering from the other Hollinger shareholders, but, being bourgeois law, naturally, it has nothing to say to the fact that the wealth was siphoned off from the workers on Hollinger's papers, from whose labour power came the wealth those like Sarah Sands sent on to the owners. Under the law in a democratic bourgeois country it is taken as normal that the means of communication should be the private property of individuals and companies. Black can't filch from the Hollinger shareholders without dire legal consequences, but he and Murdoch, Desmond and the others can own great chunks of opinion-forming media — television stations too, in the US — in bourgeois democratic countries, where, in theory the opinions so formed control what the politicians do, and in

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fact do, at least influence it. As Lord Black, he had no vote in elections — but how many votes in fact did his paper dispose of?

More than that. While a Conrad Black or a Rupert Murdoch are riding high, at the peak of power, no one dares accuse them of wrong-doing. The late Robert Maxwell (also a Lord) who

controlled the Mirror Group of newspapers, was a notorious crook and swindler. He even robbed the pension fund of his employees. It was widely known what Maxwell was, yet for

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many years, the libel laws — a rich person's shield which in practice is not available to the non-rich — prevented him from being exposed. At his death a mountain of information came tumbling out — too late to do anyone any good. The libel law in its majesty protected Maxwell. Just as the law protected Black as long as he and the other corporate bandits, Hollinger's shareholders, didn't fall out over sharing the spoils.

When Robert Maxwell died, the following story came out. The old bandit stood on the roof of the Mirror Groups skyscraper headquarters in Holborn, London, and pissed over the edge on to the passers-by down below. He turned to his companion and, with a gesture of his head towards the street, said: "Look! They don't even know they're being pissed on!" Even if they don't do it literally, that's what all such creatures do. That is what they will go on doing. Anyone who thinks that the exposure and conviction of Black will change that, to any degree at all, is...delusional. Black on the French Revolution, above, got it a little out of focus. The French aristocrats renounced nothing until the roused up people forced them to. Neither will the aristocrats of the purse, press lords, and all the other sorts of reigning bourgeois "Lords", until we force them to.

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even a duckling, only a London sparrow in the grip of a late-life romantic right-wing fantasy that the money, which her husband didn't have, ennobled her too. She was so ill-bred that she couldn't resist boasting to the world: "my extravagance knows no bounds". But as poor Lord Black discovered in the Chicago courtroom, there were bounds.

The bounds set by Black's wealth and the law against appropriating other people's money. There is no such crime as injury to the Crown in the Republican USA: there is injury to capital!

The Blacks spent three-quarters of a

Galloway on trial

IN the first we've heard of him in ages, George Galloway will be suspended from the House of Commons for 18 days this autumn on the grounds that he damaged the reputation of Parliament through the conduct of his Mariam Appeal charity.

Three basic points for the left:

1. We should reject representatives being suspended except by their constituents. As with Ken Livingstone's brief suspension by the Standards Board of England last year, we must oppose such anti-democratic moves even when we loathe their victims.

2. We should also reject the concept which lies behind the charge. Why should damaging the reputation of Parliament be a punishable offence? Moreover, take

a look at the accusers. Why does their accusation apply to Galloway's antics, but not to the political corruption of the three main parties, stuffed to the gills with obscene largesse from big business? Did the Mariam Appeal really do more to lower public opinion of MPs than Tory sleaze or Labour's various "love the rich" scandals, most recently "cash for peerages"? Parliament is a pigsty; Galloway is far from the only pig.

3. Neither of these points means that Galloway is an innocent man.

For certain, the man who openly admits he took funding from the petrodollar autocracies of Saudi Arabia and UEA and from Ba'athist businessmen, and who boasted of his free access to officials of Saddam Hussein's government, is no friend of the left or the working class.