

The New Zealand Memory Hole

by Theodore Dalrymple



In the wake of the horrible massacre in Christchurch, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, announced in parliament that she would never pronounce the name of the perpetrator, and forever refer to him only anonymously. In some quarters she has been taken almost as a secular saint who has covered herself with a thick mantle of virtue, but from now on I shall refer to her as Mrs Pecksniff, in honour of Mr Pecksniff, the character in Dickens who introduced his two daughters, Charity and Mercy, by adding ‘Not unholy names, I hope?’

Mrs Pecksniff’s decision was sentimental, stupid and self-important. The name of the perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant, is by now known to all the world and can hardly be effaced from the public record. That particular genie will not go back into the bottle. Whether or not she pronounces his name cannot make the

slightest difference to his notoriety.

Her decision not to pronounce it, though, was taken because (she said) she wished to deprive him of what she alleged he most wanted, publicity. Either she was guilty of primitive magical thinking, the belief that one's thoughts, words or wishes can by themselves bring about events that by normal standards of causation they cannot, or of gross overestimation of her own influence. It is not by failing to pronounce words or names known to everyone that evil will be stopped in its tracks.

Instead of pronouncing his name, Mrs Pecksniff asked people in her country to pronounce the names of his victims. What was this supposed to achieve, even were it possible? It is a fact that fifty unfamiliar names will soon be forgotten, though it would of course be appropriate to inscribe them on any monument erected to commemorate the massacre. Mrs Pecksniff is thus a practitioner of that modern and lamentably increasing genre of politics, gestural mass psychotherapy.

Strictly speaking, even her gesture was somewhat less virtuous than she herself clearly took it to be. Brenton Tarrant has not yet been found guilty of any crime, and it is an ancient principle that a man is to be considered innocent until he has been found guilty. No one can seriously doubt that he committed the *actus reus*, the guilty act, but he needs also to have had the *mens rea*, the guilty mind, for his act to have been murder. While I think it is extremely unlikely that he did not have it, yet this has still to be fully determined. In effect, however, the Prime Minister of the country in which he is to be tried has already pronounced on the subject. She has pronounced him guilty before he has been found guilty.

She is almost certainly right that he is guilty, of course, but that is not the point. It was not for her to prejudge the issue in public, and the principle of innocence until a verdict of guilty is passed is of greater importance than any

personal display of virtue. In the circumstances she had to say something, but should have confined herself to a belief that, if found guilty, she thought that the perpetrator should be punished with the full rigour of the law. Self-righteousness is no substitute for the rule of law.

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