

Smooth operator

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Until I heard Politically Charged this week on Radio Four, part of The Westminster Hour (Sunday, repeated Wednesday), I'd forgotten that the sleek, smug, perma-tanned Peter Hain had been prosecuted in 1972 for conspiracy to disrupt all-white sports tours from South Africa as part of the anti-apartheid campaign. I remember his absurd, bogus prosecution for carrying out a bank robbery in Putney — he was quite rightly acquitted — but not the private prosecution for conspiracy brought by Francis Bennion, a barrister and parliamentary draughtsman. Bennion was just as principled a man as Hain and was outraged that protesters could disrupt or stop rugby, cricket and tennis tours by South Africans.

How innocent he seems to us today. It's become the norm to take 'direct action' to make life difficult for or to stop other people doing things of which some other people don't approve. And if you have a Labour government and you pay them enough they'll even ban what you don't like, hunting being the most glaring example. Or, if Rupert Murdoch supports you, pay him back by allowing English cricket rights on television to go to him, thus preventing non-satellite subscribers from seeing any English Test cricket for four years. At a time when a government appeases the IRA psychopaths and does nothing about animal-rights terrorists Bennion's belief is gloriously old-fashioned. He told the presenter Clive Anderson, 'The way a civilised society conducts itself is by reasoned debate and decision on whether to change the law, and until the law is changed in that way you do not allow crude force to have its affect. That is a defeat for democracy.'

Hain was a young Liberal until he realised the party would never be in power or even in coalition; he then switched to Labour and improved his career prospects no end. He is, of course, now the Honourable Peter Hain, 'one of the smoothest operators in the New Lab. government', as Anderson put it. He had been only 19 when he became chairman of the stop the 70s tour campaign, having left South Africa with his family because of his father's anti-apartheid campaign. Hain said he realised the psychological importance of sport for white South Africans, and thought that if he could undermine that it would help end apartheid. He still thinks that and has a rather overblown view of his own importance. The then captain of the South African rugby team, Dawie de Villiers, later a cabinet minister and ambassador to Britain, rather dismissed this, saying it was not as significant a factor as people thought. He's right. Although white South Africans resented their sporting isolation, it was casualties from the guerrilla war, financed and supported by China and the Soviet Union and pressure from Washington that finally persuaded the South African government to abandon apartheid and agree to democratic elections, not the digging-up cricket pitches.

The prosecution shouldn't have been brought, of course. Even Bennion, while defending his decision, described it folly, as the stresses contributed to the break-up of his marriage and financial debt. Hain, in contrast, has moved on with Widmerpool aplomb to greater things. In any case, conspiracy is often a dubious charge as it suggests that the evidence to convict for the actual crime in question is a bit shaky. Hain escaped the main charge because he sacked his legal team, among them the left-wing lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, and faced the court as 'the sole pathetic youth all alone before the jury and appealed to the jury's sympathy'. Bennion said. 'A cunning ploy,' according to Robertson. . . .