

# Guilt without responsibility

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## LOOSE CANNON

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It is always disheartening to see how hypocrisy feeds on itself. The recent emotionally gaudy displays of retrospective anguish over the 1994 Rwanda massacres are an indication of how deeply cynical has become the discourse of international politics. In the years leading up to April 1994 and at the time when the Rwandan horror began in earnest, United Nations peace-keeping specialists, its secretary general and a veritable wallow of presidents and prime ministers, didn't give a toss about what was under way in this tiny African state. Bosnia was far worthier of their attention. Now, 10 safe years later, they stumble eagerly over each other to show the depth of their distress.

Worst of all has been the eternally smug Kofi Annan, current Secretary General of the UN, who seized on the moment of the 10th anniversary of

the Rwanda slaughterhouse to announce to the world, in low trembling tones, how much he regretted not having done enough to stop the progress of an obvious and planned campaign of genocide.

Was this genuine contrition? Did it come from somewhere deep within the man, a scorching affliction of his soul that for 10 long years he has struggled to contain? Or was it a bogus exculpation: a grandstand melancholy expressed at the 10th anniversary and when a large audience was guaranteed? Whichever, the vastly belated *meae culpae* of Annan, of Boutros Boutros-Ghali and all the other international players who did nothing about Rwanda had one thing in common: guilt prudently dislodged into the future is guilt without responsibility. Having dismissed the horror as unworthy of their attention at the time, they now all share in mouthing the same obscene caveat as they grieve over the old bones: "This makes us resolute in our determination that this must never happen again."

How regularly that delusory phrase is trotted out: ready-at-hand compassion in response to the excesses of the subhuman. It is yet another political cliché, utterly with-

out meaning. Of course it will "happen again". Since Rwanda, in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone about three million lives have been sacrificed to the adjournments of the politicians. In the Sudan wholesale ethnic cleansing is under way right now. The slaughter continues in the Middle East, in Malaysia, in Iraq. In Rwanda, the last of 25 000 victims of brutal rape are dying of Aids. You would think Annan's touching culpability would jolt the UN into some action to relieve their suffering. You would be wrong.

Recently I've been reading Linda Melvern's meticulously researched work: *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*. This is a follow-up to her earlier book: *A People Betrayed: the Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*. Published to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the massacre, it might be suspected that this timing was more for commercial reasons than any others.

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Only a few pages into the book dispels that reservation.

Melvern's book is outstanding and it makes it almost impossible to avoid cynicism about the sincerity at the stage-managed public relations exercise that attended the commemorative ceremonies of the Rwandan tragedy. With few exceptions the attending media played to the "shock-and-horror" gallery: the coverage was often slushy and overstated, full of the curious pomposity that features of this kind lend to their opinions.

Some sounded like sports reports. "It was by far the worst genocide to have hit Africa, outreaching even Idi Amin," gasped one enthusiastic television reporter. Like most of the métier, it was the serving up of junk-food news and comment. Here today, forgotten tomorrow. But then, you only have to look at the phenomenal dramatic, literary, cinematic and media mileage that has been squeezed, leached and hammered out of Hitler's Germany or Stalin's USSR to know that there's an endless market for the well-packaged suffering of others.

If anything this display of synthesised grief endorsed George Steiner's controversial recommendation that the only appropriate response to the horrors of the 20th century is silence.

Anything else will always be in danger of in some way being exploitative. In deference to this, Melvern's book carefully sidesteps the pitfall. She writes clearly and with no attempt at cheap dramatisation of horror. Her research has been exhaustive and the clarity of her chronology is the most damning of all indictments against those who looked the other way in the years leading up to 1994. Melvern's record is, therefore, all the more effective: objectivity subsidises credibility. In this way her work ranks with the 2003 book *Gulag*, a formidable revelation of the truth about the past century's most guarded secret, the Soviet labour and death camps. Its author, Anne Applebaum, has already received the Pulitzer Prize. It will not be surprising if Linda Melvern's work receives similar reward.

The relevance of the Rwandan tragedy to the Zimbabwean oligarchy of Robert Mugabe is, of course, salient. With Zimbabwe, too, politicians dither and make excuses for not bringing an end to what, if not in scale, certainly in its viciousness, is a government of criminals.

I'll say one thing for Mbeki. He took the trouble to attend the commemoration ceremonies in Kigali. Not a sign of Annan there.