

# In Fear Of Feelings

Emotions, as we all know, are pretty powerful stuff. But when it comes to politics, **Elena Lieven** argues that we often pretend they don't really exist

**P**olitically emotion is of immense importance yet we rarely think about it. Politicians appeal constantly to the emotions - think of Kinnock and Thatcher on unemployment and defence. The peace movement also depends on emotion a great deal, particularly fear. And the British public sometimes responds in a way that shows emotion to be a major political force as during the Falklands war, with Live Aid and in response to the Chernobyl disaster.

The Left and progressive movements ought to be thinking about how emotion works and what sort of emotions we should be trying to engender. Instead we are grateful for those emotions that work in our favour and don't really understand those that work against us.

In addition, and because we don't think about it, we tend to depend on the same emotions and responses as those of the Right rather than thinking about the transformatory possibilities of a politics of emotion. Fear, chauvinism and selfishness are the tools of the Right. Even if such emotions bring us short-term gains in support, what are the long-term effects on the possibility of change, if we use such emotions? We have to change people, and not just structures, if we are to start moving in the direction of the sort of society that we want.

But emotion is hard to think about: complex and contradictory, and it is not going to be easy to integrate an emotional analysis with a political strategy, particularly as the place to start is with our own emotions.

One of the commonest implicit or explicit ways of dealing with emotion is to argue that it is best to avoid it altogether and stick to the rational. But to claim rationality while evading emotionality is to be *irrational*. Thus the frequent contrast between men as rational and women as emotional is best seen as a contrast between different ways of dealing with emotion. Men's emotionality is more likely to involve shouting, or icy logic, than bursting into tears. How many times have I argued with someone whose seemingly rational approach I know to be wrong, only to realise later what was being denied and hidden by one or both of us! The need to win an argument is usually at the expense of failing to hear

what the other is saying.

Yet, despite the fact that the accusation of emotionality is almost always used to deny the rationality of what is being said, I am not arguing for the supremacy of the emotional over something called the rational but that the two are part of the same truly rational approach to understanding. Not prioritising feeling over rationality but integrating them. Without this integration we exist in a one-dimensional world from which we can never hope to understand the complexity of public and political emotion.

**Where emotion is 'allowed' it is usually that of traditional leftwing emotions which celebrate male heroism and individual courage often in the cause of stand-up confrontation and often *lacking* rational analysis. But the ground for these emotions is reactive and often ends in defeat. And the struggle makes us hard and turns us into people that we don't want to be. The often violent reaction to the voicing of any criticism or doubt of these emotional reactions, for instance in the miners' strike, makes one suspect that they fulfil an important need for many of those on the traditional Left, and that they should be carefully examined. It is not that people should *not* respond to these emotions of solidarity in struggle - they reflect collective human oppression and the response to it. But they are not enough on their own, they too have their irrationality.**

**W**hile there is argument about the details and even the scientific standing of psychoanalysis, many of its concepts now form an accepted and recognisable part of our ways of thinking about ourselves and others and can be extremely useful in helping us to understand emotion. People can act for reasons, and have deep felt needs, that they themselves may not consciously perceive; they can feel two contradictory emotions about the same event or person, which often leads to frustration and anger; they can 'block' something they don't want to hear, or mentally run away from it.

For these reasons, emotional reactions can seem totally out of proportion to the immediate precipitating event - either not enough emotion, too much of it or what seems an inappropriate

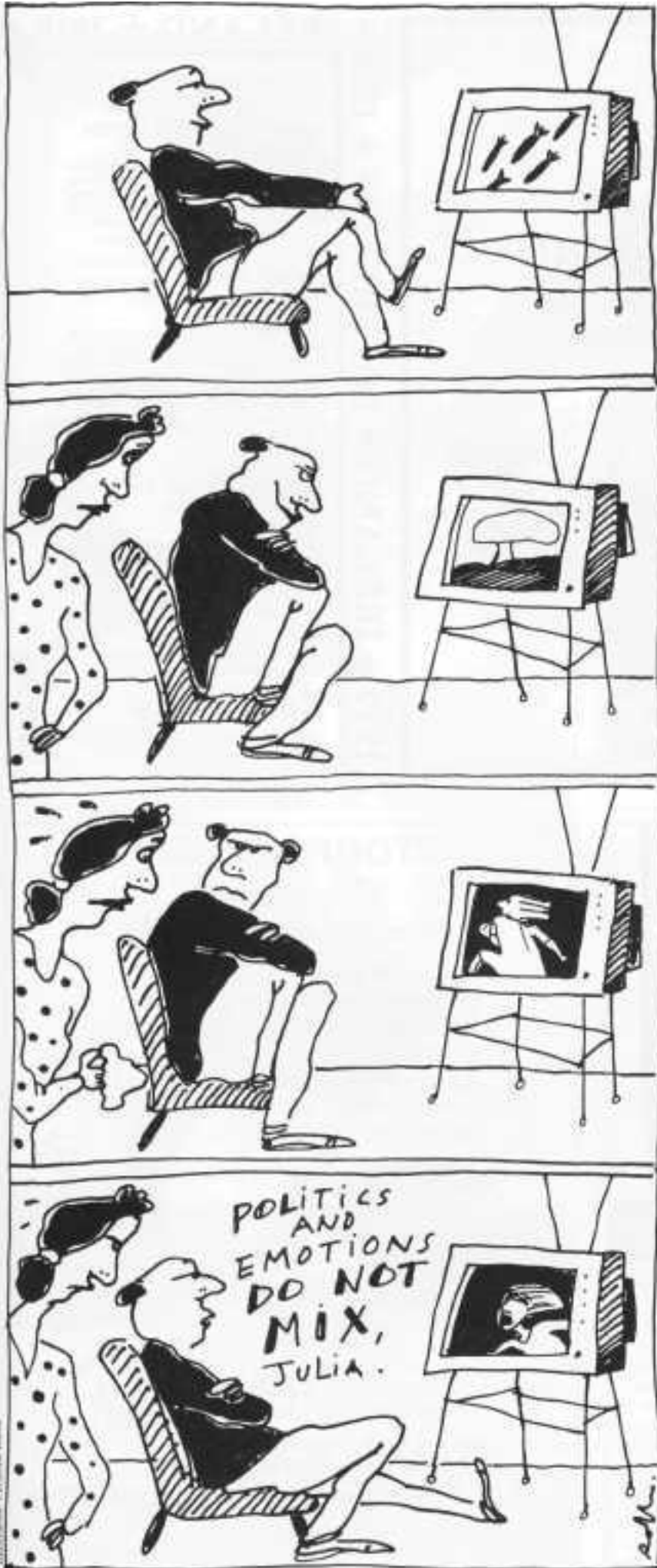
reaction. But these things are not arbitrary, nor do they require years of individual psychotherapy to identify. With practice, they are recognisable and we can start to understand and deal with them.

Take attitudes to the nuclear arms race. I think we radically underestimate the disabling effects of two kinds of fear. One is the not unreasonable fear of nuclear war and the other is the fear of responsibility, of taking the future into our own hands. Fear, though obviously at a biological level crucial to survival, tends to be channelled by the human mind in ways that will buffer us from the animal responses of flight, fight or freeze. We fly from it in the mind rather than the body; block it or project it onto something less dangerous than the original fearful object. The seemingly unreasonable anger that we sometimes see in ourselves and others is often generated by deep fear; if we can't begin to understand this, we are likely to get very confused indeed.

**Now there is no doubt that fear brings** many people to the peace movement in the first place; the present phase of the European peace movements started with the decision to deploy Cruise missiles in Europe and the related decision, as many say it, to limit nuclear war to Europe.

And yet for every person who joins or is sympathetic, there may be a larger number whose fear paralyses them or is simply blocked off altogether and perhaps invested in anger against the people who arouse it. I think that we can see a similar blocking reaction in the peace movement when we protect ourselves by not thinking constantly about the horrors of nuclear war, yet this does not prevent us from acting. There is, however, also the possibility of a negative side to this, when the justifiable anger that we feel about the responsibility of politicians for the nuclear nightmare gets diverted into anger with each other or into obsessionality about one aspect of our work. For many of us, our fear is lessened by *doing* something and we gain strength from the possibility of a different future that we come to envisage. If we could understand this process better, perhaps we could extend it into the arenas of education and information which are a central part of CND's work and which, at the moment, may well be disabling many people by increasing their fear.

As well as the fear of nuclear devastation, we also have to come to terms with a deep fear of responsibility which seems to afflict huge numbers of people not excluding those on the Left and in the progressive movements. Why are people so afraid of change and so passionately committed to the *status quo*? Many people seem to have a need to believe in a benign and protective state that outweighs their rational fears and knowledge of what that state might and can do. At the same time, there is a widespread dislike and even disgust of



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politicians and politics. This seems to suggest that the state is felt to be quite separate from politics and this, in turn, fits in with the idea that many people don't want to be offered choices, while at the same time resenting those who do the choosing.

**A**t the risk of sounding very reductionist, this seems to have a parallel in the tension between the freedoms of childhood and those of mature adulthood. In childhood, others take decisions for you, which can be very pleasurable but, of course, at the same time, you may well resent them for doing so. Maturity lies in a self-reliance and autonomy which is not afraid of responsibility, but even those who manage to achieve this fairly fully experience a longing for others to take decisions for them.

The strategic difficulty is that if the Left and the peace movement emphasise distrust of the state without also finding ways to help people towards self-reliance, it may simply be too threatening for people to deal with. And again perhaps, we can see the same complex emotional responses reflected in progressive politics: the resentment of hierarchies together with a refusal to take responsibility. Perhaps the twin dangers of blind faith in, and blind distrust of, leadership come from the same emotional roots? Again if we faced up to these things in our everyday practice, perhaps we could start to think how to solve them on a wider scale.

**So we have to build personal and collective responsibility and create positive visions of the future.** But you cannot help people face responsibility by *telling* them that they are responsible, particularly if you are also telling them that what they are responsible for is nasty. We have to build responsibility for ourselves and others by facing up to the difficulties and pain of it and with small, slow, practical steps. We also have to deal with fear, partly by bringing it into the open but also and crucially, by providing hope. We must enable and not disable people with our politics and until we can do that, I suspect that we **will** be going round and round with the Right on the treadmill of fear, distrust and powerlessness.

For all these reasons we must do much more conscious talking about emotion in politics, both personally and more generally, in both its positive and negative effects, rather than being bludgeoned into emotion on some occasions and denied it on others. Emotional responses have to be considered seriously and made part of the analysis of strategy. And finally we need much clearer ways of thinking about these exceedingly complex issues than I have managed here. They have always been central to the feminist project - what I've tried to do is to show that they are central to the entire progressive movement.