

By Paula Jaegar, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

Ron Silver, West Wing actor, author, sometime intelligence agent and lifelong Democrat, said at a meeting in the House of Commons as the UK's £half trillion rescue package for banks was launched that in the midst of the financial maelstrom we would have to get used to the idea of the world crumbling on almost every front. Our special correspondent was there.

'Life Imitating Art : Will the 'West Wing election' mirror reality or can we expect a surprise result?" discussed the parallels and differences between the West Wing and real-life presidential elections. Mr Silver assessed the policy positions of the Democrat and Republican presidential candidates and the possible repercussions for future transatlantic relations.

The breadth of his experience and education shows. His fluent delivery humour, erudition, self-deprecation and warmth informed his themes; this 'extraordinary election', towards which he professed an ambivalence, the precipitous financial climate, and his overriding concern for national security issues. 9/11, he said, had irrevocably changed the world – and suggested that the global financial crisis was changing it over again.

His ambivalence to the Obama-McCain contest, and the growing likelihood (with suddenly a lot of commentators coming out and saying it) of an Obama victory, grew from his lifelong status as a registered Democrat and his desire to see, in his lifetime, an African American President of the United States, versus his absolute prioritisation of security issues above all else.

He considers himself to be, in the American sense, a 'liberal' on social issues, such as stem cell research and gay marriages. He claims to be well to the left of mass British opinion in his support for the National Health Service and his wish to see free health care on a similar basis in the States (though he doesn't realistically expect it). He opposed Reagan and Reaganism in most policy areas. Yet he supported that President's deployment of Pershing missiles in Europe and his unequivocal support for Israel. He identifies the great danger to the world, not as the presence of American power, but its withdrawal.

Ron Silver believes that in the storm of the biggest crisis for nearly 80 years, all the major financial institutions of the world, set up in the wake of World War II, are shown to be anachronistic, crumbling, and in need of major revision.

Mr Silver's colleagues on West Wing – a hardcore Democrat caucus – nicknamed him neo-Ron for his espousal of unfashionable and distinctly unDemocratic security policies after 9/11.

He said that he encountered a form of intolerance from the Left which he had previously encountered entirely from the Right : but nothing systemic; nothing comparable to the climate of McCarthyism. He cited his long term commitment to the Pro-Choice movement, but because

he didn't follow the Party line on a particular piece of related legislation (on parental notification of the parents of a minor having an abortion) he was vilified. On education, he came out in favour of a voucher scheme, tired of sitting around at affluent dinner party tables where his hosts and fellow guests enthused about public education while sending their own offspring to \$30-40,000 a year private education (including Obama). He lost his place in the political spectrum; he became ideologically homeless.

Negotiating the publication of his book on his career and political activity, he found that prospective publishers wanted a conversion story, a tale of his leaving behind his childish callow beliefs and emerging, mature, a fully-formed Republican.

Nothing like it.

He spoke of his leaving the Creative Coalition, which he founded, disillusioned by the same evidence of groupthink, an unwillingness not to stick to the orthodoxy. Following the Danish cartoon controversy, and the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, he tried and failed to organise a print of the cartoons in the major 'liberal' east Coast papers, a screening of the filmmaker's projects.

His own interest in, and apprehension of, militant Islam, goes back to the early Nineties, following the assassination of rightwing new York rabbi Meir Kahane in 1990 and the first truck bombing of the World Trade Centre.

In a project filmed in the East End of London and shown a year before 7/7, Red Mercury, described the balkanisation of the British Muslim population in the UK, its alienation, its purposeless drift into dangerous arenas. It was, he said, a deliberately provocative film. A policeman asks: What is Britain for? Who are we, where are we going, what are we doing? All we can offer our young people is binge-drinking and celebrity fetishism.

He does not compare the British unfavourably to home-grown American culture, its greed, its self-aggrandisement. He opines we are both guilty of a serious lapse in behaviour. Evidence of this is coming home; in our foreign policy, our problems with our immigrant populations (The USA, he believes, has been far more successful than Europe in assimilating and rewarding immigrants), and now in this catastrophic financial collapse.

The American provision of benign stability is over. Who, he asks, would we prefer to see fill that vacancy?

Bush is nearly gone; and no longer blinded by his presence, we will be able to focus on the issues of his aftermath.

Both Presidential candidates have very seriously, perhaps fatally compromised themselves in Silver's eyes, as the result of the irrefusable impulse to win.

Speaking humourously, and very tellingly, of how actors playing the fictional candidates in West Wing were infected by this overwhelming desire and would approach the writers to suggest

that their character should win("after campaigning for a whole year..."), Silver equated Obama's obstruction of the possibility of government funding for presidential candidates, to replace the reliance on private funding and all the muck it entails, because he wanted to win, with McCain's nomination of Sarah Palin as Vice Presidential candidate, because he wanted to win.

The election will be a decisive victory for Obama; because Obama is better organised on the ground; and whoever can get their people to the polls on the day will carry it.

He will be better than Bush for American national interest than Bush. He is more curious, a better speaker. He is more acceptable to the larger world. His election will buy America six months' goodwill.

His face, and that of his photogenic family, will look good on the cover of Time, of Newsweek, at the newsstands outside the madrassas. Perhaps its students will look at his face and think, hey, he's black, he's 47, his father was a goatherd, he went to Harvard and now he's President of America ?

And then ?

Silver doesn't foresee a change in policy towards Israel. He can imagine that the US will content itself with allowing China, Japan, Korea, to work it out for themselves. He sees the 7th Fleet out of the Persian Gulf. It won't be up to the US. Influence won't be based on dollars, it won't be based on warships. There will be an end to interventions such as Rwanda, Bosnia. There won't be the money.

Who, he again asks, would we like to see in its place? Russia, to which he assigns a growing and threatening nationalism? Europe, with or without its constitution and its individual nationalisms?

Mr Silver is too modest and far too experienced to pretend he can offer solutions, but expertly and poignantly asks the uncomfortable questions.

For his part Mr Silver is full of praise for the seriousness of British political discourse, observing that while American political commentary is caught up in a celebrity-trivia obsession with personality and quirk, the Brits downstairs are seriously getting to grips with the financial storm (for a far less flattering analysis and comparison, see Simon Jenkins in that day's Guardian - 8th October 2008).

Mr Silver is a member of the Council of Foreign Relations and of the Program Committee of the Wilson Council at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He is a former President of Equity and founder of the Creative Coalition, a grassroots political organisation, and speaking as the guest of the Henry Jackson Society and the Rt Hon Bruce George MP. But it's probably his role as political consultant Bruno Gianelli in the West Wing series that makes him an immediately recognisable face. He demonstrated transatlantic relations at their best; charming, generous, good-humoured, a little sly, a little envious, thoroughly at home.