

The Mark Thomas Interview

William Clark: Anger is uneasy in performance. How does that work?



Mark Thomas: Well people either leave or they stay.

WC: But the issues must make you angry anyway, they must *really* make you angry.

MT: I've spoke to all these fucking people some of whom took a risk to talk to me (Kurdish people). One guy who was president of IHD in Diyarbakir, he was late because of land mines exploding—it took two hours for the Security Forces to get there...the delay was very likely the

cause of the deaths of two young 16/17 year olds—and he came back and we're sitting in this office and he started saying 'right before you start to ask me any questions this is what's happening', and he gave a little speech, which lasted about ten minutes, about what was going on and what he was doing, how things had changed and were still bad, what our responsibility was, what their's was: really laying out what you must do to help. Now he'd said it so many times he was bored with it. He's had lots of people come in and listen to him.

We bumped into him the next night, he was coming round to the hotel because someone from the Foreign Office wanted to have a meeting with him: he sees Human Rights delegations, Civil Servants, NGOs, European Parliament...he's said all this stuff and he was bored with it. And when you put those two things together—people who take risks to come and talk to you and a man who's given the speech so many times—I just thought I'm not going to be another fucking cunt that just walks passed, do you know what I mean? I'm not going to be someone who's peeked into someone else's misery and then just fucked off.

Those two things, are if you like, the motor for what...there are different motors, do you understand what I'm saying? The facts of what people told me are fucking hugely distressing, hugely fucking emotional and our involvement, the British Government's involvement, British companies' involvement, the West's involvement to basically allow Turkey to get away with it is a huge shame. I think it is quite right that people should feel angry about it. There's also the feeling that when you're in that situation you can't do anything, you can't say anything to the 'Golfers' [Thomas' term for the secret police/security service heads], I can't say anything because if I do the people I'm with are going to get it when I've left. I won't get it; they'll get it when I've gone.

WC: You've been to South East Turkey, I've been too, I think when you do experience it—it's under Marshall Law—for yourself you realise that this is just different, you're going to nearly be killed a few times.

MT: We're quite lucky in a way that we've got political freedoms that we should be using...

WC: It's interesting that you focused on their humour, Kurdish Humour, because you go through all these things and you talk to them about all this

stuff and they go 'oh yeah right', because they've been shot at school. There's nothing you can say, people just cannot understand how these people have been brought up.

MT: The humour is fucking...

WC: Did you go to Drama School?

MT: Yes. If you're saying is it for real or do I act it? I'm not a psychologist I'm not sure how it works out.

WC: No obviously it's a performance, but the level of awareness of Kurdish issues is so low that really your stuff is pitched really well, taking in aspects of prior knowledge. As you say we should be more advanced and aware of the issues here but we aren't.

MT: I'll tell you what it is actually. It's a very fundamental thing, not just about compassion and solidarity or care or love about fellow human beings and their basic genuine human emotions, care and concern. But it's actually another fundamental emotion: I refuse to be lied to.

WC: People are lovers of the truth.

MT: I REFUSE to have them...Columbia for instance, what America is doing there in the name of this 'war on drugs' and their support of terrorism there: I want to fucking know about this because I want to challenge when Bush and the fucking news comes on and when the government say this or that. I want to be able to say I'm not going to be lied to—I want to know the facts. There's a fundamental thing there which is not just about compassion for other human beings but also a fucking anger that you're being shafted. Your money is being used for those guns in the name of fucking God knows what.

WC: One can read things and see things that make you look at TV and newspapers in a different way. Surely that's part of your political education.

MT: Absolutely.

WC: From that it becomes very difficult—people go on about 'The' media not really taking on the complexities: some forms of censorship exist through laziness or whatever. But the thing about the Ilisu dam is that it was such a potentially successful campaign.

MT: You see I think we're still going to win, but as you saw tonight we're meeting up with the Fire Brigade Union on Thursday.

WC: You're making all these contacts as you go round. But what is this for you Mark is it your real life? You've devoted your life to this because...?

MT: No I've spent three years doing it.

WC: You say your doing 'it', so this is it, you just want to go on with the Kurdish thing?—it seems to be growing events are unfolding more and more.

MT: The point is I got involved accidentally.

WC: Surely you met activists and when you meet

activists at that level its like stepping on a merry-go-round where they don't let go of you, they've got you by the scruff of the neck and they're going to squeeze you like a fucking lemon—and good on them.

MT: [Laughs] No no no its not just that. I knew Nick Hildyard way before we started work on Ilisu. Nick and I had done stuff together on the Export Credit Guarantee Dept. We'd hooked up through various friends of friends: Kerim [Yildiz] I got to know when we started to look at a campaign about Ilisu. The show was done because I wanted to tell the story of what had happened. I hadn't toured for five years—mainly because you see these fucking smoes coming off the telly: they fucking churn it all out, they've finished their series they do the big tour they do the fucking merchandising, they're at the top and they've used up all their good material they're fucking tired.

WC: Your talking about you fellow comics?

MT: Yeah I'm talking about my fellow fucking comics: you want to talk about milking it and squeezing it? Fucking right man—they fucking do. They go after every fucking penny. I genuinely don't give a fuck about that. I do stuff on telly I get well paid, why should I be greedy about it? Why should I traipse round trying to plaster over some fucking ranting old material that I've knocked up in half an hour. And so the time came when it was just like I wanted to tell these stories and I want to tell people what happened. I'm fucked off with television cutting out all my fucking gags because it's 24 minutes long. So I want people to see something that's different, that's real. These are peoples' stories, these are people I know, they're my mates.

WC: You're talking about the live act in distinction from the Channel Four programme. You don't really feel you can do what you want...given that there are other restrictions?

MT: Occasionally there are other restrictions in terms of censorship. Most notably when I was forbidden from going to Iraq. They wouldn't back us because 'you can't get the insurance for it', so the fucking company can't fucking film and they refused to go 'let's do it anyway'. About three or four years ago we tried to get out to Iraq to take out medicines then come back and be arrested. They said you can't go, I said 'why' and they said 'because it's illegal'. I said 'that's exactly the point I was trying to prove: that the law is immoral and they won't actually act upon it, because they know that it's wrong and if they arrest me for this they'll look stupid and they won't do it.' They said 'yes, but you're talking about morals; we're talking about the law'. I was really fucked off, I genuinely still don't know whether I should have walked on this or not.

WC: What: pack in the whole thing—what's the point in that?

MT: What's the point in that? There's a very important point which is: do I do this stuff because I want to do the things I do and because there is a valid fucking political



comment to be made and I want other people to see it and think 'fuck we can do something'. Or, am I just fucking doing that because yeah I can't believe in it but heh the fucking money's nice too. And actually how far do you acquiesce and go along with them? There's a very important point about me turning round and going 'maybe I should have fucking walked'. Maybe I just should have gone 'fuck you, that's your line.'

WC: Why didn't you do it independently? Because it wouldn't have had the impact?

MT: That's the first point, and because in the way these things work they have to be planned not just to coincide with taking the most political advantage but also to coincide with school holidays and children (laughter) and the boring mundane stuff of just getting on with your life and making sure that...

WC: ...well you don't get your head cut off...

MT: There's a matter of not getting your head cut off but there's also the matter of making sure that the kids have got the new shoes for school and all of those kinds of things.

WC: The events at Balfour Beatty's AGM was the focus of a lot of your performance...there was a sense of enjoyment in your account which was very like the Boulting Brothers and Ealing come-

dies—you know the class divide somehow comes together, it seemed reminiscent of those...I'm all right Jack' type old British comedy. The class boss doing this and the shop floor revolting. It seemed a very traditional view, the personas and the voices...?

MT: Yeah it is. I love Ealing comedies. My favourite two films—one of them is Rear Window—but 'Kind Hearts and Coronets' and 'Passports to Pimlico' they're just fucking brilliant.

WC: Even 'Whisky Galore', parts of which were based on a Propaganda film. You know where they hide the bottles of whisky—during the war there was this newsreel film of the resistance hiding radios in kids prams from the Nazis, which it makes reference to...

MT: They actually filmed Passport to Pimlico in Stockwell, which I'm really happy with—I love South London. Stockwell's officially South London. I love those films I think they're brilliant. When you look at *Kind Hearts and Coronets* what fucking genius! 'I wonder if you might say a few words in Matabeli for us...bougrrgh.'

WC: What are they to our generation they're somehow accepted and rejected...?

MT: I don't subscribe to that sort of Julie Burchill, Billy Connolly point of view that sort of says there's people at the bottom and people at the top but it's the people in the middle who fuck it all up. 'The upper class and the working class have got something in common', we both like fucking and hunting.

WC: Is that Marxist—the bourgeois oppress the working class?

MT: No I don't think so—if you say teachers or journalists are they middle class? How would you define class here, is it just income, would you say it's education or just culture. I suppose it's all a mixture of those things. But ultimately the middle class have just got as much to gain in some ways as working people have. Different furniture, different food, posher fucking wine. Ultimately you've got to take the view that you either get control of the elites that run this world and make it work for our advantage or you don't.

WC: I think a lot of the problems in trying to change things is that you encounter a lot of very idiotic bureaucrats—if you want to use this term 'petite bourgeoisie' or just 'petty'—who have no knowledge of what they're doing and have no real compassion and enforce rules out of a sense of inadequacy. That I would see as an obstacle.

MT: I think you're absolutely right, it's an obstacle. I mean the amount of support—it's fucking weird—I was in a 24 hour bagel bakery down at the East End, a beautiful old place. We stopped after a gig to have our bagels and tea on the way home. This bloke just comes up to me and he goes "I'm a bit pissed but I think you're fucking marvellous and that's from an off-duty copper," and then staggers out. OK where do I put him on the class enemy list...?

WC: There's human social interaction and then there's an economic value on class and....

MT: Of course there is and it's the same person who said that to me who's going to be running around picket lines...I accept that but it's still a weird situation. Those divisions are really...we have more in common than we think.

WC: Well, somehow or other, when you talked about visiting the House of Lords, you're describing yourself in terms of, well through your own ignorance, which I think is a great literary or whatever device: the ignorant narrator, the reader engages with it definitely. But part of that was your own class prejudices...

MT: Absolutely.

WC: It's like 'oh that's a big house you've got here, I don't know if I should go in and get the carpet dirty'...

MT: (Laughs) Part of it is just 'bollocks bollocks fuck 'em, I'm as good as them' and all that sort of stuff.

WC: I'd like to tie that up with your use of the word 'liberalism' quite a lot in quite a positive sense. I've rarely heard it used in such a positive light: "I've reached the edge of the liberal barrier," for the people I hang about with liberalism is used pejoratively.

MT: I can sort of go down that route...the whole thing about liberal consensus is taking the piss out of whether its OK to say things or not: if I say we've reached the end of liberal consensus...if I'm going to talk about Zionism I'm going to talk about it...this is the bit where you lot all clam up and go 'oh don't Mark' That's just a factual...

WC: There's an estimation of the audience...

MT: Yes there is but its not necessarily pejorative or dismissive or positive rather.

WC: But there must be—it's a value judgement.

MT: It's a value judgement about the audience. If you were to sum up that audience you'd say they're basically kind of liberal.

WC: You had your kind of persona of the audience with the wee Scottish guy taking notes—what was all that about?

MT: I've no idea (laughter). It's playful fun.

WC: But isn't it like the showbiz thing of 'bring on the cake it Mark's birthday tonight!' I don't know—what do I know about it...

MT: Look I made a gag about Henry McLeish, I'm not going to make that gag down in Manchester because they're not going to get it, it's as simple as that. I would rather engage with people there and who they are and what they are and where they're from and their points of reference...

WC: ...the assumption of what they are.

MT: Yeah but I kind of figure the audience might have a vested interest in McLeish and might know a little bit about it...

WC: They seemed to have to think about that one.

MT: No I think people went with it quite well.

WC: What do you imagine them to be...?

MT: You could describe them as liberal, they're Trade Unionists, there are old Commies there, Marxists, Crusties, Peace Camp Campaigners, Students all sorts of different people—but you can broadly say they're not going to read the Daily Mail.

Campaign Succeeds as Balfour Beatty withdraws from ILISU!

On 13 November, Balfour Beatty, the lead contractor for the Ilisu Dam, announced its withdrawal from the project on social, environmental and economic grounds. Its Italian partner, Impregilo, has also withdrawn.

After one and a half years of very active campaigning we have finally prevailed in getting the UK out of the Ilisu dam project. We used many tactics, including the credible threat of legal action, press coverage, political work, grassroots letter writing, demonstrations, public meetings, coalition building, international networking and shareholder activism. It really did work and much of the credit must go to you, the supporters. It was your active support that built the groundswell of public furor around this project, helping to make Ilisu so controversial that even a huge multinational like Balfour Beatty had to listen.

So first, we wanted to say a huge THANK YOU to you all for your support. And also to let you know what's happening, and how we need your help in the future.

The news had been greeted with jubilation by campaigners and by those whose homes, lands and livelihoods were threatened by the dam. Speaking from Batman, a town which would be impacted by the dam, Mayor Abdullah Akin said that, "The people are celebrating."

Executive Director of the Kurdish Human Rights Project and Chair of the Ilisu Dam Campaign, Kerim Yildiz, expressed his delight at the news: "Balfour Beatty's withdrawal has vindicated what we at the Campaign have been saying all along: that the Ilisu dam would be a human rights, environmental and cultural disaster. This Campaign, strengthened by the unity of human rights and environmental groups working together, has helped to establish a precedent in sending a clear message to governments and companies that projects like Ilisu are simply not acceptable. This Campaign not only stopped the Ilisu dam but has also helped to establish the beginnings of a democratic platform in Turkey where people can discuss possible alternatives to disastrous projects like Ilisu."

Balfour Beatty had applied for export credit

support from the UK Export Credit Guarantee Department (ECGD) and from the US Ex-Im Bank. With the company's withdrawal, both agencies have now ceased to be involved in the project. The company admits that the project failed to meet the conditions laid down by the agencies for export credit support—which is what we have argued all along.

We will be continuing to monitor the project closely, although the chances are that Ilisu has now effectively been stopped due to the consortium's collapse. Sulzer Hydro, the company which heads the dam consortium, has said that it is looking for a partner to replace Balfour Beatty. However, a well placed Turkish source told Channel 4 news, "Other European firms won't be interested now and the Ilisu project may not go ahead." We will continue to work with international colleagues to ensure that other companies do not become involved—to ensure that Ilisu is once and for all truly stopped.

We are now calling for the lessons of Ilisu to be learned. We want ECGD and other export credit agencies to adopt legally binding human rights, environment and development standards—so that other "Ilisus" cannot happen in future. To this end, the coalition that founded the Ilisu Dam Campaign—the Kurdish Human Rights Project, Friends of the Earth, The Cornerhouse and Mark Thomas—is going to be campaigning on other projects in the region. One, the Yusefeli dam, would be built by UK firm AMEC and partly financed with a £68 million ECGD credit. Another, the BP-promoted Baku-Ceyhan oil and gas pipeline, will cut through the Kurdish regions of Turkey, raising human rights and environmental concerns.

We would love to have your continued support for our proposed work on these campaigns. With your help we could capitalise on the victory we have achieved with Ilisu.

Kate Geary
Campaign co-ordinator
ilisu@gn.apc.org

WC: Meaning...?

MT: Oh what the fuck do you think it means? What do you fucking think it means? If they're going to come and see the gig they're not going to sit there and say "that Mark Thomas yeah, yeah, I'm a Daily Mail reader I have those values that actually doubts the wisdom of immigration—at all—into this country and Mark Thomas seems to epitomise those values."

WC: So it's back to the notion of what prior knowledge you can assume.

MT: I assume that most people don't know a huge amount about Kurdish issues and might know a little bit about things like the Ilisu dam. I assume they have doubts about the way government operates, and that's probably about it. Look I'll be fucking honest with you: do you think I can go out there and just go 'what will the audience want? I will do a show that the audience want...' Do I go out there and go 'will I do the show that I think they want me to do?' No, I can't do that. Just out of interest: when was the last time you saw a stand up do anything like that?

WC: Never.

MT: It's not that fucking easy. It's not about what do people think, where are they? It's about going 'these are the stories this is what happened'. It's about having as much fun as you can with those things. But letting through the whole thing—not just in terms of information but on an emotional level as well. I don't think we can change the World with statistics.