



## Keeping Our Nerve

**I FIND IT VERY DIFFICULT** to stay calm as the cabin crew finally spin the door bolts, take their seats, and fasten their belts. These are the moments when I feel like shrieking and running for the exit. Instead I'm overwhelmed by the responsibility I have not to make a scene or upset the child sitting across the aisle. "Why did I agree to this?" "Why didn't we stay home?" "Why didn't we go by train?" Trains are another thing, especially those carriages that list right or left when they sweep fast around curving tracks; like motorbikes they do that death defying tilt around corners and I think, "Why don't we all just slow down." Yes, I am a fearful person. I'm the sort of person that hates heights and is not too keen on lifts, frequently imagining that I might be suddenly plunged into the bowels of a building only to land crushed in a tangle of cables and steel panels.

My panic is neither moral, nor wholly irrational. However, I constantly rehearse statistical possibilities – you know, those magical numbers that tell you that you can't win the lottery, die in a plane crash, or be the victim of a fatal stabbing on the street. All those swirling probabilities and possibilities turned, for all practical purposes, into certainties. These are the magical numbers that lead wiseacres and steady heads of all kinds to keep yelling: "Don't Panic!" at every available opportunity. They do this, not simply to display their doughty spirit in the face of danger, but

also to demonstrate the superior quality of their reason and their wholly scientific approach to life.

They are having a field day with the influenza from Mexico, chastising the government and the health authorities for provoking alarm and confusion when they know only too well that the chances of a pandemic are very slight and that even if one does emerge, only every second person will fall ill, and only two in a hundred of those will actually die. These scientific types are evidently sublimely certain that they will not, by reason of their statistical nous, be adversely affected. But, for the numerically challenged among us, things are not so simple; peril awaits us at every turn.

Imagine my horror just this week when I read in *The Observer*, a newspaper not given to the promotion of alarm and despondency, “that the number of rats” in Britain “is soaring out of control”. The paper reported that rat infestations are going from bad to worse in places as far afield as Exeter and York. As if this wasn’t bad enough, the British Pest Control Association has identified a number of towns where the rats have learned to chomp happily through poisoned bait, and are ratfully resisting all attempts to kill them.

I am frequently told not to worry, so I was manfully resisting the fear of Room 101 and the widening rat panic when I learned that the scientists at the CERN laboratory in Switzerland have finally fixed the Large Hadron Collider and intend to restart their search for the Higgs Boson: the God particle. They’re planning on creating the conditions that existed just after the birth of the universe around 13.7 billion years ago. This will involve the creation of swarms of black holes in the long tube they’ve buried under the Swiss-French border. There is, of course, no cause for alarm, the black holes will, the scientists assure us, be very small and short lived. Nothing will get swallowed, nothing at all to worry about.

This is also true, no doubt, of Russian plans to build a fleet of floating and submersible nuclear power stations – that’s “submersible” not “sinkable” – to help

them exploit oil and gas reserves in the Kara and Barents Seas in Russia's far North. It would, of course, be churlish to mention Chernobyl. That was a Soviet disaster in the Ukraine and we have no reason at all for supposing that Russia's new corporate state is anything other than entirely trustworthy. The prototype of these devices is being built at the SevMash shipyard at Severodvinsk, a town in Arkhangelsk Oblast that once rejoiced in the name of Molotovsk in honour of the Stalinist minister Vyacheslav Molotov who ratified the Nazi-Soviet partition of Poland in 1939. Some might take this to be a bad omen, but Molotov is, like Chernobyl, safely in the past. So, there's nothing to worry about. Particularly as the twin nuclear reactors will be safely bolted on board giant steel platforms that will be serviced every twelve to fourteen years.

This leaves only the Taliban, earthquakes, asteroid strikes, and the imminent arrival of a Tory government. Although Gordon Brown probably views the prospect with some sense of foreboding he keeps cackling at catastrophe and laughing in the face of fate; it's a cross between a relaxed smirk indicating that he can see the joke and a rictus grin suitable for almost all other occasions. As his recent You Tube performance indicates he is going to keep smiling at all the wrong moments in all the wrong places until David Cameron sweeps him away by winning the next General Election.

Then, we will enter the new Tory "age of austerity", and our inchoate sense of fear will melt away as we step out on the Conservative road to national recovery. Yet, still, one has to ask, why should Cameron's promise of "austerity" prove so reassuring? Matthew Parris, answered this question last week when he explained that "austerity" was the right word because unlike "cuts" it summoned ideas of "nobility and virtue" and "reminded us of the Second World War". Parris's advice to the Tory front bench is to avoid being specific and to concentrate upon giving the voters a vague spiritualised sense of the kind of

government they will get if they vote Tory. Do not fear cuts, but welcome instead a new age of austerity in which Britain will balance the budget and learn, once again to live within her means.

Matthew Parris is a charming, gay, former Tory MP who writes for *The Times*; he cut his teeth working for Margaret Thatcher and developed, long before Ian Duncan Smith or David Cameron, the striking capacity to humanise the Tory enterprise with wit and intelligence, effortlessly casting Norman Tebbit into the shadows and dispelling the idea that Conservatives had to be nasty and brutish. In giving his advice, “Austerity” not “Cuts” he knows exactly how to quell fears while advocating savage attacks upon spending on health, welfare, and infrastructure. Summon up austerity, rationing, the Second World War, he advises; after all it was our finest hour, the nation united in a noble cause.

The problem with Matthew’s advice to Cameron’s strategists is that it is cunningly cosmetic. It conveys a sense of seriousness and honesty about the nation’s predicament while it simultaneously gives the impression that the tough choices will be fairly made and, like rationing, the cuts in spending will fall equally upon all concerned. But, of course, life in the forties and early fifties was not a bit like that. The burden of the War and Britain’s post-war bankruptcy was not borne equally across all social classes.

Consequently, it is imperative to keep the fear of cuts well out in the open, to face these fears openly, and to demand that we be told by all three political parties exactly where they would cut spending, by how much, and for how long.