

Funding the Future

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Every year on the 5th of November, people across Britain light bonfires, set off fireworks, and burn effigies of a man who died more than four centuries ago. [Guy Fawkes](#), as the supposed mastermind of the Gunpowder Plot, has become a symbol of treachery and failed rebellion. Yet I can't help wondering, was Guy Fawkes really so bad?

Before anyone misunderstands me, let me be clear. Violence has no place in political campaigning. Explosives are not tools for social change. Fawkes's plan to blow up Parliament and the king was wrong. There were and still are no excuses for such actions. But recognising that fact does not mean we should be comfortable with what his annual condemnation still represents. For what we celebrate on November 5th is not merely the defeat of a terrorist plot. It is, in effect, a ritual reaffirmation of a one-sided history which conveniently ignores the politics that created men like Fawkes in the first place.

First, Fawkes lived in an era of persecution. Catholics in early seventeenth-century England were disenfranchised, fined, and excluded from public life. Religion was politics, and politics was religion. Loyalty to the Pope was treated as treason. When Fawkes and his co-conspirators sought to challenge this system, however misguidedly, they were responding to profound structural injustice, not unlike those in every age who find themselves pushed beyond lawful means because lawful means have been closed to them. To commemorate their failure without acknowledging the repression that provoked it is to falsify history.

Second, the continuing ritual of burning an effigy of Guy Fawkes, often quite explicitly referred to as a Catholic, should trouble us. However secularised Bonfire Night may now seem, its origins lie in sectarian triumphalism. To burn an image of the defeated enemy within is not an act of innocent fun. It normalises the idea that dissent can be crushed, that opposition can be caricatured, and that persecution can be celebrated. It trains generations to cheer the punishment of the outsider.

Third, what does it say about our present politics that this tradition endures so comfortably? We live in a country where protest is increasingly criminalised, where whistleblowers are demonised, and where dissenting voices are treated as threats to

what is euphemistically called national security. The Fawkes story, with its easy villains and supposedly righteous victors, suits those who prefer obedience to conscience. It reinforces the idea that rebellion is always wrong and that authority is always right. That is a myth worth challenging.

Fourth, there is another lesson here. The Gunpowder Plot failed because it was desperate and disconnected. It was a violent fantasy born of political exclusion. But the deeper failure was England's refusal to reform. Rather than ask what had driven such anger, the state tightened its grip. The cycle of persecution deepened, and as is clear from a great deal of history when viewed impartially, this is what too often happens when governments silence legitimate dissent. The result is that supposedly illegitimate resistance then grows. The same pattern can, of course, be seen today, whether with regard to economic protest, environmental activism, or struggles for democratic renewal.

So what if we reimagined November 5th? Instead of celebrating the suppression of rebellion, perhaps we could remember it as a warning about the consequences of injustice. We could use it to talk about tolerance, representation, and the right to dissent, which are the very principles that a democratic society should defend. Fawkes's mistake was to choose violence. Our mistake is to pretend that violence happens in a vacuum.

In the end, Guy Fawkes was not a hero, but neither was he simply a villain. He was a symptom of a broken political order; a man driven by conviction in an age of cruelty. If we still burn him in effigy four hundred years later, maybe it says less about him and more about us; that we remain too fond of simple stories, and too reluctant to face the injustices that make rebellion seem necessary.

It is time, I think, to rethink Guy Fawkes Night. Not to celebrate his act, but to reflect on the society that made it imaginable. That, surely, would be a far better way to light the fire.