



# THIS MIGHT'VE BEEN JUST A TOKEN GESTURE

by Roger Beaumont.

want to give us money, but can we lend them 40 billion bucks until they can?"

The late British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, never saw the need for a translator: "I went first to Germany and there I spoke with the German Foreign Minister, Herr . . . Herr and there. And we exchanged many frank words in our respective languages."

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The small world of insect behaviour experts has been shaken with the discovery by Finnish scientists that ants, long imagined to be the "socialists of sociobiology", practice full on serial nepotism - favouring blood relatives with food, and mutilating strangers. Sounds pretty human to me.

One current administration has thrown ambassadorships at wealthy donors like confetti, giving little consideration to whether, for example, the ambassador to France could speak any French.

These days, nepotism covers everything from blatant favouritism towards an idiot relative to appointing someone you already know to a job. In areas where trust and loyalty are critical, sticking to the "friends and family" approach has clear benefits. After all, organised criminals don't rely on equal opportunities recruitment policies. Academia is less promising ground for nepotism. Being Darwin's granddaughter cuts no ice with the editor of Nature magazine. Sport is still less forgiving. Stopwatches don't even know your name.

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"Americans simply don't get it," wrote Seumas Milne in The Guardian recently. "The Yanks should be trying to figure out what they did to get those terrorists all steamed up." That's the old Louis Farrakhan line: the Jews just don't get it, they should give more thought to what they did to make Hitler so mad at them. But to wonder whether suicide bombing is a crime punishable by death is like asking if Hell

has wheelchair access.

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It's all extremely civilised. One of Fiji's local chiefs has invited the descendants of Thomas Baker, a 19th-century missionary, to visit the islands next month so that he can formally apologise over the table manners of his ancestors, who ate Baker for breakfast. With his boots still on. (One of them still sits in a display case in the Fiji Museum).

He was apparently the first (and last) white man ever to suffer such a fate in Fiji. Today, such treatment is as foreign to Fijians as to anyone, and, as most cultures have a few cannibalistic chapters in their past, why do Fijians feel the need to apologise?

A decade later, the famous ship "Mignonette" floundered in the Atlantic, and her sailors started looking at each other in a most disconcerting way. According to "the custom of the sea", they ate one of their own to survive, but were later tried for killing their comrade, before they started munching him.

Cannibalism, strictly speaking, is not illegal in Britain and many other democracies. Still, it is better left off the menu. Pass the nuts, will you?

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There are some who believe that the death mask of Tutankhamen is the most beautiful thing ever created by anyone anywhere at any time. We should be grateful that his burial party never got to see this graffiti: "Tutankhamen has changed his mind and wants to be buried at sea."

The interesting thing about your prime minister," a visiting journalist noted, "is that the less people agree with him the angrier he seems to get, and the angrier he seems to get the less they feel understood. Thailand appears to be a democracy in which you can say what you like but do what you are told." He paused, then added: "There used to be fruit machines like Thaksin. You didn't use real money, you put in tokens. And when you won, guess what you got back? Tokens."

Hosting and attending Apec meetings is that most delicious of all privileges - spending other people's money. But for a billion baht-plus-plus, Apecs should be held rather than inhaled. And those Bt90,000 shirts. The group photo looked like a bunch of letters delivered to the wrong address. God knows what an amazing sight our world leaders would make if the Maoris ever get to host Apec.

Another visitor observed that the overall impression of the "genuinely spellbinding" Royal Barge Procession was one of concealed wealth watching talented youth from a safe distance.

Indeed, but then in this city, it's always a wise move to hold traditional events at night, because the Chao Phya has been described as "cigar soup" and suffers from cirrhosis of the river.

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An American diplomat once said, "Conferences at the top level are always courteous. Name-calling is left to the foreign ministers." I still think translators at these meetings do an extraordinary job. But I often wonder if they are ever tempted to lie? "The minister says his country will soon be able to offer financial aid to our country", which might turn out as, "They



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