Independent)

Local politicians were not particularly welcoming either. The leader of Liverpool's Liberal Democrats presented a letter of protest to Dr Rice. A local Labour councillor was also critical, saying, "It shows a certain insensitivity on Jack Straw's part... It's not appropriate that she comes here." The Mayor, Yusuf Jan-Virmani, said that he was "delighted" with the jeering of Dr Rice by the Stop the War coalition, which included demonstrators dressed in Guantánamo-style jumpsuits.

Meanwhile, the royal Liverpool Philharmonic Hall was reduced to selecting possible comperes from its C-list for a gala evening in Dr Rice's honour, after the poet Roger McGough and the actress Cathy Tyson turned down the opportunity!

At the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, there were rumors that some members of a gospel choir who were to perform for Dr Rice wanted to pull out, while students objected to the short notice provided (accusations about lack of consultation again rearing their ugly head!) One student protester said it was a "disgrace" that Dr Rice had been invited - "Why should we be seen to condone the actions of this woman?"

Unsurprisingly, the "gala" performance was affected by these concerns. The institute's founder, Paul McCartney (the former Beatle) was not present, and one performer, Jennifer John, made her agreement to perform contingent on being allowed to sing John Lennon's antiwar theme song "Imagine". She dedicated it to people protesting peacefully outside the hall before she began. And to make matters worse, halfway through the song she switched to "Give Peace a Chance"!



Meanwhile, in London, eight-year-old Mohammed El-Banna was hoping that the visit of the US Secretary of State would result in the release of his father from Guantánamo Bay. "Please can you tell Dr. Rice I want my dad back...I miss him so much, and when he comes back I will give him a big hug." His father Jamil El-Banna, London-based Palestinian businessman, is being detained along with his friend Bisher al-Rawi, after the CIA and Gambian intelligence - on a tip-off from British intelligence - seized them during a business trip there.

While Bisher al-Rawi actually worked for MI5 as its intermediary with Abu Qatada, the Jordanian-born preacher alleged to be Al Qaeda's spiritual leader in Europe, Jamil El-Banna was arrested simply because he had once helped al-Rawi ferry Abu Qatada's wife and children around London. According to the UK Independent, CIA and MI5 believed that their fear of detention and torture would turn both men into key witnesses against Abu Qatada. The fact that al-Rawi was approached by and co-operated with MI5 for months before his arrest was somehow deemed of insufficient importance in this entire situation!

The UK government had previously insisted that it was unable to help any non-passport holder, but Jack Straw is now petitioning the US for the release El-Banna's friend, Bisher al-Rawi. Since it was al-Rawi's involvement with MI5 that had led to their arrest, the El-Banna family hopes Jamil El-Banna will also be freed.

But Mrs. El-Banna is also afraid that her husband could be left behind. She tries to teach her children not to hate their father's captors, because feelings of anger or hatred are "a dangerous disease". And she appears to have been successful, judging by the number of "citizenship" awards they have won for exemplary behavior at school. Mohamed's citation reads: "Always being kind to others and offering to help peers and teachers. Also for his positive attitude to do well in whatever he takes on."

For the sake of the El-Banna family, and others like them, one can only hope that Dr. Rice, who claims to be an avowed Beatles fan, will actually start listening to the lyrics of the songs that she professes to like so much... ■