



OF POWER, PROXIMITY & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

ECPA Spring Briefing
7th April 2011

My first political memories were as a child of eight in 1956. My father was toasting the success of the Anglo-French intervention at Suez. We then listened in horror to the last words from the free radio station in Budapest as Russian tanks closed in. *"This is free Hungary. We fight for Hungary. We fight for Europe. Do not forget us!"* We can only guess how close we came to the last broadcast from free Benghazi. Massacres depend for their political impact firstly on being seen and secondly on being interpreted in some historical context that links them to the viewer. Thus the genocides in Rwanda, the suppression of the Mayan population in Nicaragua's civil war or the very fact of the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks in the First World War all failed to move public opinion in time. By contrast the crazy heroism of the anti-Gaddafi forces re-stated in ultimately irrefutable terms the case for humanitarian intervention and the 'duty to protect' civilians from attack by their own governments. Many years later I was attending a Conference of Chairmen of Foreign Affairs Committees at Lake Ochrid in Macedonia when Slobodan Milosevic expelled the Albanian population of Kosovo. A huge refugee camp formed rapidly in the plains around Skopje. Walking amongst recently uprooted families made a permanent impression on me. These people were not describable by some abstract noun such as refugees, Albanians or Muslims. Rather they were, but for the grace of God, one's own family expelled from their homes in the dawn and crowded into trains for immediate and chaotic expulsion. The case for humanitarian intervention grew stronger with every image from North Africa.

Journalism is often described as the first draft of history. Good journalism does not always lead to good policy. 'The war on terror' may have been more serviceable than earlier mentions of a crusade, but it nevertheless locked the US Government into war rhetoric when its interests might better have been served by treating 9/11 as a criminal act. The phrase the "Arab Spring" has a beguiling optimism about it. It has echoes of the Prague Spring of 1968 when miracles seemed possible and all the world was young. The Prague Spring ended with the August Repression, as Soviet-led, Warsaw Pact troops crushed the Czechoslovaks. We should remember therefore that all springs are not the same. The stirrings in the Arab world may lead to a domino effect, but the dominoes are not the same as the nation states of Eastern Europe held in thrall by Moscow until 1989. The states created in the Arab world by the Franco-British division of the Ottoman Empire were with few exceptions fragile and artificial. They were states but not nations. They were defined by the West, to serve Western purposes. The Suez Crisis, happening at the same moment as the Hungarian Revolt, was the moment the US withdrew its support for the Anglo-French power structure that had been imposed on the Arab world.

Difference defines the Arab world. There are states with oil and states without oil. There is the split between Sunni and Shiite. There are Left wing states and Right wing states. There are totalitarian states and autocratic states. The things which unite them are often their negatives. Most of them have not educated their women; their climates are precarious; their societies lack resilience. Most of the candidates for future failed states are in the Arab world. The combination of long memories and short tempers, of former glory and current squalor renders them inflammable. Over this rubble of difference the phrase 'the Arab Spring' endows twenty or more different crises with a misleading sense of optimism and commonality. On a visit to Tunisia in the spring of 1999 I walked with my children through the green grass surrounding the Roman cities of northern Tunisia. These great remains spoke of a different geography and a different climate, but also of

the importance of ancient proximity, for in late Roman times the majority of Senators came from North Africa.

Some American authorities are reported to be surprised by the attention given to Libya in particular and to North Africa in general by the Europeans. A quick look at an atlas, let alone a sense of history, might remind them of the proximity of these states to Europe. The states of the North African littoral find themselves in an unenviable position between the European Union, with its tensions over migrants and much of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa, heading north towards the supposed nirvana of employment and economic success. Whatever the limitations of the Barcelona Process and its successor the Union of the Mediterranean, they express the reality of proximity and the urgent need for dialogue. The great French historian Fernand Braudel would have appreciated every nuance of the current situation. Were he alive today one can imagine him writing a new work entitled "The Mediterranean & the Mediterranean World in the Age of President Sarkozy". How Braudel would have enjoyed a crisis of capitalism, a new focus on the Mediterranean and a global power shift, all happening simultaneously. Fifty four years on from the Suez crisis here are the British and French taking the lead while a chastened America tries to limit its involvement in the removal of a cynical and eccentric tyrant. Turkey, the former imperial power in much of the Arab world, seeks to use its position in NATO to stop the intervention in Libya being defined as a NATO venture. Above the whole conflicted scene hang the vacuous smiles of George Bush and Tony Blair. Their combination of over-confidence, can-do energy and born-again Christianity so woefully worsened the West's relationship with Arab lands and continues to be bedevil their successors.

During the past few weeks political leaders have had to trust their own intuition. Their intelligence experts had long known of the fragility of Arab regimes of all flavours, but somehow in all their scenarios none of these gurus had offered them a true rehearsal for the events of this complex 'Spring'. Iraq has haunted both spook and statesman. The noise levels from commentators known to have 'good intelligence sources' became deafening as the window of opportunity to intervene in Benghazi grew ever smaller. Could it be that Western intelligence agencies think that the defeat of peaceful and popular uprisings by brutal military force might look more acceptable from Western leaning autocracies if it has first been successfully practised by Colonel Gaddafi? One might also wonder what Mossad makes of the current situation, given that Israel/Palestine cannot be immune from the upheavals bubbling all round it. With the unrest in Syria the turbulence grows ever closer to the Holy Land. Anyone who claims to be able to predict the fate of regimes from Morocco to Oman as spring turns into summer should be treated with great suspicion unless they have a keen sense of history.

A recent visit to Malta underlined for me the importance of both power and proximity in defining foreign policy and the public affairs by which it is increasingly carried out. For the outside world Malta is defined by two crosses. The Maltese Cross of the Knights of Malta who governed the island until 1798 and the George Cross awarded to the people of the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" for their heroism in the Second World War. Malta may be a micro-state but its politics and history are as complex as any other Member State of the European Union. The original aristocratic Maltese families resented but survived the domination of the Knights, the French and the British. They have prospered by clear eyed cynicism about the Mediterranean power structures which surround them. To walk down Republic Street, formerly Kingsway, is to experience a public affairs practitioner's dream. Within an hour one can talk to Government, Opposition, Commissioner and MEPs. Opposite the Palace of the Knights is the Governor's House built by the British in 1814. When the then Prime Minister, Dom Mintoff, expelled the British he needed to find a replacement for the income which flowed from the British military garrison. He invited the Libyan National Oil Company to

occupy the Governor's House and welcomed Libyan investment on a grand scale. Of all members of the EU, the Maltese know more about the Gaddafi regime than anyone else. They understand the difference between Roman Tripolitania and Greek Cyrenaica, traditionally separated not just by a vast desert, but in a way that Braudel would have appreciated by tides and trade winds. These two territories were united for the first time since Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, when the Italians adopted the name Libya in 1934, having killed some fifty thousand people. My Maltese friends are not optimistic about an early reunification and tend towards the 'stalemate' school of thought. I suspect however that neither the Europeans nor the Arabs will permit the creation of a second Gaza. With the UN intervention in the Ivory Coast it would seem that our multi-polar world has recovered its taste for humanitarian intervention, albeit on grounds of realpolitik.

It is unfortunate that most of the Club Med states of the Union are currently distracted by financial crises or under-age 'bunga bunga'. On the other hand the EU quite enjoys a good crisis on its doorstep which speaks to its historic mission. Let us hope that the reforms of recent treaties have endowed Europe with an ability to act externally than is greater than the last time Europe felt the lhand of history on its shoulder ahead of the Yugoslav wars. A prolonged crisis in Europe's 'Near Abroad' cannot be good news for Baroness Ashton as High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy. The knives are already out in Brussels. She was appointed for a five year term in the dying days of the Labour Government. The only realistic route to her early removal lies in a vote of the European Parliament that would express their loss of confidence in her. The bicephalous Baroness could hardly survive if Parliament had effectively lopped off her head as Vice President of the European Commission. If she were to go in the next few months, it would signal the start of manoeuvrings ahead of the 2014 renewal of the Institutions. Would she be replaced as British Commissioner by a British Conservative nominee, or would President Barroso lay claim to the right to have a full scale reshuffle of his Commission?

Unfortunately for the Baroness there are other forces moving on the multi-level chessboard that is the European Union. The post-election deal on the Presidency of Parliament is due to replace an inoffensive Pole with the abrasive Martin Schulz from the Socialists. This is the same Martin Schulz who has spent fifteen years in Parliament being abrasive, not least to Mr Berlusconi. The same Herr Schulz who, with the leader of the EPP, Joseph Daul, are the defenders of the unpopular commitment to Strasbourg. However convenient that beautiful city may be for these two local boys, it is increasingly being challenged by the majority of Parliament. An opportunity therefore opens up in January 2012, when Parliament re-elects its Officers, for a third party candidate to challenge the ugly duopoly that robs the European Elections of any meaning. Normally this role would fall to the leader of the Liberal Group (ALDE), Guy Verhofstadt. However the gallant Guy has bigger fish to fry. He would very much like to be the next President of the European Commission. He cannot therefore risk irritating the nabobs of the two big Groups. Watch out therefore for a candidate from one of the smaller Groups capable of appealing to both Liberal MEPs and members of the EPP unhappy with Martin Schulz.

While the official diplomacy of the European Union has been distinctly flabby during the Arab Spring, the same cannot be said for the burgeoning business of polishing the image of Arab governments or pretenders to their thrones. Mayfair has positively buzzed with new business for public affairs consultancies, staffed with retired diplomats. This has led to predicable squeaks from the anti-lobbying lobby about the public affairs function defending the indefensible. However it seems to me that ex-diplomats with an understanding of how the EU works are likely to be a useful part of the scene for the foreseeable future. They after all

have training in history, geography and power - the very essence of both public affairs and foreign policy.

Tom Spencer
7th April 2011



© Tom Spencer