

## OF ROGUES, BISHOPS AND GOLDEN TOADS

ECPA Briefing, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2006

Governments, like fish, rot from the head. Over time the deadly mixture of ideology, money and power leads to a lazy hubris and a deadly belief in their own rhetoric. They come to despise any opposition, ignore bad news and rely on techniques of political manipulation rather than broad public support. A single external challenge can then destabilise the whole rotten structure. Mr Blair and President Bush are widely regarded as being punished by their electorates for the Iraq fiasco. In my view Iraq is the trigger rather than the driver for the destruction of both their reputations. The Blair Government has used spin more relentlessly than any of its predecessors. It built a governing coalition, centralised power around a small group, politicised much of the civil service and then turned to deceit to fund its electoral needs. Cash for peerages is a story of rogues who took short cuts. George W Bush presented himself in the 2000 Election as a Compassionate Conservative, squeaked into office on the votes of the Supreme Court rather than the electorate and then proceeded to construct a disciplined, centralised and dogmatic power structure. His addiction was not to spin, rather it was to control. Tom Delay's so-called K Street Project set out to restrict access to power to ensure that loyalists would be heard and rewarded. Had it succeeded it would have perverted the nature of public affairs in Washington. Over six years even the political genius of Karl Rove decayed into the constant repetition of tired stunts to "rally the base".

One of the wisest observers of the Washington public affairs scene confirms my instinct that the culture of corruption in Washington did have an impact on the elections. *"Back in January, only 18% of the public said that political corruption was a major issue for them. This led the GOP leadership in the House to conclude (erroneously) that if they waited long enough the scandals would fade from view. What they didn't realize was that public cynicism about politics and politicians was already dangerously high; the Abramoff scandal did in fact upset people, but they didn't consider it an 'issue' because they didn't feel empowered to do anything about it. Then came the Duke Cunningham bribery scandal, the resignation of Bob Ney and finally the Mark Foley incident. The cumulative effect -- just in time for the election -- cost the Republicans a lot of votes. When the exit polls were taken, something like 40% of the public said that 'political corruption' influenced their vote."* That 40% is more potent than a similar 40% who said they voted to express their concern about Iraq because it is spread more evenly across the electorate. Abramoff could credibly be dismissed as a corrupt rogue but the smell of arrogance and corruption in the mismanagement of the occupation of Iraq symbolised by Vice President Cheney's former company Halliburton fed back into disillusion at home. Both Blair and Bush have recently been heavily criticised by their own top military. They stand accused of exposing their armies in ill prepared, undermanned and under equipped situations. 'Dodgy Dossiers' and the shame of Abu Ghraib sink deep into the public consciousness.

How their successors in Democrat or Conservative Administrations clean up this public affairs and governmental mess is a story for another day, but it is already apparent that the whirlwind of climate change is likely to be the next external challenge to political creativity. As always effective global action in time depends on Washington not London. "American Theocracy: The Perils and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" by Kevin Phillips, an advisor to Richard Nixon, underlines the role which petroleum money has played in American power from the beginning of the oil age. He spins off the elegant thought that this is typical of *"problems that all nations have to contend with as they grow older. The very sources of national success, whether in resources or industrial innovation, eventually reach their limits; what lasts is the structure of power and influence that inhibits reform"*. This year has been full of good examples. One can sympathise with the crucifixion of Ford and General Motors until one remembers that it was motor industry lobbyists who ignited the SUV boom by lobbying for the deceit that such vehicles were "light trucks" not subject to motor car emission standards.

In my fifteen-year involvement with climate change as a political and public affairs issue I cannot remember a moment of such sea change in public attitudes. High oil prices with little prospect of long

term relief seem to have succeeded where a hundred environmentalist documentaries have failed. They have changed the public and political sense of what is possible. In the 1960s RAB Butler argued “that politics was the art of the possible”. Two generations later David Cameron feels comfortable bidding to become Prime Minister on the basis of green taxation that for the first time treats the public as adults in terms of the threat from climate change. Gordon Brown consequently re-positions himself around The Stern Report and suddenly all major political parties in the UK are aligned in favour of serious action. With any luck this sea change will spur political action in time to moderate the rise of sea level that threatens to inundate Shanghai, Bangladesh, Florida and much of Manhattan. Is it too soon to take comfort from the increasing number of politicians of the Centre Right who are at last taking environmental issues seriously? David Cameron in the UK, John McCain in Arizona, Arnold Schwarzenegger in California and, after the Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, even President Barroso in Brussels. How will this interest interact with the increasing insistence of churchmen that environmental chaos is a moral as well as political and technical issue.

Taxing aviation fuel is a good case in point. We have known for many years that airlines are major perpetrators of global warming. I remember discussions with both British Airways and KLM in the early 1990s, which always ended in evasion and guilty silence. Cheap air flights have helped build a sense of Europe and their curtailment might endanger that tenuous sense of European unity that sets in just before the hangover. The growth in flight remains as strong as predicted, but its impact on the climate becomes more obvious as other sources are contained or reduced and as we learn more about its damage to the atmosphere. I recently had cause to ponder my attitude to cheap air flight. I was in California when the great “liquids can blow you out of the sky” story broke. For once it seemed to me that it was the British who were over-reacting, while the American public, perhaps for the first time, refused to be panicked by the fear machine of the US Administration. Maybe, I mused, there is a Gaia-like countervailing force at work. The more we yearn for cheap air flight, the more we are rewarded with Islamic fundamentalists and deep vein thrombosis. Richard Chartres, the excellent Bishop of London, whose presence has for some years been my main anchor in the Church of England, had stolen the summer headlines a few weeks before with his meditation on environmental sins and his conclusion that serious Christians should no longer take polluting long-range holidays. Yet here I was in an American desert, soaking up the sunshine while writing panegyrics in praise of Al Gore’s movie on climate change “An Inconvenient Truth”.

We may have to abandon the old reference to ‘shifting the deck chairs on the Titanic’, if the Greenland ice cap melts and icebergs in the North Atlantic become a thing of the past. The sheer scale of mankind’s impertinence was borne out to me while standing in a field of soya bean carved out of the Amazon rainforest near Santarem. From the air the area looks like beautifully planted English parkland, with copses flanking expanses of open farmland, graced by carefully preserved individual trees. On the ground the truth is altogether more serious. The “copses” are signs of the developers’ determination to avoid the regulation that at least 20% of the jungle must be left standing. The single trees are Brazil Nut trees. However stately they look in their splendid isolation, every one of them is doomed. The Brazil Nut is protected under Brazilian law, but it is a protection that is meaningless once the forest has been stripped away. The tree is a forest species. It is fertilised by a single type of bee. The bee depends on a particular orchid which grows within height range of the Brazil Nuts. Once the surrounding trees and their the orchids are removed, the bee no longer fertilises the flowers of the Brazil Nut and the tree becomes infertile. However it is not destined to suffer this infertility for long, as, stripped of its surrounding forest, it is inevitably killed by direct sun and wind. These micro-tragedies, caused in equal part by Europe’s hunger for soya to feed its meat eating frenzy and Brazil’s equation of the forest with underdevelopment, threaten much greater tragedies. Sharing this sorry sight with me was another Bishop, James Jones, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool who was being interviewed by the BBC. The interviewer pointed out that much of Liverpool’s traditional wealth had been based on the slave trade. By extension they were keen to know James’s views on the ethics of soya exports from Cargill’s new terminal at Santarem directly into Liverpool. Within days of the publicity given to this issue, the soya companies had promised a moratorium on further soya-led forest destruction. Suddenly good public affairs had made the impossible possible.

I was in Brazil for the sixth meeting of the Religion, Science and the Environment Symposium led by the remarkable ‘green’ Patriarch of Constantinople, the head of the Orthodox Church. In the extraordinary surroundings of the Manaus Opera House, relic of the nineteenth century rubber boom, His All Holiness was declared by the Governor of Manaus State to be the Patriarch of the Rainforest. In an extraordinary shift for the head of a major Christian Church, the Patriarch has encouraged all

Christians to recognise and value indigenous peoples and their religious experience. It is not surprising that third generation environmentalism is increasingly drawing on religious and scientific insight.

The Symposium's time in Manaus revealed yet darker secrets. The uninitiated might reasonably believe that the Amazon rainforest exists because there is a lot of rain. As a result of recent scientific work in Amazonia, we now know that the rain falls because of the forest. Without the forest releasing its volatile organic compounds to seed the rising water vapour that it emits daily, the area risks the unthinkable fate of becoming a desert. Drought has already struck parts of the North East of Brazil as the damaged 'forest pump' fails to suck in sufficient warm air from the southern part of the North Atlantic. This leaves the sea temperatures in the birthing grounds of Caribbean hurricanes dangerously high. For years the sophisticated Brazilian Foreign Office has pumped out elegant diatribes about Brazil's right to follow Europe in clearing its domestic forests. Now those same diplomats may like to try explaining to the Caribbean, Mexico and the USA the logic of their forest clearance projects as made manifest in Hurricane Katrina. More immediately useful for the public affairs of the possible is the growing recognition that destruction of the Amazon forest cover is reducing rainfall in the food baskets of southern Brazil and the rich pampas of Argentina. There is now an impeccable case, rooted in Brazilian self-interest, for calling a halt to soya-led rainforest destruction. Last year Sao Paulo's eighteen million people came within ten days of running out of drinking water. While this would have made an interesting case study for the Institute for Environmental Security, it would certainly have added a security dimension that would have enriched Brazil's environmental consciousness! Those interested in the future of their planet might like to check out Antonio Nobre's excellent presentation from the Nairobi Conference of the Parties which can be found at [www.envirosecurity.org](http://www.envirosecurity.org)

Those of you who have followed my argument thus far may be anxious to know where the golden toad comes in. For the full story I would refer them to an excellent book entitled "The Weather Makers" by Tim Flannery. Its sub-title is "The History and Future Impact of Climate Change". It is a compendium of stories elegantly told to illustrate our arrogance and carelessness. For me, its most emotive story is set in the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica. The golden toad (*Bufo periglenes*) was only discovered in 1966. It spent most of its life underground in burrows, emerging above ground during the wet season in April and May. The details of toad mating are not a fit matter for public affairs practitioners, but suffice it to say that the males used every trick in the book to gain access to the female in what is euphemistically described as a 'toad ball'. Think lobbyists pursuing a European Parliament Rapporteur. In 1987 the clouds failed to deliver sufficient moisture to the forest pools near the top of the mountain. The eggs were desiccated and by the following May researchers could locate only a single male, the last of his species. As the climate warms species such as the toad are either driven further up the mountain or they die. The world's politicians need to recognise that they do not have much head room left.

Now that we begin to understand what drives it, it is not the difficulty of countering climate change which is so depressing. Rather it is the agonising slowness with which our species sorts out its political responses and unpicks the public affairs knots so carefully woven by previous politicians and special interests. We will never see the golden toad again, but in 2007 we can at least contemplate the possibility that *Homo sapiens sapiens* may just get its act together in time... even if that means that I have to abandon an outdated worship of sunshine.

