



THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF SUNSHINE

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A year in which one half of Europe is roasted, while the other half drowns, looks set to see the whole continent adopting the British habit of talking endlessly about the weather. The political weather for the European Union seems to be benefiting from a shift in the intellectual jet stream. For the first time since the French and Dutch votes on the Constitution, believers in the European cause can feel sunlight on their faces. The June Summit, that produced the draft Reform Treaty, went more smoothly than might have been expected. The combination of a successful German Presidency, a new French President and a British Prime Minister prepared to ignore demands for a referendum lifts the gloom that has pervaded European circles. There is every prospect of an end to the deadlock that was euphemistically described as 'a pause for reflection'. Euroscptics will bemoan the resilience of the Union, while europhiles will regret the loss of significant totems from the draft Constitution. However politicians, as opposed to public intellectuals, should welcome the outcome. They should also read Michael Ignatieff's op-ed piece in the New York Times on 5th August. As the ultimate public intellectual, who has chosen to leave his ivory tower in Harvard and launch into the choppy waters of Canadian politics, Ignatieff's musings should command respect:

"The philosopher Isaiah Berlin once said that the trouble with academics and commentators is that they care more about whether ideas are interesting than whether they are true. Politicians live by ideas just as much as professional thinkers do, but they can't afford the luxury of entertaining ideas that are merely interesting. They have to work with the small number of ideas that happen to be true and the even smaller number that happen to be applicable to real life. In academic life, false ideas are merely false and useless ones can be fun to play with. In political life, false ideas can ruin the lives of millions and useless ones can waste precious resources. An intellectual's responsibility for his ideas is to follow their consequences wherever they may lead. A politician's responsibility is to master those consequences and prevent them from doing harm I've learned that good judgment in politics looks different from good judgment in intellectual life. Among intellectuals, judgment is about generalizing and interpreting particular facts as instances of some big idea. In politics, everything is what it is and not another thing. Specifics matter more than generalities. Theory gets in the wayThe attribute that underpins good judgment in politicians is a sense of reality. "What is called wisdom in statesmen," Berlin wrote, referring to figures like Roosevelt and Churchill, "is understanding rather than knowledge — some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what; what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know." Politicians cannot afford to cocoon themselves in the inner world of their own imaginings. They must not confuse the world as it is with the world as they wish it to be. They must see Iraq — or anywhere else — as it is."

Both sides of the debate about Europe ignored the necessity to 'see Europe as it is'. Both were cocooned in their own frames of reference. In truth the European Union is neither an evil Teutonic plot nor a benign, carbon copy of the institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany. It is what it has always been, a sui generis response by the peoples of Europe to the challenge of peace in their continent and now to the defence of Europe's interests in the world. I feel a rare apology is appropriate. The Presidencies of large countries are normally a disappointment. On this occasion Angela Merkel delivered success on the three areas that matter most for this generation of Europeans – climate change, foreign policy and an updating of Europe's self image. Europe will now play a full role in the 'great game' of squaring energy security, environmental stability and the attendant foreign policy challenges of a multi-polar world.

"Let sunshine win the day", cried David Cameron in his peroration at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2006. He flooded the Conference platform with sunshine and blue skies. His advisors had rightly identified the lesson from American politics about the importance of optimism. Parties out of government need to hold out sunlit uplands, shining cities on the hill, if they are to overturn incumbents. Ten months later David Cameron has discovered that in the words of Longfellow: "Into each life some rain must fall". The commentariat that gave David Cameron a prolonged honeymoon now turn on him. Their central charge seems to be that he is all public relations

and has no strategic vision. Even by the standards of media tittle-tattle, this is a thoroughly unjust accusation. David Cameron is the first Leader of the Conservative Party since Margaret Thatcher to have both a clear strategy for regaining power and the nerve to see it through. To win he needs to restore the credibility of the Conservative Party and to win back the votes of the professional classes, women and young voters. He needs to have change on his side, even if this means temporarily discomfiting the Party's right wing. Of necessity, this means using the tactical tools of public relations to shake up the congealed perceptions of ten years of right wing and Eurosceptic nastiness.

It says much for the image problem that public relations has as a profession in the UK when the very mention of it can be used as an insult. There ought to be a difference between "public relations" and "spin". For the ten years of Blair's Britain, spin meant endlessly re-packaging old announcements and an approach to the truth that should have shamed even Alastair Campbell. What could be more typical of Blair's 'low dishonest decade' than that Campbell should feel it necessary to 'edit' his diaries, The Blair Years, to avoid embarrassing the Labour Party? Gordon Brown has spun his way to a good start as Prime Minister by denouncing spin. He chooses to distance himself from Blair by puritanical rebuttal of the Labour Government's policies on gambling, licensing hours and the re-classification of cannabis. With Presbyterian certainty and statistical wizardry, he flourishes the science of skunk and dispatches the joys of social liberalism. He should be careful. Cavaliers are more in tune with modern Britain than Roundheads. There is a looming backlash against the loss of civil liberties during the last ten years. Brown will only make this stronger by his insistence on intrusive DNA identity cards and an assertive state that insists on using traffic data and CCTV cameras to track the movement of every citizen. Longer periods of internment without trial, and similar products of the politics of fear, fit too comfortably into the public's accumulated perceptions of Gordon Brown. He will not risk an early election and will be looking less fresh by the summer of 2009. The sunlight that temporarily surrounds him feels more like a golden sunset than a new dawn.

The ability of the Arctic ice to reflect the sun's rays back into space is a key part of the mechanism that inhibits global warming. The importance of the Arctic is only slowly penetrating the public consciousness. The concept of starving polar bears, separated from their prey by melting polar ice, has made it into the public discourse. The much greater dangers of methane release from melting tundra and the increased tendency for the land-based Greenland Glacier to both melt and slide into the Atlantic is taking longer to ring alarm bells. It is typical of the rearguard action being fought by the fossil fuel industries that they seek to cloud the picture by making much of those bits of Greenland which are getting colder, while ignoring the continuing dramatic loss of snow and ice cover. Scientific complexity will always offer opportunities for unscrupulous public affairs. The Arctic should properly be seen as the repository of much of the damage which industrial civilisation has inflicted on the planet. High latitudes are warming faster than the Equator and toxic chemicals build up most intensely in the Arctic food chain. How appropriate therefore that the Arctic may well prove to be our nemesis. The retreat of the sea ice holds out the prospect for a great new bonanza of the very fossil fuels that are destabilising our environment. Rather than drawing the obvious conclusion that it would be unwise to extract this Faustian gold, the Arctic nations are now engaged in an unseemly scramble to plant their national flags. A longer term view would be to treat the Arctic in the same way that we have agreed to treat Antarctica by forbidding mineral exploitation. One might have thought that the International Polar Year 2007/2008 would be a good time to start. Full marks therefore for His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, who is taking this year's Religion, Science and Environment Symposium to the far North under the title "The Arctic: Mirror of Life". He rejected substantial financial support from the Norwegian Government when they insisted that the Symposium should celebrate the new potential for Statoil to deploy their drilling technology in Arctic regions. Instead His All Holiness is taking a group of seventeen leaders of the world's faiths to the Icefjord on the west coast of Greenland, where many icebergs calve, to "Pray for the Planet".

Such issues are not merely of scientific and religious interest. Following a Spanish initiative, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is giving serious thought to adding Environment and Security to its mandate and is encouraging its 54 member governments from Vancouver to Vladivostok, to develop their own Environment and Security programmes. Despite the fact that the Arctic is an OSCE lake, the complex of trade, transport and security issues make it too difficult a topic for them to tackle, with the Russians, Canadians and Americans all limiting themselves to comforting platitudes at frozen latitudes. Conflict, verging on war, over such resources is no longer the stuff only of dystopian nightmares.

The rhetoric of governments about the dangers of climate change has shifted recently in a positive direction, but there remain huge doubts about their real ability to make a difference. While the image of carbon trading has taken a battering from its association with dicey hedge funds and a fringe of bogus operators in the Voluntary Emissions Trading Market, nobody seriously doubts that it will be part of the solution. However there remains a major role for regulatory approaches. The Montreal Protocol is without any doubt the most climate-friendly treaty ever enacted, even if that was not its primary intent. The twentieth anniversary of the Protocol falls in September 2007 and a diverse group of nations want to celebrate it by agreeing a much faster rate for phasing out the remaining HCFCs. The silo mentality of government departments threatens however to kick this promising opportunity into the long grass by referring it to a study group. The strangely fickle nature of the political process seems doomed to concentrate on the small and difficult, while wilfully avoiding some obvious low hanging fruit.

Those of us who work in public affairs occasionally forget just how much influence we may have. I was recently asked by Public Affairs News to review Daniel Guéguen's new book "European Lobbying". It is beautifully laid out, wonderfully idiosyncratic, and in some areas, just plain wrong. Daniel draws heavily on his own experience in European Trade Associations in a way which, in my view, underplays the role of corporate lobbying and gives a rather old fashioned feel to his text. However he does give an interesting case study of the European Photovoltaic Industry Association (EPIA), which I have every reason to believe is accurate. One consequence of its success is that every politician in Europe who hears mention of solar power, thinks immediately of photovoltaic cells. Unfortunately, in the ruthless competition between renewables, that is an inevitable subset of the wider rivalry between renewables and fossil fuels, such carefully engineered perceptions have squeezed out the potentially much more important generator of power known as "Concentrated Solar Power" (CSP). CSP is proven technology involving using mirrors to concentrate the sun's rays and, in a variety of ways, to heat water to produce steam which drives a turbine. Large scale operations have existed in the Mojave Desert for twenty years and the Spanish have built a series of plants developing Californian technology. Why therefore does it not feature on most lists of exciting, upscaleable renewables? The answer seems to lie almost entirely in the realm of public affairs. There is a nomenclature problem. Is it to be known as Concentrated Solar Power or Solar Thermal Power? If the latter, how is it to be distinguished from small scale projects aimed at heating domestic bath water. Then there is the absence of an effective trade association with any focus on Brussels. CSP works best in deserts of the kind found in North Africa and the South West States of the USA. Governments in gloomy Northern Europe tend not to give proper thought to a technology that does not immediately seem to fall within their geographic potential. The key to using CSP in Europe would be a HVDC direct current grid. There exists a German- financed scenario, showing how all of Europe's renewable energies could be linked to such a grid, doing wonders for the solidarity of Europe in the face of threats to energy security. Perhaps most importantly the case for CSP is squeezed out by louder voices. The countries with most to gain, North Africa, Egypt, Jordan, Iran and India are not traditionally regarded as players in the energy politics of the European Union. The technical and geo-political case for CSP linked to an HVDC grid, looks to me to be overwhelming. Californian investment in it has risen sharply since 2006. Anyone who cares about the future of our energy and environment policies should be echoing David Cameron and crying "Let sunshine win the day".

The practice of public affairs is very much in the news this summer. When Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, introduced the charmingly named "Open Government, Honest Leadership Act", she declared: "With the passage of the Act we draw back the curtains, throw up the windows and let the sunshine in". Elsewhere the House of Commons is currently investigating lobbying, while in Vienna the political world is convulsed by a pair of lobbying-related scandals. This autumn in Brussels will see the next instalment of the complex struggle over the European Transparency Initiative. Both politicians and public affairs practitioners should bear in mind Michael Ignatieff's injunction not to cocoon themselves in the inner world of their own imaginings nor to confuse the world as it is with the world as they wish it to be.



