



THE STATE OF OUR UNIONS

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The depth of a particularly unpleasant winter saw near simultaneous State of the Union debates in Washington, Strasbourg and London. At one level they are just the presentation of executive laundry lists. At a deeper level however they are an annual reminder of who we think we are. As a grudging late spring finally stirs the daffodils and the cherry blossom, they make a good starting point from which to consider the political season that lies ahead.

The Americans started the idea of an annual review called The State of the Union. The three branches of government crowd into one chamber to hear the President review the current position and look forward to the next twelve months. This year's State of the Union address by President Obama was no doubt substantially different from the one he had anticipated delivering before the electoral disaster in Massachusetts. His speech was marked by raucous partisanship and gestures of dissent from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Similarly it has become a well established tradition for the European Parliament to hold a debate on the State of the Union. This address is traditionally given by the President of the European Commission. This year it was delayed by the months of institutional wrangling that followed the European Elections in June. Indeed by next year it may be an open question as to whether President Barroso or President Van Rompuy should deliver the Address. The State Opening of Parliament is the nearest equivalent in the United Kingdom reflecting the medieval tradition of the Crown. However it has not been adapted to reflect the increasingly federal nature of the country. Separate Administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast are not represented at the foot of the steps leading to the throne. In as far as these events are genuinely intended to review the constitutional and political balance of our political systems, they all have at least two missing players. The press was long ago identified as the "Fourth Estate". Given the importance of the media in advanced societies, we should perhaps bring them formally into the panoply of state. Perhaps our political systems would be healthier if we also invited the lobbyists into such occasions. If one believes, as I do, that a healthy system of public affairs is essential in a modern democracy, it would not be too far-fetched to include them in return for transparency and loyalty to the institutions which they seek to influence.

No one can contemplate the level of constitutional debate in the UK with anything approaching satisfaction. Despite having designed federations around the world in the twentieth century, the English are still remarkably illiterate in the politics of multi-level government. While sanity may have prevailed by the skin of its teeth in Northern Ireland in recent weeks, the constitutional conundrum over the relationship of Scotland and England remains unresolved. The days when the Labour Party weighed its seats in Wales and Scotland are over. While the credibility of an independent Scotland has been damaged by the impact of the recession on Iceland and Ireland, the arrival of a Conservative-led Administration in Westminster is bound to lead to increased tensions. The UK now has a Supreme Court separate from the House of Lords. The Welsh are warming to their devolved Assembly. Indeed the health of the movement towards devolution in the nations of the United Kingdom can be accurately measured by the strength of the separate public affairs systems which are now in existence in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately a review of the constitutional arrangements has become intimately involved with the public credibility of all the players. The grossly inflated media and public obsession with the abuse of some expenses by some MPs has led to some spectacular policy non-sequiturs. Everything from the clothing worn by the Speaker of the House of Commons to the electoral system by which it is chosen, has been dragged into the debate about how to placate public anger at the misdeeds of parliamentarians. As in America, the people are said to be angry. This anger is rooted in a very understandable sense of fear. Western electorates are not stupid. They know that unemployment will continue to be a threat after the apparent success of emergency measures to shore up the financial world. They have experienced the collapse of a range of "certainties" – their banks, their mortgages, their jobs and their children's prospects. The way to respond to such public moods is to deal with the root fear rather than the symptomatic anger. Of course duck houses and bankers' bonuses make people angry, but they also sell newspapers. Competitive breast beating may be good for pre-election spin but it does not lead to

intelligent legislation. Gordon Brown is once again fiddling with the composition of the House of Lords and has had an apparent death bed conversion away from First Past the Post to the equally un-proportional system known as the Alternative Vote. This is in fact no more than a belated recognition that the result of a General Election in May is likely to be a hung parliament.

In all of this debate public affairs is intimately involved. No one can deny that recent revelations about abuse of travel expenses has damaged the well deserved reputation of the House of Lords as a reviewing Chamber. Furthermore inflated claims of influence by some Labour Lords and by three retiring Blairite Cabinet Ministers, ensnared by journalists into likening themselves to 'taxicabs for hire', demonstrates the dangers of an appointed rather than an elected or inherited Second Chamber. Most of these incidents are not 'lobbying scandals', but are rather amateurish sales promotion exercises by politicians past their best. All the main British political parties have long ago ceased to think rationally about the role of public affairs. David Cameron, the first leader of a major political party in Europe to come from a background as a lobbyist, has been hysterically desperate about the public affairs activities of his MPs and MEPs. Gordon Brown, having decided against mandatory registration and regulation of lobbyists, reversed his view on the very day that the UK Public Affairs Council, summoned in response to Government pressure, was to embark on its voyage as a beacon of voluntary co-operation. So now the UK debate on the regulation of public affairs will take place in a pre-election period. Whoever wins the election in May should pause and take a deep breath before they legislate in this area. At the very least we should expect them to end up with an outcome that is consistent at national, regional and international levels.

Similar lessons about the importance of including public affairs when analysing politics can be learned from the strange tale of the US Health Care debate. In mid-winter much erudite analysis was indulged in to explain the electoral woes of the Obama Administration. As usual the simplest explanations are the right ones. As Sigmund Freud may, or may not, have said "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar". Recessions are frightening events. Fear leads to anger and to a greater tolerance of those who show anger. A version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Values kicks in. Personal security takes precedence over wider sympathy for the common good. The mood of November 2008 was generous to those without health care and was concerned about the impact of climate change on future generations. President Obama won a majority on the basis of who he was and how he made Americans feel about themselves, rather on a specific set of detailed policies. It is not surprising therefore that getting legislation through Congress, with all the associated political advertising and coverage, should be a messy affair. It would be a mistake however to think that public opinion had fundamentally shifted on either health or climate change. Politicians are elected on poetry, but have to govern in prose. The contrast between the rhetoric of the campaign and the hesitation of governing fed the media treatment of Obama. His dramatic rise from obscurity and his titanic struggle with Hillary were the stuff of soap operas. His triumphant election and inauguration were pure theatre. In the euphoria people forgot that there was nothing inevitable or overwhelming in his victory. Huge expectations were raised, fanned by both supporters and opponents. A classical dramatist would recognise the hubris moment. In the heightened news cycle of our time the tragic figure does even have to take the fatal decision that angers the Gods. The media does it all for him. The fall from grace that was Massachusetts follows the classic up and down rhythm of myth. In American politics this is normally timed to fit with the two year cycle of elections to Congress. President Obama should be grateful for the timing of his winter of discontent. In the light of the vote over Health Care the press is already writing the "Remarkable Recovery of President: Mid term elections not the expected blood bath" story.

As always the story can be told either as politics or as public affairs. The Obama Administration came into office announcing its determination to break the hold of lobbyists on the American political system. They introduced measures that forbade registered lobbyists from approaching the Administration on a range of issues including applications for stimulus funding. Lobbyists in Washington talked about having to wear 'the Scarlet L'. In fact this led to what is now known as the 'K Street paradox'. Registered lobbyists de-registered themselves in large numbers, including those who still aspire to join the Administration as the slow process of approval of appointments drags on. The result is a reduction in the number of formally registered lobbyists during a twelve month period that has seen an avalanche of lobbying as business sought to influence Congress on the Obama Administration's proposals on Health Care, Cap and Trade and Financial Regulation. Much of the money thrown into the debate is not therefore recorded in the official statistics.

As Health Care, in the form of a vast legislative package, passed through the law making sausage machine, it became difficult to follow for the public. What had been general statements of intent became intensely personal questions for individual Americans. Such complexity opened the way for deliberate encouragement of fear by assertions of 'death panels' and the introduction into the debate of the explosive issue of federally funded aid for abortions. President Obama was criticised for leaving the issue in the hands of Congress until the very last moment. In fact this strategy was validated by the House of Representatives vote on Sunday 21st March. In the debate which preceded the vote Nancy Pelosi made the observation that "All politics is personal". We now know that the pep talk with which the President consolidated the Democrat majority was an appeal to the personal feelings and the "better angels" of legislators.

The campaigning Obama had made much of the need for a return to bi-partisanship in American politics. It became apparent from day one of the Administration that the Republicans were not prepared to play such a game. They have pursued a policy of non-co-operation on all fronts, which they vow will continue after the Health Care vote. In truth, they find themselves in this position as a result of weakness rather than strength. Their defeats in 2006 and 2008 left the GOP without leadership or clear policy goals. Their situation has been made worse by the activities of that very American phenomenon the Tea Party movement. The Tea Party is a bewildering mix of traditional US populism and social media communication. It presents itself as a self-organising response to the elitist and structured politics of both major parties. However it has paid organisers funded by shadowy individuals and corporate entities. It should perhaps best be seen as a continuation of forces that were both active and disappointed during the eight years of the Bush Administration. "Republican Gomorrah" by Max Blumenthal records in painstaking detail the relationship between the Republican Party, the Christian Right, and the Conservative Movement. The Tea Party channels both anger and violence. The attack on town hall meetings last summer appears to have been in part a deliberate adoption of the tactics of the radical Left from the 1960s and 1970s. The level of abuse can only be described as hysterical. Much of it was directed personally at President Obama, questioning whether he was actually born in the US and accusing him of everything from Marxism to Fascism. It undoubtedly carries heavy racist overtones. And yet it would be a mistake to view the Tea Party as a coherent political conspiracy or as being of other than temporary advantage to the Republican Party. While Sarah Palin gained much publicity from addressing the Tea Party conference in Nashville, a subsequent poll of attendees at the event showed that only 7% of them would vote for her in a Presidential Election. In fact the Tea Party represents a major threat to GOP recovery as it drives Republican candidates to adopt extreme positions that will make it more difficult for the leadership of the Party to de-toxify its brand in time for Presidential Elections in 2012.

In assessing the impact of all this on the rest of the world we should remember that America is not Europe and that it is undergoing a major post-imperial crisis in the middle of a major recession. On a recent visit to Washington, I breakfasted with Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, who is the UK's Climate & Security Envoy and a leading figure in the Institute of Environmental Security's Military Advisory Council. Neil and I ordered breakfast subconsciously expecting it to arrive in an ordered sequence of courses. Instead of course it all arrived at once. Berries, bacon and toast to be eaten at one go. Perhaps the most justified accusation that can legitimately be levelled at President Obama is that he has sought to do everything at once in the last twelve months. The success with Health Care demonstrates that even presidents have to set priorities. His electoral survival will depend on the speed or otherwise of the recovery as measured in employment terms. Beyond that he has to sell two very difficult ideas to the American people. He needs to communicate domestically his re-conceptualising of American foreign policy. He has understood that America is no longer a dominant hegemon and that its interests are served by opportunist coalitions and compromises with other power centres. Simultaneously he has to communicate that Americans can no longer assume that they command endless resources. Neither of these will be easy in a country bred to believe in American exceptionalism.

A similar story applies in Brussels. The simultaneous arrival of a new Treaty, a new Commission and new personalities at a moment of global power shift has re-arranged the kaleidoscope of power in the European Union. We would be clearer about the state of the Union if much of the winter had not been spent struggling with functional defects in the operation of the Eurozone. The crisis over Greek finances has played a role similar to the Health Care debate in the US. It has highlighted problems of governance in a complex multi-level institution and should remind all of us that nothing can be regarded as permanently 'achieved'. The role of Germany, the tension between core and periphery, the problems of economic governance without political union are with us always. The advertising man in

me took some pleasure from the importance of acronyms in the world of politics and business. The financial difficulties of Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain were magnified by the recognition that the four countries spelled out PIGS. In this context one should also consider the impact of 'BRICs' or of 'BASIC'. Politics is not just about ideas it is about how you communicate them, which is why public affairs matters. By mid-summer we shall know whether there is to be a change of emphasis in the European Commission's approach to the regulation of lobbying. We will know whether President Obama can overturn the judgement of the Supreme Court removing restrictions on corporate funding of political activity. We will have a clearer idea as to whether the UK General Election has drawn a line under the decay of the credibility of the political class and its consequent approach to lobbying.

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