

THIS DEFINING MOMENT: INDIA & CLIMATE CHANGE

Speech by Tom Spencer to the EU-India High-Level Dialogue
New Delhi, 3rd February 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are encouraged by our illustrious Co-Chairs, Nitin Desai and Crispin Tickell to “think differently in a new era and then to move urgently to action”. Let me start therefore by paying tribute to a man who is not with us tonight, but without whom Action for a Global climate change would not exist. John Pinder, now in his eighties, applied his intellect, his energies and his Federalist beliefs to the unity of the peoples of Europe as they emerged from their civil wars in the first half of the twentieth century. His intellectual enthusiasm, his optimism and his belief that thought should be transferred into action should be an inspiration to us all. He also stands as a symbol of the long interaction between India and Europe. Some years ago he received a bequest from a Great Uncle who had made a jute fortune in India. John decided that money made in India should be deployed for India’s benefit. Hence his foundation of the AGCC.

How should we move from the intellectual and ethical consensus established at our first meeting in Potsdam in May 2008 to action now? I thought it would be most helpful if I was to address the subject tonight from the viewpoint of a ‘recovering politician’ and a Visiting Professor of Public Affairs at Brunel University.

It was the first President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein, who memorably reminded us that, on all matters of action, “The devil is in the details”. My own experience confirms however that action for politicians can only be achieved when they have been equipped with robust “stories”. One cannot move electorates with “parts per million” or “reform of the CDM”.

What stories are we to tell amidst the darkness and political confusion which President Obama describes as “this defining moment”? I was in Washington in the days after the Inaugural for an Aspen Institute seminar discussing the options for US policy in the approach to the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen. I was the only non-American in a group of policy wonks, luxuriating in the miracle of an intellectual US President with a global vision. They were empowered by his ability to define complex issues in a way which had won him his electoral support. His Inaugural Address is notable for its near total dependence on the tradition of “American Idealism”, rather than on the Bush Administration’s reliance on phrases drawn from “American Exceptionalism”. I would have changed only one sentence. “America is ready to lead” could more fruitfully have been rendered as “America is ready to lead by example”. Optimism and commitment to action is a requirement that we may justifiably look for in all the great players of today’s world.

A speaker at the Aspen Institute seminar told a good, and possibly even true, story. Someone asked the top Chinese negotiator what were the chances for success in Copenhagen? He supposedly replied “There are two scenarios for success in these climate change talks - one realistic and one fantasy. It is possible that aliens will land, give us the relevant technology and help us organise ourselves. Sadly that is the realistic scenario!”

Why, in the face of such pessimism, do I believe that the current crises present opportunities that entitle us to be optimistic? Last week I was part of a European Centre for Public Affairs discussion in Brussels on Managing Public Affairs in a Crisis. A very impressive social psychologist, working for Unilever, described how they have entirely reformed the company’s response to crisis. His recommendations have relevance for governments at this difficult moment. Of

his four points the first, “stay big-minded”, is the most important and the one on which I want to concentrate tonight. We must stay focused on the big issues and the long term. Beyond that he recommends the importance of imposing order on chaos as a key to avoiding panic. He points to the need to professionalise our response to crisis and to delegate authority to the relevant level. All good advice for G20 governments at sea over the reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions and the financial instruments of the planet. So what stories may we craft for politicians in this year of challenge and destiny?

There is the story of the downturn as opportunity. It is obvious that we should not buy the story, assiduously pushed by the fossil fuel lobby, that the downturn means abandoning environmental concerns as a luxury left over from the years of plenty. President Obama has led the way by framing his stimulus package as an investment in the long journey towards a low carbon economy. We need to copy this globally, particularly as it relates to Concentrated Solar Power in California, the Mediterranean and in India. Secondly there is an emerging story about the changing relationship between business and government. In a year when the US and the UK have between them nationalised more banks than Mrs Gandhi, there must be room for reshaping our thinking on how business and government should work together.

Then there is the story of the new multi-polarity and its impact on foreign policy around the world. No one can now doubt that the period of US uni-polar dominance is at an end. I suspect that history will see President Obama as the American equivalent of Emperor Justinian – a final blaze of imperial glory before retrenchment as one power amongst many. Delhi knows more than most cities about the rise and fall of empires. A distant relative of mine, Emily, Lady Clive Bayley, was the daughter of the British Resident at the Mughal Court at the beginning of the 1850s. Her diary has been re-published as a book entitled “The Golden Calm”. I fear that, as a planet, we have had our “golden calm”. We must now come to terms with a period of change. Such paradigm shifts are always uncomfortable and usually violent.

As a child of the sixties, I was fascinated by the inter-action of Asian and European thought. I read my Goethe and my Herman Hesse. I was influenced by Indian practices and Indian philosophies. There are spiritual reasons, at the end of an Hindu Great Age, for believing that the next five years are a defining moment and a testing time for humanity. It is no longer good enough to know this. Now we must live the new reality; not just talk about it.

Such a moment calls for institutional creativity in both bi-lateral and global relationships. All previous re-designing of global systems have taken place under the sponsorship of a hegemon – the British at the end of the nineteenth century and the Americans after the shock of World War II. It will be doubly difficult to find a new stability in a multi-polar world, where the relationship between the West and Asia remains unresolved.

One day historians will trace the way mankind successively re-framed the question of climate change. I detect important developments in the stories we tell each other about climate change. First it was Mitigation. Then it was Adaptation. Now I believe it is time to add a third phase – Restoration. The fossil fuel industry wants us to invest heavily in Carbon Capture and Sequestration. I have my doubts about both the technology and the timing of CCS, but even if both could be met we would still be talking about mitigating the impact of our on-going emissions. A more fundamental and optimistic story is called for. Tim Flannery believes that Biochar is the key. If we can upscale what we are already doing, we could recapture all the carbon which the developed world put into the atmosphere between 1850 and today. Furthermore, we could help improve soil fertility and water retention in the process. Action on such a

vast scale would not return the planet to its pre-industrial state, but it would overcome the current ethical impasse about historic responsibility. It has been said that, if Mitigation is about Air, then Adaptation is about Water. To follow the logic of the Greek elements, Restoration would be about Earth. Fire, the fourth element, is what will follow if we fail to act.

Fire, in the sense of the security aspects of climate change, is a story which is rapidly spreading amongst policy makers. Reports from American generals and the evolution of the Solana Report stress the significance of climate change as a driver of instability and conflict. I fear however that the current state of the debate under-estimates the dangers. The melting of the "Third Pole" glaciers of the Himalayas could yet prove to be the cause of great political upheaval and massively increased poverty in Asia. The potential for damage to the summer water flow of Asia's rivers, on all sides of the mountains, should by now be apparent to all. Yet many continue to take comfort in the idea of linear climate change, giving us time to adapt. The military whose job it is to think about the worst scenarios, are increasingly aware of the speed of abrupt climate change and our dangerous approach to irreversible tipping points. We must not be paralysed by such a prospect. There are actions that we can and should take now. Most notably we should take action to reduce the Black Carbon falling on the snows of the mountains, reducing the 'albedo effect' and speeding up glacial melt by up to 40%.

In the break Air Marshall Singh asked me if Europe realised the enormity of the challenge facing India. I believe that peoples interpret climate change according to their historic ways of thinking. In Europe and North America we are increasingly realising that the Arctic may be our nemesis. We have pumped pollutants into the atmosphere, which have concentrated at the pole which now threatens us with sea level rise on a catastrophic scale. In India it is Mount Kailash, sacred to India's religions, which stands above the great rivers that now threaten disaster rather than succour.

So to Lenin's question. What is to be done? Let us return to Unilever. If we have remained "big-minded", we must now "bring order out of chaos, professionalise and delegate". We must create a structure for action such that we can manage the details. At the global level I see this as a re-balancing of the "Climate Quad" of US, China, India and Europe. At a bilateral level it means a strengthened institutional structure for EU-India relations to the benefit of both parties.

Let me close with a personal wish. There is much debate about the origins of cricket, but most people agree that it started in the Weald, on the borders between Surrey and Sussex. I used to live in one of those villages where the tradition is still strong that the game originated from milkmaids in the eighteenth century. They are believed to have converted their three-legged milking stools into wickets. The game spread nationally and then followed the nervous system of Empire to India. In recent decades India's passion for the game has re-shaped it. My wish therefore is that India should do for climate change what she has done for cricket. To do that she must understand that dealing with climate change is not a distraction from dealing with poverty, rather it is the essential step in avoiding a future decline into a deeper impoverishment. India should not be the reluctant bride of climate change. She should be an innovator and a leader in the struggle. Now is the moment to take guard and get on with the action.

