

“THE GROWTH OF FEMALE INFLUENCE ON POLICY”

Speech delivered to the Diplomatic Academy Symposium on Diplomacy & Gender,
University of Westminster,

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Your Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I want to start this morning by arguing that things are often not what they seem. The theme notes for this conference refer to increased female participation in the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. However, I believe that the power to influence policy is far more widely dispersed and that we should therefore look for female influence in industrial and NGO lobbying and indeed in that “psych-ops” of modern power - the battle for ideas, both in and out of universities.

In this discussion, we are of course all marked by our own gender and are products of our own civilisations. I detest the Samuel Huntingdon thesis about the clash of civilisations, but I must declare my membership of “Frankish”, Western civilisation in Toynbee’s sense. Those of you in this room from the other great civilisations of the planet do not need me to remind you about the way in which issues such as gender evolve differently in different civilisations. The assumption of the inevitability of a total and global adoption of western norms, via globalisation or direct military power, is in my view the greatest current weakness of western politics and diplomacy. It is a hubristic failure of the empathy essential to both good diplomacy and good public affairs.

I approach the subject of gender with a certain caution. I cannot say that my interventions on this subject over the last twenty years have been universally successful. In 1981 I was an MEP and Conservative Spokesman on Social Affairs & Employment. As a consequence, I was nominated as the only bearded member of the European Parliament Woman’s Rights Committee. In that context, I learnt the value of listening, just as I have done in my family composed of three loquacious and determined daughters. In those years, my wife did my research in Parliament. She is the only person ever to have written a speech for me, with which I did not interfere. I delivered a speech on Gender to a Conservative Woman’s meeting, which was warmly received. However, the first question from the floor was, “Mr Spencer, that speech was so sensitive, it could only have been written by a woman!” My more recent interventions have been no more successful. Two years ago, a distinguished foreign policy academic sought to involve me in his belief that foreign & defence policy reflected the innate homophobia of male elites and invited me to share a seminar with his students. His evidence was almost entirely composed of quasi-pornographic images taken from military magazines! Indeed things are not as they seem. Many of us on the Woman’s Rights Committee wondered at the motivation of a rather heavily set MEP, representing the German extreme Right, who made ferocious speeches condemning women’s rights. She proved on closer inspection to be a heavily made-up transvestite with a mission to force women back into the kitchen!

Let me therefore inoculate myself on this occasion by a little defensive definition. This symposium is entitled Diplomacy & Gender, which is normally a discreet code for women in diplomacy. However, men also have gender and what I believe the textbooks refer to as ‘masculinist’ ideas. Perhaps therefore I could talk for a few moments about the feminine influence on policy, rather than being tied specifically to the female gender. I want to argue that feminine influence on policy has increased, will increase and should increase in order to face the challenges of an increasingly complex world in the 21st century. I will draw my examples not from classic inter-state diplomacy, but from my experience in the European Union, particularly the European Parliament, and from my involvement in aspects of global governance and public affairs practice.

The European Parliament directly elected in 1979 was special in a variety of ways. A quarter of its initial membership were women, and it elected as its first President, Madame Simone Veil. The European Parliament therefore started its democratic life from day one with none of the undeclared masculinity of most Parliaments. This was particularly appropriate for a parliament, which was not

required to support a government and where no political group, nationality or language had a majority. The Parliament was, and is, an institution where the skills most in demand involve the management of complexity and compromise over an extended period. By 1999, when Parliament came of age in the midst of the crisis of the Santer Commission, the percentage of women members have risen substantially and the largest group was led by a woman. Indeed in mid 1999, the Fifth Parliament went on to elect its second French woman as President, substantially on the basis of the personal popularity engendered by her reputation as an efficient and sensitive Chair of difficult Parliamentary voting sessions. It is however notable that this further influx of women led to a possibly regrettable clustering around the so-called "soft subjects" such as Human Rights, and Committees such as Environment, Public Health & Consumer Affairs and Media & Culture.

Similar patterns can be seen in the European Commission, which despite Romano Prodi's best intentions, has not achieved gender parity, and where women Commissioners are still most likely to be found in areas such as the Environment and Social Affairs areas. We still await the first woman Permanent Representative, and the European Council has not quite recovered from the experience of Mrs Thatcher.

The association of women with environmental subjects can also be seen at global level. I greatly enjoyed working as President of GLOBE International with Liz Dowdeswell during her time as Executive Director of UNEP. Although she was, in my view, unfairly attacked by male colleagues, she proved extremely capable at using the fragile structure and uncertain prerogatives of UNEP to birth an impressive series of Multilateral Environmental Agreements. Here you could see in operation all the supposedly feminine skills - extended networking and the holistic management of complexity. They were also apparent in the early work on climate change, up to and including the Kyoto Protocol. I was struck by the particular quality of diplomacy needed in the world of climate change. I had cut my global political teeth at GATT, while seeking to introduce environmental constraints on the operation of an almost entirely male-dominated, trade-negotiating culture. Moving from GATT/WTO to the world of climate change, it soon became apparent that successful green diplomats had to understand that in climate change policy everyone had to be kept happy if any progress was to be made. The "big elephants" approach of GATT, with its concentration on the European Union and the USA, simply did not work with India, China or Brazil, as one cannot divide the atmosphere and treat it in the way one would textile quotas. I sought as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee to promote the discussion of Environmental Security. This of course is the classic mix of Venus and Mars. Ten years on, it is sadly apparent that the capture of this subject by environment ministers has effectively removed it from the agenda of the military.

Before turning to some dangerous generalisations, may I just comment on my experience of the feminine in the policy formation process which we call 'public affairs'. The European Centre for Public Affairs defines public affairs as "the organised attempt to influence decision making within a political system". If I consider my fifteen Corporate Members of the ECPA, seven of them are headed up by women. They are as a general rule spectacularly good at running the public affairs function, with its boundary nature and Janus-like characteristics of having to look simultaneously inwards into the company and outward to the world. I would further argue that the elite group of really effective public affairs consultants in Brussels is dominated by women and gay men. I suspect there is something in the quality of empathy necessary for successful public affairs, as well as in the continuing barriers for both gays and women in elected politics, which encourages this phenomenon.

I should by now be old enough to know the dangers of generalising before such as distinguished audience as yourselves. However, let me throw out a few assertions, if only to offer tempting "straw persons" for this afternoon's working groups. I suspect that in all aspects of human life in Western civilisation, and by extension in much of the world where Western culture sets the expectations, that we are at the very end of the influence of the Enlightenment worldview. The definitions we use to define government, democracy, religion, science and diplomacy stem from eighteenth century models. They increasingly no longer match the realities of the 21st century. The belief that "If we were rational, we would be good" - the "Voltaire's bastards" argument - has proved to be wrong. We are left nevertheless, with a diplomacy that is shaped by Western, rational, male and secular assumptions. Two hundred and fifty years after the Enlightenment, we find ourselves in the second great paradigm shift, not from agriculture to industry, but from industrial to knowledge based societies. In all aspects of our life, we are required to struggle with the difficult trinity of information, knowledge and wisdom. Of the three, wisdom is the most important for the survival of the species. I share something of the

excitement that Jung expressed in 1950 at the rise of the feminine. From work which I have done with the Orthodox Church and the Religion, Science & Environment Symposia organised by His All Holiness The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, I believe that it is possible to see the reassertion of Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, in all religions, as they are crowded together in our global village.

Paradoxically, just as the assumption of the inevitability of secular humanist domination has begun to break down, we see the rise of a frightened fundamentalism in all the world's great religions. I do not believe that it is unreasonable to characterise this as a male, masculinist response to the fear that the simple outlines of a patriarchal society were being fatally compromised.

Each of us is still seeking to draw conclusions from the events of September 11th. It is, however, clear that a strong element of the American reaction to the Twin Towers has been classically masculinist, with a dependence on high technology, aggression and the open assertion of power. One may doubt how far such an approach is an intelligent response to asymmetrical warfare. Big toys for big boys and an attachment to the image of Rome rather than Greece seem to be the order of the day. Robert Kagan's seminal writings make the differences of worldview between America and Europe explicit in gender terms. He announces that America is from Mars and Europe from Venus. He points to the American fear of entanglement and commitment and to the European fear of the strong.

As we survey the potential wreckage of fifty years of carefully constructed multilateralism, we might perhaps note that the circle around Secretary of State Rumsfeld and the New American Century group, might have come to very different conclusions had they been less overwhelmingly male.

Let me conclude where I started. Power is subtle and so is the ability to use it to shape policy. In seeking to identify female or feminine influence on policy, it is necessary to scan our societies more widely than is perhaps appreciated. When 22nd century historians ask the Bernard Lewis question "What went wrong?", they may ask it not of Islam, but of Western civilisation. They may well conclude that the civilisation became full of hubris, defensive, lost its flexibility and creativity - that, in a phrase, it failed to honour its feminine side.

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