

“POWER AND THE PLANET: THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF STEP CHANGE”

An address by Tom Spencer given to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency Boards Conference, “Dunkeld 2005: Environmental Conflicts”

20th September 2005, Dunkeld, Perthshire

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for welcoming me here. Ken (Sir Kenneth Collins) you are too generous in your description of our time together when you chaired the Environment Committee of the European Parliament. Perhaps I should explain that my environmentalism was actually driven by my daughter, then eight years old, who was one of the first generation of English primary school children to be taught about the environment. She would greet me upon my return from Parliament each week with big blue eyes and the question “What have you done for the planet this week, Daddy?” When Ken asked me to come to Perthshire to speak to this conference I wondered how I might justify the environmental footprint to my now adult environmentalist daughter. Or put in less theoretical terms, what might persuade a lazy English Burkean Tory to abandon the beauties of a rural Surrey autumn and the smug joy of driving my newly acquired Toyota Prius? Why should I exchange this bliss for the brutality of BMI’s cabin service to Edinburgh and a dented and rented Mondeo? Some of you may have guessed the answer. If you have ever been chaired by Ken, you develop the habit of saying yes.

Let me give you the real reasons. I associate Scotland with comfort food that I would not dream of eating in England. In particular I am thinking of Mrs Crimble’s Chocolate Macaroons. Secondly I wanted to make the pilgrimage of heresy to Rosslyn Chapel. It was there that I came across both Mrs Crimble’s Chocolate Macaroons and a hundred carvings of the Green Man hidden in the stonework. Thirdly of course I wanted to pay tribute to Green Ken. Should you want to check the carving of the Green Man immediately above the altar to Our Lady, it looks exactly like your Chairman in ferocious mood!

Let me restate those reasons and relate them to the theme of this conference on Environmental Conflict. The macaroons can stand as a symbol for the fact that both I and the planet are losing the battle with growth. There are too many of us on the planet and some of us are too greedy. I make the battle with growth even worse by insisting on gym visits to acquire functionally unnecessary muscles as a form of male display – not unlike our unnecessary expenditure on vast defence budgets. Rosslyn Chapel, where they are next week filming part of the Da Vinci Code, can stand for the way in which we tell stories about spirituality and power in the twenty-first century.

We need to remember that we are in the middle of a paradigm shift from Industrial to the Knowledge Society. Such paradigm shifts always take humanity through violent times. Green Ken can stand for the inventiveness in governance which we will need to respond in time to the environmental challenges which we face. Ken, you were without doubt the most effective Committee Chairman the European Parliament has ever produced. I copied your techniques, if not your style, when I became Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. History will record that you were the green magnet at the centre of the movement in the eighties and early nineties that created the environment policy of the European Union. A small group of Commission officials, NGO activists and MEPs led by you effectively invented it from a standing start.

In inviting me, you reminded me of the incident when a naive American lobbyist for the Global Climate Campaign tried to buy my services both before and after I became Rapporteur on the CO2 Energy Tax in 1990. The lobbyist showed a totally cynical disregard for the general public good, but it was helpful to start my rapporteurship on climate change having been given the game plan of an organisation which he assured me existed to “ensure that no legislation about climate change would reach either American or European statute books”. As the gentleman expressed it to me at the time “ We will deny the science and stress the tax aspect, which should buy us ten years. Afterwards we will just claim that adaptation is the only strategy”. Not a bad summary of what actually happened.

In this afternoon’s debate a participant asked “Will we make it?” My answer is yes – if we can develop the political mechanisms to stop companies such as Exxon successfully slowing down urgently needed environmental legislation. In the same debate Tom Burke said, “The scarcest resource is time”. Time was very much on my mind as I bathed my first granddaughter last weekend. She was born on 1st May 2005 and will have a good chance of seeing out the whole of the twenty-first century. I could not help but wondering where the Gulf Stream will be when she is a grandmother. Our core problem is that traditional politics does not give us time to beat the vested interests by traditional democratic processes. This is why I spend energy on what I call “the Public Affairs of Step Change” – a vital conflict that we must win.

Part of the challenge is to side-step the weakness of Environment Ministries and use the language of security to promote environmental legislation. Since I left Parliament I have devoted time to the Institute for Environmental Security in The Hague. Politicians in liberal democracies now compete not with promises of prosperity, but with promises to protect us from external threats in a ‘time of fear’. We need to recognise that environmental public affairs covers a much wider scope than before.

It is a mistake to think of climate change as something unrelated to other policies. Climate change will drive mass migration from fragile societies, most notably in the Arab world. I commend the work of a Swedish social scientist, Dr Leif Ohlsson at Gothenburg University, who has described the dynamic of displaced young males in mega-cities, who no longer have a secure place in a traditional society by which to define their maleness. Their insecurity-driven violence against society in general, and women in particular, fuels fundamentalism. Such fundamentalism in all religions is a modern phenomenon driven by fear of secularism. The combination of climate change and male displacement is a potent recruiting sergeant for radical Islam.

Incorporating China into a sane global environmental system is another huge challenge which our generation faces. We know how to do it as regards climate change, by adopting a form of “Contraction and Convergence” as put forward by The Global Commons Institute. This relationship between China and the USA is crucial, but we must remember that it covers all policy areas. I am distressed to see that the rise of China is now being used in America to justify the next round of defence spending.

We face a ‘catch 22’ in democratic societies. We have created economic globalisation without a matching political structure, and have thus left ourselves few ways of restraining turbo-capitalists intent on short run profit maximisation. The answer must be stronger frameworks of global governance. Two years ago there were those who saw a benign US hegemony as an alternative to global governance. I would feel more comfortable about this but for the strange twists in US politics that have brought the fundamentalist Christian Right to a position of power. The combination of ‘faith-driven’ policies and ‘money-driven’ vested interests does not bode well for American leadership. Many American fundamentalists seem to believe that environmental degradation is God’s will as revealed in Revelation. Sadly, every time the US public affairs system has been reformed to make it more transparent, it has ended up perversely making it more open to the brute power of money.

What progress can we make therefore on the public affairs of step change? Can we create instruments to buy out or circumvent vested interests who currently have the power to impose unacceptable delay? The case of tobacco is not encouraging. Despite a fifty-year campaign and millions of ‘victims’, legal moves have only succeeded in denting the total figures for tobacco consumption world wide. I make no judgment on the ethics of tobacco smoking, unlike climate change this is an activity which smokers pursue from choice. No individual can give up a disrupted climate. The Common Agricultural Policy was traditionally designed for and run by big farming vested interests. Ken and I were involved in LUFPIG (the Land Use and Food Parliamentary Inter Group). After thirty years of similar efforts we have reformed perhaps 50% of the abuses of the system. In the early nineties, Sir Fred Catherwood, as Chairman of LUFPIG, proposed a bond which would replace the subsidies to big farmers. It would have made commercial sense for the farmers to accept it and would have led to a long-term reduction in public expenditure. This kind of idea is crucial to step change, which is where time meets money and power. An after dinner speech is perhaps not the best environment in which to discuss Discounted Cash Flow and Net Present Value. However where you have an end point, such as the effective exhaustion of oil or a time limit, you can create a financial mechanism. It should not be beyond the wit of man to turn the shareholders of Exxon into allies for climate legislation. This kind of inventiveness in governance is essential if we are to give politicians new options. We can no longer just stand wringing our hands about the short time horizons of elected politicians.

This afternoon’s debate rightly shied away from a generalised pessimism to ask “what can Scotland do?” As an Englishman, who was brought up to believe with Cecil Rhodes, that “To be born English is to win first prize in the lottery of life”, I do not lightly commend your debate this afternoon. It showed that mixture of intelligence, education and devotion to public service which makes the English jealous of aspects of the intellectual climate in Scotland. You should not underestimate your influence

on matters of money, technology and power. What is more, while we have this strange system of 'asymmetrical federalism', you can try things which the rest of the United Kingdom is not ready for. Furthermore in the remaining years of Scots domination of Her Majesty's Government, you are well placed to advocate new and creative mechanisms of financial governance.

At the European Centre for Public Affairs we are much concerned with process. I think in particular of Decision Mapping®, one lesson of which is that often you cannot solve a problem by doing the same thing better. Rather you have to try doing a better thing. So my advice is to look for that better something here in Scotland and then trumpet it to the world.

Let me warn you however that in our globalised world things are not always as they seem. Courtesy of Ken's work on consumer labelling, I discover that Mrs Crimble's Macaroons, sold to me by Rosslyn Chapel as the essence of Scots cuisine, are not made in Edinburgh. In fact they are produced in Odiham, ten miles from my home in Surrey!

In a globalised world in the middle of paradigm shift we are swamped in information. We are rich in knowledge, but we are short of wisdom. History teaches us that wisdom grows best from coherent societies of a certain size. Scotland is one of those societies. Come up with a single good idea and I will be able to justify today's footprint to my daughter.

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