



PROPHET OR PROFIT?

Speech to the Round Table on “Profit and Values: Bio-Environment – Bio-Culture”,
organised by Biopolitics International Organisation, London Money Show

Saturday 19th November 2001

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen, My Dear Agni.

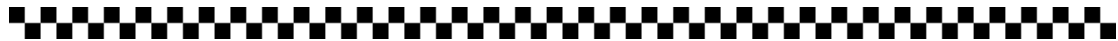
It has long been my belief that parliamentarians have a key role to play as "story tellers to the tribe". Let me therefore start by telling you a story that was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 this week. The English have many strange traditions involving the meeting of experts. One such meeting took place this week. It was a gathering of apple experts in the West Country. A gentleman in his seventies arrived bearing a large golden apple. None of the experts could identify it. He told them that he owned one tree that produced these apples. He gave the apple to an expert, who offered to identify it from the national apple records. Before he vanished into the night, without leaving a name or address, he was asked what the apple was called in his village. Such is the richness of homophones in the English language, that it was not clear from his reply whether the apple was known as a Prophet or a Profit. Research later indicated that this was an apple last seen by the experts in 1944. I enjoy the thought that the nation's apple experts are now desperately seeking an unknown old gentleman, who holds the key to the survival of an endangered part of the planet's biodiversity!

How wise of Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis to invite us to debate profit and values at the London Money Show. I now spend my life examining the consequences of our ability as a species to create an economic globalisation without matching political institutions. My prime motivation in this is to find a political way in which we may limit the damage which our arrogance is doing to the stability of the biosphere.

As a Member of the European Parliament for fifteen years, I became increasingly aware of the accelerating rate of such damage. I was one of the founders of GLOBE (Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment) and was the President of GLOBE International in succession to Al Gore from 1994 to 1999. GLOBE is a network of environmentally committed parliamentarians with shared values which transcend their different nationalities and ideologies. There are GLOBE groups in the European Parliament, the US Congress, the Japanese Diet and the Russian Duma. The network has now spread into the national parliaments of Europe and outwards into other nations of the world, including a vigorous GLOBE Southern Africa with 120 members in nine parliaments. GLOBE and Biopolitics International are both innovative institutions seeking to fill the gaps in mankind's political structures at global level. GLOBE set out to provide a network of friends who could tell each other the truth and would collaborate to take political action. We invaded the secret world of global treaty making. There were forty of us in Kyoto for the crucial Climate Change talks which led to the Kyoto Protocol, and eighty of us in Buenos Aires for the follow-up a year later. We sought to exercise the parliamentary right of oversight beyond our national boundaries. It seems right to me that parliamentarians, who are expected to ratify treaties in their national parliaments, should have an input into the preparation of international treaties. It seems equally sensible that parliamentarians, who vote the budgets for the institutions of global governance, should cross-examine and question international civil servants. This principle extends beyond environmental treaties. As a parliamentarian I was involved in the World Trade Organisation. I am pleased to see that that organisation is now developing a quite effective range of parliamentary organs. I am currently advising the World Bank on how to strengthen its Parliamentary Network. I am also working with colleagues to see what we can do to create an electronic, 'e-Parliament'. Such institutions will not exercise the full range of parliamentary activities that we have become used to in our national democratic systems. However the fact that we cannot fully mimic our national democracy does not mean that we should abandon all our international activities to the undemocratic dominion of civil servants and experts, intermittently assisted by self-appointed civil society. It may not be a full polis, but we can create an analogue polis that replicates part of parliamentary oversight.

The need to equip the planet with a more democratic system is made more urgent by the events of September 11. The outrages in America remind us that we do not live in a homogenous or a secular world. They should also remind us that an economic globalisation, without political institutions, deprives us of the means to anticipate and to respond before tensions become explosive. I do not believe in Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations', but we could well blunder into disasters if our vision of the world is purely secular. I am honoured to be involved in a small way with the work of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. I am helping to organise the fourth Religion, Science and Environment Symposium in the Aegean in June next year. The Symposium will depart from Corfu and visit Albania, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia, before turning to Ravenna and Venice. At the conclusion of the Symposium, we intend to issue the Venice Commitment addressed to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002. Contact with the world of Orthodoxy, and its particular approach to the environment, has been one of the most important experiences of my life. It was the Patriarch who declared abuse of the environment to be a sin and who has shown how the churches can lead the way in influencing public policy.

It is values that breathe life into institutions, but as bin Laden has shown us it is also values that can erupt into war. In the middle of the last century it was rightly said that "the twenty first century will be spiritual or it will not be". I do not suppose that we then realised quite how literally accurate that saying is. Faced with the various threats to our climate and to our political stability, up to and including nuclear terrorism, we risk losing all our riches. I want society to continue to be rich in monetary terms, but also to be rich in biodiversity, in stability and in spirituality. All our future hangs on our ability to understand both profit and profit.



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