

SEPTEMBER 11TH: FROM QUESTIONS TO ANSWERS?

Speech to the Dutch Professional Organisation for Public Affairs

Nieuwspoort Parliament Buildings, The Hague, 7th November 2001

It is appropriate that we should be meeting tonight in the press centre attached to the Dutch Parliament to discuss the impact of the events of September 11th on the conduct of public affairs. The attacks on America were a shock for the political systems of the whole democratic world, not just for Washington. In its fifteen years of existence the European Centre for Public Affairs has sought to be a “safe space” in which the elements of the political world could meet and discuss in an independent manner and with a degree of academic rigour. From the moment of our founding, we rejected the idea of a world divided between government and lobbyists. It has always been our view that journalists and the media, lobbyists, both from civil society and from the corporate sector, and ministers, members of parliament and civil servants all form part of one seamless political world. They have the same fascination with power and with process. They are intimately and umbilically linked. The ECPA is proud of its independent status. It is not owned or financed by governments. It is not formally part of any one university. It is not a trade association of large corporations, nor is it a concealed consultancy. It is a focus for research, debate and publication. It is a think tank and a source of training programmes, both public and customised. It remains true to its mission statement in recording, analysing and improving the conduct of public affairs.

With this holistic view of the political world, it is a natural function for the ECPA to take the lead in assessing the impact of the events of September 11th on all the elements of the political world. Jointly with the Public Affairs Newsletter, I am pleased to announce tonight that we will be hosting a Seminar at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House in London on 9th January. We are gathering together four panels of experts and around one hundred participants to seek to come to some initial conclusions. We do not believe that we have the answers. We do believe that such a gathering will be in a good position to ask the right questions. We will publish our conclusions in a special supplement of the Public Affairs Newsletter, and will pursue the arguments further at the ECPA Annual Conference in Leuven on 14th February.

It is possible that the events of September 11th will have only a temporary impact on the way in which we conduct ourselves as democracies. It is my personal view however that some aspects of our personal, business and political lives have been changed irreversibly. In my own field of global governance the impact is already clear. Regardless of the political colour or ideology of the administration, the attacks on the World Trade Center have forever changed the psyche of America. The sense of innocence and invulnerability which traditionally marked American attitudes to abroad, has been changed forever. The USA now recognises its need to be involved in multi-lateralist activities in order to safeguard its own national interests. I have no doubt, that when the dust has settled, the immediate collaboration on intelligence gathering, diplomacy and money laundering will widen out to climate change, development policy and the rest. We should not expect this to be an immediate or a coherent evolution but the direction is clear.

The attack on the World Trade Center casts an interesting light on the crisis of the nation state, to which even the greatest power on the planet is seen to be prone. Electorates know that nation states can no longer act with total independence. September 11th has simultaneously reminded electorates of why they need states and of the limitations of state power acting alone. The emergence of a powerful external threat, albeit of a non-traditional nature, anchors the political systems of the democracies in a way that we have not seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall. To take only one example from the politics of the European Union, we can already see clearly the impact of Osama bin Laden on Justice and Home Affairs policies.

None of this is to suggest that we should fall into the easy nonsense of Samuel Huntingdon’s thesis on the Clash of Civilisations. The threat to the democracies comes not from Islam, but from the nature of certain fundamentalisms. Karen Armstrong in “The Battle for God” makes a powerful case that the

revival of fundamentalism in the twentieth century is a modern phenomena in response to the emergence of largely secular political systems across the planet. She points to the intimate parallels between Islamic, Judaic and Christian fundamentalists and their less well recognised brothers in radicalised Hinduism and Buddhism.

This spiritual and philosophical consequence of our secular globalisation has too often been crowded out of public consciousness by the campaign slogans of the anti-globalisers. They have however drawn attention to the cultural dimensions of globalisation, even if they did not identify these specific religious consequences. They do not deserve to be one of the victims of bin Laden's attack, but he has undoubtedly "rained on their parade". September 11th not only marks the re-valuation of the usefulness of the state as opposed to the domination of corporations. It also marks a sharp end to the period between Seattle and Genoa, when political conditions favoured the anti-globalisers. The globalisation debate is morphing towards a new emphasis on global governance. In this new phase it is no longer sufficient to be against globalisation, it is now necessary to propose new, robust, and hopefully even democratic, institutions by which the species might live. The Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt recognised this when inviting many of the anti-globalisers to a Presidency Conference in Ghent on 30th October. However the need to make positive recommendations is much more difficult for a diverse coalition than is the emotionally satisfying chanting of slogans against an ill defined globalisation. There are new constraints for ngos of all kinds in the world of "radical insecurity" in which they, as the rest of the political world, must now operate.

We do not know whether the world of 2002 will revert to look like its predecessor on September 10th. It is at least possible however that the events will leave a widely felt desire to incorporate more of an ethical dimension into the réal politique of world affairs. How for instance is the debate about corporate social responsibility and new definitions of social partnership to develop. Will it be seen as a central concern of business and government in the new era; or will it be dismissed as the pleasant fantasy of a prosperous decade?

What are the likely responses of business? Some will undoubtedly be dictated by a deepening recession. Others will be influenced by a sense that the public perception of business' role in the world has changed. Will this lead to more global organisation of public affairs? Will there be more meetings or fewer? Will there be larger public affairs budgets or will they be more constrained? In recent weeks, I have come across examples of CEOs ordering wholesale reviews of their public affairs strategy. In several cases these have involved cutting traditional detailed involvement in trade associations and investing instead in a broader enhancement of the CEO's ability to understand the world in which he or she now has to operate. There are consequences from all this for the public affairs consultant. Will they need to be more specialist? Will they be expected to show a greater understanding of global institutions and global politics? For those involved in the four large groups, ultimately owned by American advertising agencies, which now dominate the European industry, will there be a need to reassert the importance of the local within the overall context of the global?

The tragedy of September holds up a harsh mirror to our political world and to those of us who work within in it in whatever capacity. I repeat that the ECPA does not believe that it has the answers. We do believe that it is right to ask the questions. I invite you to join us in this process at Chatham House on 9th January and in Leuven on 14th February.



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