

“To Give in To the Protesters Would be to Turn Democracy on its Head”

So responded an angry Tony Blair to suggestions that summits like the G-8 meeting in Genoa should not take place in view of the violence and bloodshed. Blair, defiant as ever, insists that the protesters are preventing democratically elected world leaders from carrying out their day-to-day business of making the world a better and safer place. He vehemently denies that he and other political leaders are out of touch and insists the protesters are seeking to turn democracy on its head. But such statements only serve to underline the extent to which Blair has already lost touch with reality. For he assumes that genuine ‘democracy’ still exists; an assumption which could cost us all dearly in the months and years to come unless politicians take appropriate action very soon. Indeed, quite unbeknown to Mr. Blair – though not to many who shun the ballot box in droves - democracy has *already* been turned on its head and can no longer be said to exist by any reasonable definition of the word.

Now he and other politicians - and perhaps many readers – will at first scoff at such a statement. After all, we have elections, don’t we? Indeed we do. And they’re free and fair, aren’t they? Indeed they are. But does that necessarily mean we have ‘democracy’? For democracy surely implies not just the *mechanics* of free and fair elections but the ability of different political parties to choose and, if elected, to implement their freely chosen manifestos. On the face of it, this may appear to be the case. But we need to probe a little deeper to uncover some of the reasons for the protests in Genoa, Gothenburg, Davos and at almost every other major summit meeting since Seattle in December 1999. And this disaffection is just the festering tip of a very large iceberg. For underlying these high-profile protests lies a widespread and deepening public disengagement from party politics as evidenced by ever-lower voter turnouts in elections around the world. This is something our Tony should know well, having himself been recently re-elected by only 42% of the vote with a turn-out of just 58%; the lowest since 1929. To my reckoning, that means only 25% of those eligible voted for him. So why all the disaffection when the mechanics of democracy seem to be in good working order?

The ‘Hidden-Hand’ of Global Competition

The answer, quite simply, is because today’s competitive global economy subtly yet effectively reduces the span of feasible policy options open to national governments. Today we live in a global and largely borderless economy where capital and transnational corporations freely move wherever profits are highest, costs lowest and where governments live in fear of the ‘reaction’ of global markets. No government can now impose higher taxes or regulations on corporations for fear of them moving employment elsewhere. Similarly, governments seeking to impose protective environmental or labour legislation would be seen by global financial markets as ‘uncompetitive’, prompting instant punishment through devaluation, capital flight, inflation and unemployment. Even the mooting of such policies would cause the computers of market traders to instantly move capital to some other economy offering an environment ‘more conducive to business needs’. Democracy presupposes that political parties can freely represent a wide diversity of public opinion and consequently a wide range of feasible policies covering the entire political spectrum. But globally competitive markets now represent a sinister ‘hidden hand’ which narrows the policy parameters to what has now become a highly restricted, business-friendly stance which excludes all those restorative policies traditionally espoused by the political Left to balance social and environmental concerns against those of business.

So at a time when the gap between rich and poor is at its greatest, when job security is at its weakest and when the Left around the world should consequently be at the peak of its effectiveness, it instead finds

itself struggling for oxygen as global markets have created a political-economic environment in which traditional centre-left policies have become impractical. And for any political party, impractical policies inevitably spell political redundancy and a loss of public support. For voters are not stupid. They certainly know that their nation cannot ignore world markets or the wider international economic environment. They know that their jobs depend to an increasing degree on their nation's competitiveness in world markets. Consequently, they are encouraged to align their votes with whichever party they perceive as most likely to maintain it. In the struggle against redundancy, therefore, the Left had little option but to shed those traditional policies of social equity and environmental protection; the policies that once defined its socialist and potentially green identity. Parties such as Old Labour or its counterparts in other countries have thus been forced to re-position themselves under the cover of 'Third Way' or other appropriate spin more towards the right: just where the competitive dictates of global markets determine that they or any other party seeking power must be.

The Lights go Down

It is as if democracy could be portrayed as a theatre stage with politicians and their parties as the actors spread across the stage from left to right. In genuine democratic conditions, the spotlights would light the entire stage giving the audience (i.e. the electorate) a clear and illuminated view or choice across the entire political spectrum. The hidden hand of fierce competition between nation states engendered by globally mobile capital and corporations has however interfered with the lighting system such that only the right half of the stage remains illuminated leaving the left in total darkness and its actors invisible. Both the actors finding themselves shrouded in darkness and the electorate seeing a restricted stage thus unwittingly and automatically shift their stance or gaze towards the illuminated area of the stage on the right. Whilst the shift of traditional left-of-centre parties towards the right is usually seen merely as a function of party-political expediency, we should be aware of the underlying anti-democratic forces at work. As such, those voters to the left of centre are today effectively deprived of political expression and of their democratic rights. So is it any wonder they take to the streets in protest? And with global problems worsening, is it any wonder that increasing numbers all over the world now see our politicians not just as 'out of touch', but out of their tiny minds as they continue to play out this charade while trumpeting it as "democracy"?

Paradoxically, however, it's not just the traditional centre-left that finds itself touched by the 'hidden hand'. As global competition has pushed the parties of the Left gradually to the right, they inevitably adopted most of the economic policies traditionally pursued by centre-right parties. As a result, parties such as the UK Conservatives equally have a problem: the problem of finding themselves displaced and politically redundant as a consequence of the neo-liberal policies their predecessors previously implemented. As former UK Prime Minister John Major once put it: "I went swimming leaving my clothes on the bank and when I came back Tony Blair was wearing them." For underlying the UK Conservative's tussle over the Euro lies an unspeakable and devastating truth which pertains to virtually all the world's centre-right parties: that the main planks of their traditional policy programmes have been quietly appropriated from under their noses by the world's "New Labours". The quasi-dictatorship of transnational capital and international competition, like the hidden hand in a puppet, has at once emasculated the Conservative Party and now moves deeply within Tony Blair who, like a sick parody of Mrs. Thatcher, now touts much the same business-friendly policies merely 'spun' in different clothing. So *this*, it seems, is Mr. Blair's upside down definition of "democracy".

Out with a Bang: Pseudo-Democracy Replaces Democracy

Indeed democracy could now better be described as 'pseudo-democracy': an illusion of democracy in which whatever party we elect, the policies delivered inevitably conform to market and corporate demands at the expense of society and the environment. Under such circumstances, it simply no longer

matters much which party we vote for or whether we bother to vote at all. As records for low voter turnouts in elections around the world are broken with increasing frequency, it is evident that politicians who took it upon themselves to de-regulate capital flows have only themselves to blame. Yet instead they bemoan the public's "lack of political engagement" in so-called "democratic processes" when it is they themselves who have hollowed out democracy by unwittingly giving power over to the quasi-dictatorship of transnational capital and international competition. Indeed, genuine democracy went out with a bang back in the 1980s: the much-vaunted "Big Bang" of Reagan-Thatcher financial market de-regulation.

Putting Democracy Back on its Feet

So with Democracy now already standing firmly on its head and politicians having unwittingly become the pseudo-democratic puppets of transnational capital, Blair and other political leaders would do well to listen carefully to what the protesters are saying. If politicians want the protests to stop and wish to lead us once again according to genuine democratic principles, they must co-operate with one another to expose and disarm the 'hidden hand' of transnational capital and corporations and the intense international economic competition which prevents them from solving mounting global problems. They must co-operate to re-impose capital controls and higher taxes and environmental standards on corporations. They must co-operate to use the revenues raised to fund development and higher social and environmental standards in the Third World on a debt-free basis. They must cancel Third-World debt. They must co-operate to impose the necessary restraints on their industries to reduce emissions. They must co-operate to ensure mutual security for all the world's nations and so remove the massive waste of the bulk of military spending. They must use the savings to help the Third World out of poverty and to arrest rampant population growth, the spread of Aids and other deadly diseases. And in doing so, they will assuredly put democracy back on its feet. But in a globally competitive world, how are our leaders to achieve such goals? How can they fulfil their proper roles to lead the world from destructive competition to fruitful co-operation in which the good of each nation is contained in the good of all? What basis for co-operation could be found which provides the necessary means of delivering those objectives?

Radically innovative yet practical ideas are now surfacing which show how politicians, the growing body of civil society activists, and disaffected voters can begin to find answers to these questions. And the protesters, too, are in need of coherent answers. For applying pressure through protest alone is likely to prove futile unless politicians can be offered a clear and practical way of releasing themselves from the tyranny of the hidden hand of global competition. One such proposal is expressed in the initials 'SP' -- the Simultaneous Policy -- a new and achievable way of removing the barriers of fear and destructive competition which today prevent us all from finding solutions.

John Bunzl – Founder and Director

International Simultaneous Policy Organisation (ISPO)

© 2001. John M. Bunzl.

P.O. Box 26547, London SE3 7YT, UK.

SP Campaign Website: www.simpol.org E-Mail: info@simpol.org

Copies of "*Reform the WTO! – But Where are the Ideas?*" are available from ISPO at the above address. A full explanation of the Simultaneous Policy (SP) campaign is set out in "*The Simultaneous Policy – An Insider's Guide to Saving Humanity and the Planet*" by John Bunzl. Copies available from the above address.