SOFT SPOTS AND HARD MESSAGES – G8

Ok, I have a soft spot for the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anyone who will stand up and describe this week's G8 Summit, in Edinburgh as a meeting at which the leaders of the world's richest and most powerful nations decide what they might do with the crumbs off the table, isn't pulling any punches.

In measured tones, he was no less robust with the press critics, who argue it is irresponsible to urge people to turn up and 'overload Edinburgh' for the event.

The Archbishop proudly described the process of turning up as the "solidarity of witness"; a way in which those in richer nations can stand as the surrogate presence of a justice agenda that will not go away. For all the major churches in Britain to commit themselves to be there in the 'Make Poverty History' lobby is no small measure of what is happening around us.

This is our zeitgeist. As yet, we barely recognise the scale of changes it will demand. One measure of the change was seen on British television last weekend. In a film, produced for the BBC but destined for a wider cinema audience, Richard Curtis' 'The Girl in the Café' took people into the G8 and the global poverty agenda through a different route.

Curtis is not a political writer. His previous films – Four Weddings and a Funeral, Notting Hill, Love Actually – are all clever, mainstream, entertainment movies. At one level, so too is 'the Girl in the Café'. But behind the funny, awkward, endearing love story is the broken glass of a question. How do we explain away the 30,000 people who die each day from avoidable consequences of global poverty? The question stalked its way through the film as pervasively as it will stalk the streets of Edinburgh; a question no longer strident, just immovable.

The global poverty question will certainly be addressed by the G8. What is not guaranteed is that it will be addressed honestly.

The cynical scenario is this; the (Washington) Consensus between free-marketeers in the US and UK administrations has already fixed the 'debt cancellation' deal so that they can steal far more than they give. World leaders will emerge from the Summit announcing a plan to cancel up to $30 billion of Third World debts. It will amount to around $2 billion a year, when the UN report from Jeffrey Sachs told us that $25 billion a year was the amount Africa needs. It will be a triumphal celebration of the redistribution of crumbs at the end of another fortified feast of the abundantly rich.

What will make G8 leaders even happier is that the deal will make them richer still. Debt relief will be tied to conditionalities that are usually described as 'good governance' conditions. Scratch the surface and you discover this means little more than privatisation.

Latin America has already had a large scale slice of such 'gifts' in World Bank/IMF development programmes that brought havoc (and in the case of Argentina, collapse) to their economies. Privatisations of water, energy, pensions and public services were standard requirements of aid packages. Now they are set to be the standard requirement of debt relief. Africa will shudder at the cost.

When Uganda received World Bank funding, state industries had to be privatised in an unseemly fire-sale of assets. Resources worth over $500 million were sold for around $2 million. Not satisfied with this, the World Bank came back with further demands for the sale of water, agricultural services and its commercial bank.

It is an approach once described by the economist J K Galbraith as 'horse and sparrow' philosophy; belief that if you feed vast amounts of grain to the horse, some of it will pass straight through and feed the sparrow on the ground. Conditionalities are merely the demand from northern countries and corporations for 'more grain'.

G8 leaders will also claim that conditions are needed to root out corruption in Africa, so that resources reach the poor rather than Africa's oligarchs. It is a fair point that sours quickly when you ask who pays the bribes or colludes with the corruption in the first place?

At least $180 million of back door payments were made to Nigerian officials in a natural gas project that went to Halliburton (the US oil corporation) and its UK arm, Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR).

For years the companies denied any dishonesty. Only when someone blew the whistle on the deal was a full scale international investigation undertaken. In 2004, KBR's Chief Executive in the USA was sacked for receiving kickbacks. Monies paid into Swiss Banks were promised to be returned.

Those involved in bribery in the West are described as 'rogue elements'. Those involved in Africa are branded 'corrupt administrations'. Britain and America, the World Bank and the IMF, continue to give companies export credit guarantees and lucrative development contracts. In Africa, governments will be told that the answer to corruption is to transfer assets to the companies who would pay the bribes in the first place.

Britain and America will claim to occupy the moral high ground of a corruption-free era of anti-poverty programmes. Behind the scenes, however, we will continue to avoid ratifying the UN Convention against Corruption. Why? Because it is our own corporations who do the corrupting.

Rather than disrupt the cosiness of corporate corruption, world leaders will attempt to get anti-poverty protestors to join a bandwagon that will only make the rich richer. It is the illusion that Africa will be 'saved' by free-trade and the removal of subsidies in the North.

Free-traders like to compare the $20 a day subsidy given to the ubiquitous cow in Scotland; with the $2 a day that 3.7 billion people struggle to live on. It is a nice comparison, but a false one.

In the USA and Europe, the fault with food subsidies is that they are really corporate subsidies. Over 70% of CAP payments go to the richest 20% of Europe's farm barons. The same is true of payments out of the US Farm Bill. Two thirds of US farmers receive nothing at all and three quarters of Europe's farmers survive on less than £5,000 a year.

The issue is not subsidies to sustainable farming but subsidies to corporate greed. As agribusiness casts its eye on the developing world it is with a view to extending its ownership of the food chain, not in increasing the supply of food or wealth to the poor.

The cynical truth is this: trade liberalisation is simply about freeing the poor to feed the rich. Two thirds of the countries facing drought or famine continue to export food throughout their crises. Day after day, their hunger fills our supermarket shelves. They do so to earn the hard currency to pay off the loans we have given them. And every season in which they produce more, world commodity prices fall and farm workers receive less.

We have been here before. In the 1970s and 80s world gluts of coffee, tea, cocoa and banana made monopoly food-traders in the North phenomenally rich, and small farmers in the South increasingly poor. To presume that the outcome would be any different if we could fill our winter tables with larger portions of mange-touts, baby carrots, green beans, sun-blush tomatoes, strawberries and salads, is the height of self-delusion. We will not make poverty history until Africa has the right to feed itself before it feeds us.

This demand becomes an imperative when placed alongside the other issue on the G8 agenda – the one it will almost certainly duck - climate change.

For decades, rich nations have ignored warnings that climate change would be a revolution of small changes. We sit bemused by events that flip from torrential downpours to sudden heatwaves. The underlying pattern, though, is a looming crisis in water supply. Droughts in California and Spain go hand in hand with the sequence of hurricanes in Florida and flash floodings in Italy and Britain. Water that bombards us fails to replenish our reservoirs. The economics of over-production in the West is no longer sustainable. But anyone who thinks the answer is in freeing the South to feed the hunger of the North is living in cloud cuckoo land. What becomes hotter and dryer in the North just becomes unbearable in the South.

We all have to reach out for a new era of sustainable economics; no longer globalised in its presumptions but regionalised and localised in what it sustains. This century will require us to live lightly within our means, if we are to live through it at all. It is a different North-South agenda, a different 'solidarity of witness', that embraces the politics of inter-dependence.

None of the leaders at the G8 wish to face this. They will ignore the fact that, at $60 a barrel, rising oil prices make presumptions about increased global trade look pretty fanciful. They will not relate this to tomorrow's cost of (oil-based) agricultural fertilisers, nor to the demands for oil (and water) in China, India and Africa, nor to the climate change effects of accelerating fuel consumption.

Only outside, on the streets of Edinburgh, will the urgency of this be understood. Inside the bunker the banquet will continue; business as usual, a feast of fools.

Outside, those who know the score are already re-writing the script.