

THE DAY WE ALL LOST



I am going to give today a miss. News coverage will no doubt be dominated by makeover explanations of the EU election results in Britain and the Reagan funeral in America . I can already feel the nausea of organised dishonesty beginning to overwhelm me.

No matter who gets what seats in the Euro elections, we will all have lost. As an exercise in democracy it carried less appeal than the Norwegian entry in the Eurovision Song Contest. The major political parties struggled to get their own supporters to vote for them on a European ticket, and will now engage in point scoring over who lost least/most to UKIP and the BNP. The anti-war parties will bemoan their fragmentation and the unwillingness of a disillusioned electorate to illegal war and occupation of Iraq into a positive protest vote.

Only in the dying hours of the European election campaigns did we get a sliver of a debate on anything that touched on the really big issues we will have to address at a local, national and European level. Even this was something of an accident.

Parliament happened to be debating the Air Transport White Paper and a row broke out between the Minister and the Environmental Audit Select Committee over ozone damage from the dramatic growth in air travel. The argument died somewhere in disputed statistics and claims that it could all be covered by 'carbon credits' and 'emissions trading'. Only once did I hear a protagonist explain that this was the politics of the mad house; that already climate change has thrown more challenges at us than we know how to deal with. Unless we face this, and make conventional economics subservient to environmental sustainability, there will be no conventional economics that survives the 21 st century.

None of this turned up in the debate in Parliament. Elected representatives of the planet Zog queued up to say that airport expansions were absolutely necessary for their local economy. Subjecting aviation fuel to the same tax regime as other fuels would, they claimed, only play into the hands of airports at Frankfurt , Schippol or Charles de Gaulle, all of which were all waiting to pinch our industry. And as for cheaper flights...These are a political totem pole no serious party leader would dare to attack. Across the water, en route to his final curtain call, Ronald Reagan could hardly have wished for a more fitting send off.

Let me leave aside Reagan's sponsorship of terrorism in Latin America , his support for the apartheid regime in South Africa and his conscious decision to help the Mujahaddin into a safe haven for Bin Laden. Reagan's greatest crime was to unleash a neo-liberal 'greed-fest' in the 80's that the world is still being consumed by today.

In the 30 years before Thatcher and Reagan launched the globalisation free-for-all, per capita income had grown in Latin American countries by 73% and in Africa by 34%. In the 20 years that followed real incomes in Latin America virtually stood still whilst in Africa , incomes actually fell by 23%. Levels of

literacy and life expectancy have gone the same way.

Today, politicians from around the world will pay tribute to Reagan as the great communicator for capitalism. His 'gift' of free trade fundamentalism is, however, the greatest indictment of him.

Globalisation has turned the world into a Death Star, driven by the over consumption of finite resources and uncomprehending of the Force (of nature) that will destroy it.

Free trade rules have become means whereby transnational corporations steal from individual nations. At this week's G8 discussions in fortress conditions on Sea Island, Georgia, great play will be made of the \$90 billion package of debt cancellation to be offered to the world's poorest nations. No mention will be made of the 'conditionality' terms attached to the offer. These amount to wholesale privatisation of their economy; a fire sale of all the essential resources of their lands. Productive assets may be of some significance in this corporate re-colonisation of the South, but the essentials they demand are the ownership of energy and water.

Politicians may live in denial that the everlasting feast is about to be disrupted but the boardrooms of greed have long been on the case. The privatisation of water and electricity generation in many of the poorer nations has usually doubled the charges to the poor and provoked massive civil conflict. The EU already has 'requests' for rights to bid for water services in 72 countries, many of which are candidates for the debt cancellation offer. It looks as though the EU is also set to join the USA in demanding that all water services be included in GATS and turned into competitive markets. No wonder, when you look at the water crisis we are consuming our way into.

Only 3% of the world's water is fresh, and only 1% of this is accessible. Yet our consumption of water has quadrupled in the last 60 years. In the developing world, the UN predicts a 150% growth in water demands in major cities during the next 20 years, but the water isn't there. In northern China, the Yellow River hasn't even made it to the sea in 5 out of the last 10 years.

In Australia there is talk of towing icebergs from the Polar Regions to relieve some their water stress. The US government wants to buy the contents of Canada's Arctic rivers to supply Los Angeles. Israel is looking to drill through into the aquifers of its Arab neighbours. And China has already begun to build a 750 mile channel to take water from the Yangtze so as to refill the Yellow River.

Oil is not the only natural resource that wars will be fought over. Water will follow and food security will too. The combination of these issues clamours for a new politics, beyond globalisation and the era of corporate feudalism it will otherwise lead us into. The neo-liberal, free-for-all needs to be buried with Reagan before it buries us all. What must replace it is the politics of interdependency. This is the political space that cries out for leaders worth following.

Look at just one cameo of what this might mean. We know that at the moment the world consumes 6 barrels of oil for every new barrel we discover. We know too that economic expansion in the South will double the demand side with or without an al Qaida price effect. The era of cheap oil is dead.

The 21st century will have to be driven by a different (renewable) energy agenda, but it will also have to learn to trade differently. Huge amounts of fossil fuel goes in shipping goods from one side of the planet to the other. Invariably, cheap oil has been used to underpin a process whereby the poor feed and

clothe the rich before they can feed and clothe themselves. Add 'water content' into this equation and you also see huge water transfers from poor to rich.

As the UN has tried to tell us, these water transfers also leave a legacy of poisoned lands and rivers, contaminated by the industrial scale production that agribusiness has brought to the South in order to feed the North. Rather than debt cancellation the South ought to be offered a programme of environmental reparation. But how would we pay for it?

Back in the Commons, airport expansionists argued that we could not tax aviation fuel because other countries would not do so and Britain would lose out. If they are right then the aviation fuel tax has to be global rather than local. The body that could do this is the World Bank, but it has no incentive to do so whilst its funding comes from nation states. It is caught in the same trap as proposals for a Tobin tax on speculative capital movements.

Put the World Bank on notice that its future funding will no longer come from nation states, and that is to have a remit that uses global eco-taxation to create an environmental level playing field for trade, and you create a different economics that might survive this century. If World Bank officials knew that their own salaries depended on such global eco-taxes. I have no doubt about their ability to have a scheme in place within the week. The most immediate consequence would be to change the way we think.

If food miles had to be paid for we would re-discover the virtues of regional food systems and food accountability. This is what the Slow Food movement across European towns and regions has begun to do. Factor in the water and energy consumption costs and we would then begin to think differently, not just about the 'where' of production, but the 'how'.

What the Slow Food movement has already demonstrated is that this is not about living poorer, but living differently. It is the excitement of creating a different internationalism based on sustainability and interdependency not bulimic consumerism.

As the state funeral lays 'the Gipper' to rest in America today it would be helpful if we also began to lay his greatest folly alongside him. Bury the cowboy with his horse, and let the pair of them argue who got it most wrong.