

# The End of an Era: A Christian Reflection on the Present Moment

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping, came to power in post-Mao China. He keynoted his term of office by announcing that wealth is glorious. The following year Margaret Thatcher came to power in this country. In the course of her years in power she once said that anyone over 26 seen riding on a bus to work must be deemed a failure. In 1980 Ronald Reagan came to power in the United States. He expressed the hope that his country would enable all its citizens to become rich.

This curious trinity of politicians and world leaders are in many ways an icon of how our culture and civilisation have evolved over the last 30 years. We have witnessed the prevailing of neo-Liberal Capitalism over the whole world.

The gap between rich and poor has widened and deepened. We speak now of "the bottom billion".

Our globe is under the domination of the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Treasury of the United States and the Pentagon. In close alliance are the globe's largest transnational banks and corporations. We can get a glimpse of their CEOs and managers when they meet at Davos, Switzerland every January at the World Economic Forum. We get no glimpse at all of the thousands of delegates who attend the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil at the same time.

Never before in the economic history of humankind have we seen the enormous amounts of wealth a system which exploits human labour and depredates the earth can produce. The fundamental ideas which drive that system are Growth and Profits. Every year we must produce more and more wealth, increase profits, expand markets, introduce new "labour-saving" technology etc.

## Our Materialist Culture

Wealth as a human value has insinuated itself into our culture, into the way we feel, think and do things in everyday life. We must have more and more. Many young people are seduced by the ideal of having a lot of money. Our advertising is replete with messages of "borrow, spend, enjoy". We covet the things that say to society how affluent we are. We take comfort in the security our possessions afford us.

The generation which finished schooling in the 1980's grew to maturity in the effervescence of a bubbling international economy where the desire for money was the foundational value. Money could buy anything, including power, influence and prestige. Its enticements hypnotised many and blinded them to the paper-thin reality which surrounded them. Fortunes were made. The system produced about ten to fifteen new billionaires a year. Everything was going up: stocks, property values, bonuses, profits etc. The fever pitch of life did not permit a more detached, dispassionate look at what could happen.

The sector that grew most vigorously was the financial. This is the area whose ethos is based on risk and gamble, usually with other people's money. The years since the 80s were creative of new and complex instruments of speculation which their sellers were scarcely capable of explaining. All they could do was to weave dreams and illusions about the great returns the buyer could obtain. Among the buyers were institutions like banks, pension funds, insurance companies and charities.

When the cataclysm occurred, first in the US and then here as of September 2007, the effect was felt throughout the whole economy. Of course, those who felt the disaster most were the workers, hard pressed mortgage holders and those just coming on to the jobs market. Those who played fast and loose with the funds entrusted to their care somehow managed to escape the worst consequences of their arrogance. Indeed, our politicians are anxious to restore public confidence in the financial sector. The Exchequer derives 15% of its intake from The City.

In light of the above events one could ask if our economy had evolved in such a way that it cannot function without that financial oligarchy. What is the relationship which exists between that oligarchy and our politicians? How does that oligarchy exercise its influence over our leaders? Since the year 2001 important members of the financial sector have contributed hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Labour Party. The same party also receives contributions from the labour unions. How do the conflicting interests of those two sectors become reconciled within the Labour Party?

## The Wider World

Little wonder that that generation did not notice what was happening internationally. In the Middle East the 1980s saw the rise of Saddam Hussein. In his war with Iran he received arms and chemical weapons from this and many other countries of Europe. A few years after that war ended he invaded Kuwait. This provoked the intervention of the US and Britain. The first Gulf war was short. It was followed by sanctions against Saddam's regime. During the almost ten years of sanctions more than 500,000 Iraqi children died, an "acceptable number" according to the US Secretary of State Madeline Albright.

The 80s and 90s were tragic years for the peoples of the Middle East. The extreme situation of poverty and foreign interference bred a form of Muslim extremism that simmered beneath the surface. We did not notice. It was hardly more than a sidebar. We were too busy with other things. We left everything in the hands of our politicians, the military and the intelligence agencies. What a surprise then when the eruption came under the guise of 9/11 in New York and Washington and other terrorist actions in London, Madrid, Bali etc later on.

We ascribe these actions to something in Islamic religion and its sacred texts that motivate and provoke them. We so easily forget a history we seem condemned to repeat. Since 1953 our presence and action in the Middle East has been in function of oil, the protection of Israel and of winning the Cold War. This has meant that we have supported corrupt regimes as long as they could be persuaded to back Western policy. What little support existed for western style democracy quickly melted away. Such a way of acting could not but provoke a severe backlash. We live today in the wake of that backlash and in fear of further vengeance.

## The Present Moment

Two years ago the Paribas Bank of Paris closed the accounts of two hedge funds for lack of capital. The next month, September, queues were forming outside the branch offices of Northern Rock. In 24 hours one billion pounds had been retired by anxious savers. The bubble had burst, the effervescence went flat, a new reality set in.

We have been witnesses these last two years to an apocalyptic trauma in the heart of our society. Somehow a materialistic rot had set in. Somehow we had created a many-headed monster which was no longer satisfied with consuming the world south of the Equator. Now it was turning its attention, Frankenstein-like, to its own creators. Those masters of the universe were now in the thrall of a beast of their own making.

It is virtually impossible to calculate how much has been lost. This is because the calculation is based on paper instruments, not on tangibles such as labour and wages, commodity production, import prices, exchange rates etc. The ngo Stamp Out Poverty has calculated the loss at £1.6tn.

In the first three months of 2008 280,000 people lost their jobs. In the quarter just concluded there were 286,000 redundancies, up by 175,000 on the previous year. Unemployment is up by 592,000 on the previous year. The rate now stands at 7.2 per cent of the population. Pay is down by 0.4 per cent, the first fall since 1991. House repossessions will exceed 50,000 this year.

Since the fall of Northern Rock the British taxpayer has coughed up £359bn to keep the roulette wheel spinning and the Christmas bonuses paid. In our name the government has bailed out numerous banks. Marx and Engels must be dancing in the heavenly banquet halls rejoicing that their long-delayed predictions of capitalism's self-destruction are at long last coming true. Where will the money come from? Will there be funds for mortgage debt relief, relief for those in fuel poverty, for aid which we owe to the poor in justice and charity and solidarity? How will the taxpayer pay for an annual military budget of £33bn, two new aircraft carriers at a cost of £1.5bn each, the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system at a cost of at least £20bn?

The experience of financial meltdown has revealed the existence of an elite band of CEOs, hedge fund managers, investment gurus and high testosterone investment brokers who somehow have not had to tighten their belts and make cuts in their daily budgets. Some have received golden handshakes, golden parachutes, bonuses and retirement plans which have made failure almost as lucrative as success. There is indeed a social stratum in our supposedly egalitarian society which lives in a way which we desire only in our

greediest dream moments. Since 1979 about 30,000 people have arisen to earn more than £500,000 per annum. Their total income is £33bn, more than the value of the economy of Viet Nam with a population of 84mn.

## The Banality of Sleaze

Since the years of Deng, Thatcher and Reagan we have been living in an Age of Excess. The spirit of that age has infected all of us to one degree or another. No one has remained impervious, not least our MPs.

In the last month or so we have become a one-newspaper nation. The Daily Telegraph has been dosing us everyday with information on how our representatives and lawmakers have been using our tax monies to pay for moat maintenance, buying bathplugs and pet food, "flipping", viewing blue movies, gardening etc.

In the grand scheme of our national gross domestic product, our parliamentarians have not spent anywhere near 1 per cent. Yet there is an odour of sleaze about it, a cosy, casual disregard of what is upright, up front and ethical. Something is not quite right when in the context of economic recession, job losses and cuts in public spending etc our elected representatives, our men and women in the corridors of power, our builders of a good society should have acted the way many of them did. They do seem to live on another planet and belong to a different club.

For Christians and others like ourselves who have for years been concerned with world issues like poverty, peace and environmental destruction this is outrageous. We marched for peace in the hope of preventing our leaders taking us to war in our name. We write to our parliamentarians calling attention to situations of injustice. We have been trying to respond to the challenges of a recent Live Simply initiative and have been trying to lighten our carbon footprint.

But before we become self-righteous or judgmental, before we create a scapegoat or take a scalp, maybe we should look at ourselves first. There is a sense in which it is true to say that our MPs are the mirror image of ourselves. It is not a question here of naming names. Each of us has a personal list of those we think were the worst offenders.

What we are confronting here is our ethos, our culture—the way we do things. Our culture is a reflection of what is in our hearts, of how we relate to our neighbours, of how we relate to other peoples, of how we relate to our environment, of how we relate to the most vulnerable etc. A critical look at the above would reveal numerous areas where we are found wanting. We have been blinded by the crass materialism and voracious consumerism of our culture. Yes, we have been generous of time and resources in campaigns to right injustices in the 2/3 World. We have begun to address planetary questions of climate change, peak oil, peak water, rainforest devastation and the fate of the indigenous living closest to the planet's body. We have become aware of the issues surrounding the global aspiration for peace. But closer to home we have been inattentive to the way our politicians have been acting in our name. We have been naïve and too trusting.

## Our Faith Is Our Politics

That may seem an overstatement. But if we understand faith as our experience of being in a loving relationship with God then to believe and to trust is to know ourselves loved by God. And God's love impels us to reach out to others. Politics is the experience of building community on the local, national and international levels. It is the arena where we discuss, debate and build a good and just society. It is the use of our power, personal, communal and international to build up the human in society, in the nation at large and even in the community of nations.

Pope Pius XII called politics one of the highest forms of charity. The Latin American bishops, meeting at Puebla in 1980, called political involvement a way of rendering worship to almighty God. John Wesley once said that the only holiness is social holiness.

We are indeed political animals, not animals in politics. We have forgotten what a noble vocation politics is. We need a different breed of politician, one who is there because she/he feels a deep need to serve society, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Our politicians are servants of the common good. We as people of faith are servants of a Reign not of this world. But that Reign does not prescind from this world. Rather it grows within history's twists and turns, joys and sorrows, and transcends it. When we pray the Our Father, we pray that the Father's will be done on earth as in heaven. When we pray for daily bread, for mutual forgiveness, for the avoidance of evil we pray for relationships which will see to it that everyone eats, that we know how to change our ways, to forgive and be forgiven, that we know how to discern good from evil. The genius of the Our Father is that it proclaims a way of life and fullness that points sacramentally to a God whose name we sanctify and whose will we obey, a will which wants life in abundance for all.

The God we love and serve is a trinity of persons who love each other and who love creation into life and existence. Within that trinitarian community there is no sexism, no classism, no chauvinism, no ageism, no "religionism", no way of relating which establishes an uneven or unjust foundation of community. The Trinity is a perfect model or paradigm of a just society where peace and wholeness are hallmarks. In contrast to what we have heard from our earliest experiences of religious formation, it is not the power of God which is almighty. Almighty is God's love.

As a consequence our political engagement, our politics is one of service. We are like the good shepherd who does not abandon the flock, who knows his people by name and is aware of the pitfalls which can destroy a good society. We are careful not to sell our soul to the power depicted on the coin. Our values open us to a broader horizon and more distant goal.

Our political ministry, then, is prophetic. It speaks truth to power. It is sensitive to the sufferings of the poor and views injustice as an insult to the holiness of God. It can be impatient of the ditherings of religious authorities who insist on presence at the altar of worship. They do not insist their people attend to those whose bodies, temples of the Spirit, are being destroyed by forced migration, by sex trafficking, by enslavement or by other forms of exploitation in the name of our contemporary versions of Mammon, Moloch or Mars.

Finally, our political ministry is priestly—not a word we use of politicians. Priests are bridge builders. As politicians they preside at or facilitate 'workshop', the task of building a just, free and equitable society. They are priests of a people longing, sometimes unconsciously, to be free. They are priests of a creation which is there to benefit everyone in a non-destructive, non-exploitative, sustainable way. They are priests of a humanity which belongs to God alone, not to Caesar.

### Our Shared Vocation to Politics

In a perspective of our shared Faith, we share the same vocation: to follow Jesus Christ in this world, in this society, in this historical moment. We hear the question which the Risen Christ is always asking: who do you say that I am? Christ is Baby P. Christ is the Chinese labourers who drowned in Morecambe Bay. Christ is Stephan Lawrence and other Stephans like him. Christ is the nameless girl of 16 recently trafficked to our country for sex. Christ is the sexually abused even in our own church. Christ is the sufferer of aids. Christ is the homeless elderly dazed by his approaching dementia. Christ is the woman trampled upon in her dignity and sexuality. Christ is the planet wounded and bleeding, gouged by an economic system founded on exploitation and greed.

Politics today in our globalised world where boundaries of nation, religion, class etc are obsolete is the practice of struggling to form a different human being committed to building a new society. It is the practice of creating structures which facilitate the encounter of persons with other persons, with the surrounding community, with organisations of all sorts and with the national community. That encounter is for the creation of a human being and a society which strives for a greater humanity with dignity and freedom.

We cannot have a Parliament which in recent years has seen cash-for-questions, cash-for-honours, cash-for-amendments. We cannot have a public forum which spends seven hours debating going to war in Iraq and 700 hours debating the hunting ban. We cannot let corruption scandals like the bribes paid by BAE to the House of Saud pass uninvestigated.

We cannot have a system in which bribery is the bread and butter of a corrupt elite. We cannot have a nation which dreams of punching above its weight and thus invests billions in war materials. We cannot have a society which does not welcome its newly born nor its newly arrived. We cannot have a community which

is introverted, inattentive to local challenges. We cannot have a church which is insular, self-centred, worried only about its structures and half-empty benches.

## A Final Word

We need to learn about doing politics with an ecological dimension, with a love for our 'earthhome'. We need a politics with a social dimension, aware of a society in pain, divided in places against itself, in conflict, where the vulnerable are exploited. We need a politics with an economic dimension, aware of the tremendous contradictions of a society in which a privileged few earn 60 or more times more than the lowest paid worker. We need a politics underpinned by a different system of ethics, a social ethics based on the dignity of the human person, on the transcendent destination of the human body and on great esteem for the human spirit.

'Culture' is a word related to cult. It seeks to answer the query: Whom do we worship? It is related to spirituality, of what spirit are we? The word is also related to the word 'cultivate'. What field will we till, take care of, nurture. Surely it is about more than making money.

These times of "apocalypse" have revealed a canker in our cultural and spiritual bloodstream. They have revealed who are the sons and daughters of corruption. But they have also revealed who those are who long for change, who are outraged by those who corrupt the body politic, who seek new pathways, explore new ideas, and form new projects. We seek an authentic culture and spirituality which will build up the human, nurture the weak and vulnerable and create economic and political structures which will facilitate the creation of a new humanity.

We have come to the end of an era—perhaps the end of various eras. We are in the last decades of cheap and abundant oil and water. We are in the last decades of the hegemony of the West. Even our church feels the surge of new energies from younger churches of the South. We are in the last decades of the dominance of the US dollar whose chronic decline will have tremendous repercussions throughout the entire world.

But are we in the last decades of crimes against humanity such as sex trafficking and other forms of slavery? Are we in the last decades of a globalised economy in which the bottom billion are languishing? Are we in the last decades of political corruption and other forms of public venality? Are we in the last decades of human-induced planetary degradation? Are we in the last decades of nuclear proliferation?

Down in the depths of the common humanity we share with 6.5 billion others, where the creation groans in the agony of birth pains, where the Spirit prays in words we do not understand, where the poor cry for justice and where Deep speaks unto Deep, can we hear the words of the Christ of Revelation: "Look, I am doing something new"?

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