

## **Reith Lectures 2000: Respect for the Earth**

### **Lecture 1: Governance - Chris Patten – London**

No disrespect is intended to scores of head teachers and thousands of well-scrubbed pupils, but I sometimes think that I have done my full ration of school speech days. The one that I remember most clearly - etched in my memory so that its vivid images return to trouble me again and again - provides a bleak paradigm for this lecture. At the time, I was Britain's Overseas Development Minister, distributor-in-chief of inadequate supplies of Band-Aid to the world's wounded. In the course of my duties, I was in Ethiopia - yet again - but this time to visit the refugees from another country's calamities. There was a savage war between the Islamic north of Sudan and the Christian South. Why do I say "was"? Twelve years later the war grinds bloodily on. Anyway, I was set to visit the refugee camps established for the Sudanese victims of the war just over the border in Ethiopia. A haven in Ethiopia. The mind boggled.

We flew down - the Ambassador, my staff, the man from the British Council and me - from Addis Ababa to the border in a government plane. A couple of weeks later the same plane on the same journey crashed, killing a distinguished American congressman and the rest of the passengers.

We inspected the camp on a sweltering morning - we were hot, wet, and increasingly dark with despair at the sheer misery we witnessed and the implacable evil that had caused it. Most of the refugees were young and male. They had fled their homes and villages, fearing genocidal slaughter, trekking for weeks across a blasted landscape to find relief on the far edge of the Nile flood plain. I asked one little boy how he and his friends - only half of whom had survived the journey - had found their way to safety. "It was simple", he replied, "we followed the bodies".

So they had plotted a path from corpse to corpse through the equatorial wilderness and, safely arrived, the first thing they did was to establish a school. There were about 12,000 pupils waiting for us and they were drawn up in a great circle on the baked mud in the middle of their huts to hear a few words of encouragement from the visiting white minister.

The man from the British Council, that insanely undervalued institution, had demonstrated its worth once again by bringing some footballs that served more purpose than my little homily about the importance of education for a happier future. The self-appointed headmaster, a Protestant pastor, asked if they could all sing for us. We stood there, the sweat dribbling down our red faces, as they sang the Lord's Prayer in their native language, Dinka or Nuer I think. And then I was told they wanted to sing a text from Isaiah. Feet stamping, hands clapping, they chanted the verses. At the time I assumed they were singing about beating swords into ploughshares, but back in the ambassador's bungalow on the hillside above Addis Ababa I thumbed curiously through the Gideon Bible in my bedroom, the fan spinning overhead, to confirm my suspicion. I was wrong. They'd sung Isaiah, Chapter 9, Verse 2 - "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined".

Those thousands of kids had certainly lived in the land of the shadow of death, young citizens of that clutch of ill-fated countries blighted by war, by political breakdown, by environmental disaster and (in a sense) by geography. As David Landes, the author of "The Wealth and Poverty of Nations" argues, "geography ... brings bad tidings", in this case that to live in that tropical or semi-tropical zone between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn - its extreme heat helping to multiply the insects and parasites that sicken and kill - is to struggle against loaded dice. Yet as Landes also argues, no one should regard geography as destiny. We can promote development and even sustain it in the most unpromising conditions if we have the will, if we see the light, if we embrace and abide by a value system both as simple as the words of Isaiah and as richly complex as the inter-connections of our ecological system. It is of course equally true that we can mess up the management of the more favoured zones of our planet if we are sufficiently careless or if public policy and the institutions and values that should sustain it are warped or plain wrong.

The "sustainable development" to which this series of lectures is devoted is a phrase first coined by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment - The Stockholm Conference - in 1972. 15 years later the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development - whose eponymous chairman will be giving one of the later lectures in this series - defined it thus, "to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". I have a friend who puts it rather more simply. "We should live here on earth", he says, "as though we were intending to stay for good, not just visit for the week-end". Most governments these days - the good, the bad and even the ugly - have an Environment Department and an Environment Minister charged with implementing Brundtland. I did the job once myself, sitting at the top of one of the most unattractive buildings in London trying to make Britain a little greener - drafting the first comprehensive White Paper on the subject, negotiating a toughening of the international agreement on halons and chloro-fluorocarbons, trying to reverse (a cyclical struggle this) the attempt to cover England's southern shires with new housing estates and shopping malls. There was more to it than that, probably more than there had been before and certainly less than there should have been, but it all felt a little like "finger in the dyke" stuff.

I think that we understand today that sustainable development is about much more than environment policy defined in terms of departments, ministers and white papers. It requires a mosaic of institutions, policies and values. Mosaic may even be too static a word for what is required; it is really a political eco-system that is needed to save the real one.

Take - because it's the simplest model, not necessarily the most reprehensible - what has too often happened in some of those countries disadvantaged by geography where environmental blight has frequently had the most immediately calamitous consequences for whole populations. The historical pattern that I am going to describe is less unusual than we would like.

About forty years ago, country X gained its independence, after a century of colonial rule that few today would attempt to justify. It inherited, probably fought for, a model pluralist constitution. There was a bi-cameral parliament fairly elected. There were independent courts. There was a free press. Civil liberties were constitutionally

guaranteed. "Habeas corpus" defended the individual. A small army was under the control of the civil authorities. The elected president was in the former Governor's mansion; the military were in their barracks; beans, maize and pulses were cropped; mineral resources were mined from the rock; God was in heaven.

Then the president began to stir uneasily under the restraints of constitutionalism, or maybe he was replaced by a Sandhurst socialist who had not himself read Jennings on the British Constitution but knew someone who claimed to have read Tawney. Political opposition was curtailed. The press was muzzled. Unchecked, political leaders ceased to make any distinction between the state's reserves and their own bank accounts. Family values came to mean the President's family skimming the nation's G.D.P. The first victim was usually the independence of the courts, and with that gone the integrity of the public services disappeared too. In order to hold onto power the army was cosseted, but spending money on the military meant there was less for educating children or agricultural extension or primary health care. Soldiers were paid; teachers and nurses were not. Taxes on the honestly entrepreneurial were hiked. Ethnic minorities were dispossessed. Industries were nationalised, which often resulted in their assets being slipped into back pockets. To retain popularity or at least acquiescence in urban areas, food prices were held down which discouraged farmers, already often discriminated against by global trading rules, from growing as much as they could have done. Increasing rural poverty led to deforestation and the collapse of rural infrastructure, for example irrigation systems. As the mountains were stripped of their trees, so the rain gouged the soil from the rock, silted the rivers and flooded the plains. It was an awful cycle of political repression, war, corruption, woeful economic management, environmental calamity, starvation and debt.

I retain several images of the process. The brand new high-tech hospital in East Africa, with no money or skill to repair the equipment, no doctors to provide treatment (having been trained, they'd emigrated to earn more money in America and Europe), no money for food, no drugs for the patients. Meanwhile in the surrounding countryside, illness and disease caused by iron deficiency laid the population low. The power station built by aid donors as much to preserve a part of British industry - it failed of course - as to deliver power to consumers who, from the Finance Ministry down, declined to pay for it. The factories full of clapped-out equipment. The dams un-repaired. The sand advancing year by year into the once arable land. The military dictator, explaining a fine point about economic policy and the environment: "As I said to my late predecessor," he began. He had hanged his "late predecessor". And everywhere, everywhere, the clapped out Land Rovers.

Now what, you may ask, does a motor vehicle have to do with sustainable development and good governance? Simple. The Land Rover is the heroic war-horse of development policy. As a donor of aid we had given fleets of those splendid vehicles to poor countries. And everywhere you went there were the same fleets of them, broken down, rusting in the rain and the sun. We began projects to repair them and put them back on the road, good projects. And would there today be enough money for the ministry to pay for their petrol? Would there be a trained local mechanic to drop the sump? Would there be the basic elements of public administration to keep the vehicles on the road - or dust tracks more like? What about a few bicycles instead? For me, in a way that I'll seek to argue in a moment, there is an umbilical link between Land Rovers, "habeas corpus", wooded mountain sides,

prosperous farmers, the ballot box, freedom of speech and improving your own quality of life without wrecking the prospects for your children. It's a connection between spiritual, political and environmental pollution, a point made by Vaclav Havel about the consequences for Central and Eastern Europe of communist tyranny there.

That should remind us that we are not talking about problems and connections that only affect developing countries. Look at the environmental deterioration of parts of our own continent under so-called people's democracies. And note that sustainable development is challenged even by the practices of liberal, pluralist democracies. Concepts of good governance or democracy were arguably implicit in the earliest definitions of sustainable development. In recent years, the references have been explicit. The richer countries club, the OECD, is today, for example, seeking ways in which developing countries can be helped to promote democratisation, civil society and the rule of law and to conform to internationally accepted human rights norms. The first, widely accepted hallmark of good, efficient, government is that it should be accountable, that those it serves should be able to question what it is doing and change what it is doing. Some regard this as a recipe for inconsistency and mess. By and large, that was for example the attitude of Asian authoritarians to the idea of accountability and public participation in government. Who could know better than them what was good for their people? That argument took a tumble with the '97 crash. You usually make better policy if it has to be justified in the cut and thrust of open debate. If you are going to be held to account for what you are doing, you are more likely to think it through rather carefully.

Accountable government gains legitimate public authority, a vital quality when unpopular decisions have to be taken or good policies have to be enforced. We should remember that good government is not ineffectual government. It has to be able to carry through what it wishes to do even when this is unpopular.

Good government will always operate within a framework of laws that entrench rights and ensure predictability and fairness in dealings between individual citizens, between individual companies or between citizens and companies on the one hand and the institutions of the state on the other. One of the most difficult things for politicians of an authoritarian bent to comprehend is that the law is master of government and governed alike; it is the guarantor of liberty. Remember the exchange between Thomas More (one of the two greatest Englishmen) and young William Roper in Robert Bolt's "A Man for all Seasons". "What would you do?" asks More of Roper, who yearns to battle evil, "Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?" Roper replies, "I'd cut every law in England to do that!" Thomas More retorts, "And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned on you - where would you hide Roper, the laws all being flat?"

Democracies are not corruption-free zones, either in business or public administration. Yet the scale of corruption and its corrosive impact on sustainable development is limited by democratic practice and a free judiciary. In an open, plural society even where there is still no cultural recognition of the primacy of public responsibility over private gain, corrupt practices will nevertheless have to run the gauntlet of relentless criticism and exposure by parliament, press and courts.

Freedom of speech and government transparency help secure at least the rudiments of public well being. Amartya Sen has argued convincingly that famines do not happen in open, independent societies. The famine that overwhelmed Mao's China in the 1950s could not have happened in Nehru's India. It was no coincidence that the devastating forest fires that blackened Asia's skies in 1997 were accompanied by media clampdowns in Indonesia and Malaysia. You might cough and splutter; you might not see the sun for weeks except through a thick haze; but from Kuala Lumpur to Jakarta, you were not allowed to draw public attention to the effect of slash and burn policies in Java's tropical forests. If you were not allowed to read about it in the newspapers, it could not be happening. There was a ghastly symmetry between Asia's environmental disaster of 1997 and its financial crash of the same year. In both cases, cover-up, secretiveness and a state of self-deluding denial produced disaster, with the ignorant greed of western commercial and political interests frequently conniving at the catastrophe.

No hymn to democracy can be without its qualifying verses. After all, as Jane Jacobs reminds us, everything is disappointing in practice. Democracy is not the only ingredient of good governance, nor a guarantee that those who are bound by its disciplines and espouse its philosophy will look after the world with all due care and attention. Democracy is more likely to produce better government on the side of sustainable development. But to borrow the song title, "It ain't necessarily so". Dictators are rarely friends of the earth. But even those democratic leaders who espouse environmentalism sometimes appear fatally constrained by a prevailing public mood or a powerful private lobby. In some cultural manifestations of environmental concern, the United States leads the world. Yet its contribution to the global struggle against climate change is hamstrung by the seeming political imperative of keeping energy prices low.

Some concede that democracy may be the most sustainable form of government, not least because it contains self-correcting mechanisms, and that it may be the least worst way of protecting the environment. But they question whether even at its most sophisticated we can really depend on it to take uncomfortable decisions for the unverifiable benefit of future generations.

The question is in a sense unanswerable. But I can't think of any sort of government likely to be better placed to take on and win this sort of argument, for example, by seeking better ways of costing the environmental results, of our daily choices and trying to incorporate them into political and economic decisions. We can look for another potential source of democratic strength by considering one of its imperfections, the tendency from time to time for democracy to turn into illiberal majoritarianism.

The ballot box is only the mechanism of democracy. A liberal democracy requires more than elections. It needs an environment of checks and balances, of accommodating not exclusive values, that enables it to flourish in the interests of all its citizens and not merely in the interest of the largest number of them. Part of this essential fabric of a liberal democracy is what we today call civil society, or - to use the buzz word - the "social capital" of a community: the independent groupings and bodies from professions and churches to non-governmental organisations. Their role and influence have been massively increased as fast as those of national elected

governments have been reduced. Where democratic governments fail, civil society - non governmental organisations - can come to the rescue ensuring that their own agenda prevails or at least is given greater heed. And this is specially relevant to the area we are discussing, since democratic governments have not always been conspicuously good at meeting their environmental responsibilities. So to secure sustainable development, it is suggested that traditional notions of good governance must take far greater account of civil society.

"To be attached to the subdivision", Edmund Burke wrote, "to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections". And so it is. All politics is local. We identify with family, club, church, village, town, interest group as well as - I don't necessarily say before - country. These loyalties always formed the underpinnings of democratic society, and sensible governments recognised this. But social, economic and technological changes have meant that today the exercise of loyalty to the "little platoons" can compromise and undermine the authority of the traditional mechanisms for delivering even sensitive and sensible majoritarian government.

First, democratic governments have been based traditionally on strong, competing mass parties. In almost every country, mass parties are a thing of the past. They wither on the electoral vine. They are in part the victims of an end to Manichean politics - good versus evil, state versus individual, Left versus Right. There is still a Left and there is still a Right, but the zealotry and heresies have largely passed into history as most politics huddles around a centrist agenda based on the triumph of market liberalism with as much of a human face as finance ministers and banks will allow. Social change has blurred the old distinctions of lifestyle, housing and employment that also sustained political parties. Everywhere, the problem of financing crumbling political organisations threatens to put them in hock to the rich with opinions or to interest groups with their own focussed ambitions. Everywhere, there is the danger of take-over by well-organised minorities. Everywhere, more people join organisations that wish to protect birds, clean up the air, ban road building and save the planet than join those that want to save the inheritance of Churchill or Attlee, Roosevelt or Eisenhower.

Secondly, national democratic governments themselves are squeezed from above and below. As technology and trade break down barriers, so governments have to cope with the commercial clout of multi-national corporations. I do not myself see cloven hooves under every boardroom table; corporations can be good, bad or indifferent. What is more, their power is not new. But it seems to me unarguable that they are more powerful today than ever before.

It is easy to see the giants of information technology both cutting governments down to size and giving individuals and the "little platoons" much more power. There was a story in the "Washington Post" a few weeks ago asserting that Microsoft, which had been locked in courtroom battles with the US Justice Department, was funding lobbyists to secure cuts in that department's budget. At the same time miniaturisation of electronics and the spread - courtesy of Microsoft among others - of knowledge and information at a pace and in quantities never before imagined, limit the ability of national governments to exercise their traditional authority, not least that based on the claim of superior intelligence. The Internet is a great leveller.

Thirdly, governments and multi-national enterprises are smart enough to know that the pooling of national sovereignty is required in some areas where national boundaries have been over-run by economics, environmental change and technology. International organisations - on a regional or global scale - have been created to try to manage the consequences of globalisation. But they have difficulty attracting the public loyalty required to give them the legitimacy they require; and they also lack the public approbation gained by a sense of participation in decision making and of openness to public accounting. That is a problem even for the institutions of a regional organisation like the European Union that has elaborate structures of democratic oversight. It is a far greater problem for global bodies like the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Into the gaps, the crevices, the nooks and crannies, floods a tide of pressure group and NGO activity, and this is in many respects admirable, a welcome demonstration of growing global pluralism. The cutting edge of all this civil society activism has been environmental, the campaign in various ways to save what is thought essential for sustainable development. But I find myself asking the awkward question - is it actually very sustainable given that it isn't obviously democratic? Do we not face the danger of discrediting good arguments by pursuing them in a manner that threatens us all with something even worse than majoritarianism, namely minoritarianism? Now I should make a distinction here between NGOs in developed countries and many of those in countries that are still developing. There, NGOs are sometimes more democratic than the structures of government. They struggle bravely for democracy itself. But that is not the case in the richer north of the globe.

So with that caveat, let us take a particular and rather controversial example of potential minoritarianism. We have witnessed recently growing signs of pressure group and NGO activity at meetings of international organisations. Many think that the high point so far was the lobbying and street parades during the Seattle meetings of the WTO. You remember the TV pictures. My own favourite showed a lobbyist, a foot soldier in civil society's growing regiment of "little platoons", carrying a banner on which was written "The World Wide Movement Against Globalisation". There will be more of all this at the spring meetings this year of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

But is the demonisation of global trade and technological progress good for sustainable development and how democratic is it?

Globalisation is not new. Look a hundred years ago at the pattern of trade, overseas investment and immigration. That was globalisation without today's technology. What makes things different today is that the triumph of liberal economic ideas has combined with technology to lower the cost and speed the impact of the movement of goods, people, money and ideas to an unimaginable degree. And on the whole, for the majority it has produced improvements in standard of living that do not require a sacrifice in quality of living.

The real questions to answer are how you can strike this balance without losing the benefits of dynamic trade, and how you can help the minority of countries and the minority within countries who are left behind when the growth in trade makes most people better off. I'm not sure that we will get those answers if the debate in developed countries becomes dominated by an undemocratic minority, however well-

intentioned. Good governance does not mean that the minority is always right. Padraic Pearse once argued, stretching Burke's military metaphor, "Always it is the many who fight for the Evil thing, and the few who fight for the Good thing; and always it is the few who win. For God fights with the small battalions". "Yes" and "No" to that.

I should like more NGOs to accept open-mindedly that God is not always on their side. But such a cultural shift has to be earned. If democratic governments, representing majorities, composed of parties and creating international bodies through which to exercise some of their sovereignty, wish to encourage more responsibility in debate from NGOs and thereby revitalise democracy, then they have to lead the way in rearranging their relations with those same NGOs.

Political parties, so often out-numbered, out-financed and out-grown by NGOs, should try at local as well as national levels to create structures that enable interest groups to contribute fully to the party political debate. Governments need to open up the discussion on public policy, to tap the expertise of NGOs and to involve them - informed minorities - in a process whose end result will be determined by the majority. They should also involve NGOs far more in the delivery of services and not just the discussion of politics. International organisations have to be more open in the negotiation of global agreements, enabling civil society to participate in the process and to shape it. To their credit the World Bank have moved some way along this path, and after Seattle the World Trade Organisation clearly knows that it must do the same.

So to ensure that the debate on sustainable development is as constructive as possible, and that it delivers results that can both command majority consent and attract minority acquiescence, the rich, pluralist developed democracies need to understand that they have lessons of governance to learn as well. Good governance is not simply a subject on which the rich developed world can lecture poor developing countries. Behind these organisational and political shifts is a reaffirmation of the democratic spirit, the understanding that democracy is an adventure in dialogue, the attempt to persuade and secure consent, the belief in Adlai Stevenson's memorable phrase that average men and women are a great deal better than the average. We have lived through an era of political leadership as superstardom, the articulation of promises and solutions usually beyond the reach of even the most charismatic leaders, however many electoral terms they are awarded. Naturally, leaders can move things a little this way or that, for better or for worse. Yet I can't help thinking that human vanity these days should take second, sustainable place to a style of political leadership that recognises the value of persuasion over posturing, that knows that reason is the only long term way to produce that aggregate of benign acts - a thousand and a thousand more - that alone can reverse the degradation of our world, its natural environment and for that matter its spiritual ideals.

What quaint notion is this - well, it may be quaint but it's not original. Six centuries before Christ, Lao Tzu, Chinese sage and Keeper of the Imperial Archives, wrote this:

"A leader is best  
When people barely know that he exists  
Not so good when people obey and proclaim him.  
"Failure to honour people,

They fail to honour you."  
But a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will all say, "We did this ourselves"

Exactly. And what they will have done, if we are fortunate, is by revitalising  
democracy to save our world, with its shadows of death and its shining lights, in all its  
fierce and awesome majesty.