

The Dog that didn't bark¹

Ronald G Young

Whatever other effects the attack on the Twin Towers may have had, it certainly provided the opportunity for the security systems of leading States (adrift after the collapse of communism) to regroup and increase their budgets and power.

The “war against terrorism” became after September 2001 the slogan behind which many States increased their surveillance and control measures over their own citizens.

- “Defence” budgets and actions boomed;
- powers of detention without legal redress were increased;
- a generation of young Muslims were radicalised²;
- and cultural tensions increased.

But the 2011 attack was by no means the only significant event over the decade. Arguably, governments and media have used the threat of terrorism to distract us all from the vastly greater threats to our security and social harmony from an ideological doctrine which has not only reduced state capacity but threatens to destroy the democratic model which was so painfully constructed in the 20th century.

Indeed, the damage which the neo-liberal ideologues and the anglo-saxon financial class have done to societies surpasses the wildest hopes of Al-Qaeda and the 09/11 terrorists!

The damage is so enormous that it is perhaps these people who should be seen as the real terrorists. People (in the developed world) do feel less secure – but not because of radical Islam terrorists. Rather because the old certainties of jobs and welfare have disappeared; and public values and facilities have declined.

*As individuals, we face increasing insecurity in our working lives, on our streets and even within our homes. As societies, we face a ruthlessly competitive global economy, the threat of armed conflict, and a biosphere stressed to the point of collapse. Why is democracy slipping away, and ethnic conflict, poverty, crime and unemployment growing day by day?*³

Any list of the ways in which the world seems to have changed in the last decade would include -

- The increased scale of migrations – caused by economic, military and natural disasters
- greater frequency and scale of natural disasters
- The breakdown of the international financial system
- Changes in social behaviour caused by the internet

¹ Article appeared in the Romanian journal Revista 22 on 8 September 2011

² For an interesting view of the process see Paul Berman's article “Do Ideas Matter?” in current issue of The New Republic <http://www.tnr.com/magazine-issue/september-15-2011>

³ Quote from Richard Douthwaite's Short Circuit – strengthening local economies for security in an unstable world (2003) which can be downloaded from http://www.feasta.org/documents/shortcircuit/Short_Circuit.pdf

- The rise of China
- Increased disillusionment with political action (with the efficacy and legitimacy of state interventions in question; and political leadership missing)
- Growth of inequality and insecurity

The problem about such listings, however, is that they give a rather partial and ethnocentric picture. Most people's view of the world is determined both by the images we get from a global media system which is increasingly concentrated in a few hands and pursues its own agenda; and by our fixation on the familiar.

But the deeper the change, the less we are likely to notice it. Lists of global trends tend to cover mainly disturbances to the comfortable western (mainly European) world.

Many countries in Latin America and Africa have seen positive political and economic developments since 2001. Hundreds of millions of people have also been lifted from poverty throughout the world - although the squalid and fragile urban conditions in which most of them live might lead some to question the significance of this particular index.

And the Arab spring may have challenged the view many had of Arab and Muslim fatalism - but we have generally become less optimistic about the onward march of democracy.

It is not just that the various tulip and other revolutions stalled; it is also the growing disillusionment with democracy in Europe as we have become customers rather than citizens.

Democracy requires political and administrative systems to have the capacity to make an impact on what its citizens judge to be unacceptable conditions.

But it's not only governments, corporate power and the media which are failing us – propelling us faster toward the precipice.

We are actually failing ourselves.

Our collective will to act as local, national and international citizens has weakened enormously over the past decade – despite our being presented in the financial crises of the past few years with the most powerful evidence for systemic change.

In 1999 we had the Seattle anti-globalisation demonstrations and annual conferences⁴. But, after the Genoa Conference of 2001, the movement disintegrated. Why?

For, as the various financial scandals (eg Enron) of the 2000s culminated in the global meltdown of 2008, it seemed that the scales dropped at last from everyone's eyes. The neo-liberal Emperor had been exposed in all his nakedness. So surely we now had the shared political understanding and will to return to the State some at least of the functions which had been stripped from it by those under the influence of dogma.

⁴ well described in Paul Kingsnorth's One No, Many Yeses (Free Press 2003)

Indeed for a moment there seemed the possibility of developing greater legitimacy for alternative social visions more consistent with basic principles of democracy and collective dialogue and action. Not only did this not happen - but the high ground, amazingly, was quickly recaptured by corporate warriors who saw the State rescue of the banking system as an opportunity to “reframe” the agenda for their benefit. State debts had increased and had therefore, went their argument, to be reduced – but through the dismemberment of the last vestiges of the civilising aspects of state activities. Colin Crouch is one of the few who has recently identified and analysed the perversity of this stunning development – pointing out, for example, the confusion large corporations have successfully sown in the public mind as they use the language of “the market” to defend their anti-competitive (let alone anti-social) practices⁵.

The system that has emerged suits nobody: in the long run, there are no winners. Even at the highest levels of society, the quality of life is declining. The threat of mergers leaves even senior managers in permanent fear of losing their jobs. As for the burgeoning list of billionaires, try though they might to fence themselves off from the collapsing social order, they cannot hide from the collapsing biosphere⁶.

Neither social democratic nor green opposition parties offer, however, any convincing agendas for change. Such agendas are available⁷ – but need to be proselytised by those who recognise that the issue is not the simplistic one of greater State power but rather the need for a proper balance of power between corporations, state structures and people-driven political processes.

“It was not capitalism which triumphed when the Berlin wall fell – it was balance” was the opening sentence of a powerful but neglected 2000 article by management guru Henry Mintzberg which set the European model of the “mixed economy” - of the “*strong private sector, strong public sector and strength in the sectors between*” - against the lack of balance and of “countervailing power” in the so-called communist societies.

“The current push to privatise everything will”, he warned then, “lead to the same disease as communist societies”⁸.

It is the apparent powerlessness in the face of disaster which is the most frightening of current trends.

⁵ in the brilliantly titled book [The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism](#) (Polity 2011)

⁶ from Richard Douthwaite’s [Short Circuit](#)

⁷ a paper on my website identifies many of these -

<http://publicadminreform.webs.com/key%2Opapers/Living%2Ofor%2Oposterity.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.bdp.org.ar/facultad/catedras/cp/tecadm/Mintzberg%2Ogerenciando.pdf>

About the author

Ronald Young held a leading position in Scottish regional government from 1974-1991 as well as an academic one (in urban studies). For the last 20 years he has lived and worked in central Europe and central Asia – as a specialist in institutional development at both a central and local level. He now divides his time between his house in the Carpathian Mountains, Bucharest and Sofia. His website <http://www.freewebs.com/publicadminreform/> contains many of the papers he has written on administrative reform; his blog www.nomadron.blogspot.com his musings about the challenges we face.