Faith in public reason: working towards a coherent world

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'To achieve in a world of flux and bonfires/Something of art's coherence',

-- Louis MacNeice, 'Windows'

An elderly man, Eddie, in his 80s, was sitting on a char on the terraced street outside his front door in the back-to-back houses of Armley in Leeds. Classic 'Coronation Street'-style homes in long terraced rows, still with strings of washing hung to dry across the street, they have been there since the nineteenth century build during the great expansion of Leeds with the fullness of the industrial revolution. Initially a market centre on a bridge across the River Aire processing the wool textiles of the Yorkshire region, Leeds built up as a trading centre of clothing, textiles, chemicals, engineering, mining, transportation goods and services until in 1910 – a decade before Eddie was born – it was known as the city of 1000 firms. Not dependent on one industry, or a mine, or a single major manufacturing company, Leeds had a diverse economic base making everything from axles and tanks, buses and trains, to blankets and clothing. In the twentieth century it became a regional retail shopping centre – as textile and clothing factories moved out into high street stores – such as Marks and Spencer. In recent decades that shift from manufacturing to service sector employment has accelerated, with a decline in traditional manufacturing (primarily engineering) and an expansion of public and private service sector industries – including the new communications technologies, the creative art and design industries, and back up services in banking, finance and legal services. The central business area has been transformed with new high rise smart shops and offices replacing the cleared warehouses and old inner-city back-to-back terrace houses.

I asked Eddie how he was, he replied, "Well, I've been sitting out here all my life – and now I don't know where I am." I asked, "Is it the view?" The old factory at the bottom of the street had been knocked down and cleared away. The skyline had changed and so had much of the surrounding environment. No, he said that didn't worry him – at least his home was still standing. Was it the neighbours then? New neighbours, some from South Asia, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, from African countries, from Kosovo and Poland, all meant that he now lived in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial street. Furthermore, since a third of the houses were cheaper, privately rented properties, there was a high turnover of people moving in and moving out. The neighbours were fine people, he reassured me – they made him meals and helped with his shopping and washing. What then was the problem? Why did he now feel so dislocated and lost? 'It's the youngsters," he replied, "they walk past me as I'm sat out with wires in their ears. I think they live somewhere in the internet but they don't speak to me know so I don't know what's going on anymore." Youngsters using iPods had cut him off from his

source of information about the world and left him feeling isolated – unable to keep up with the ever-increasing pace of change of life in the twenty-first century. The world is now wired differently.

Seven years into the twenty-first century and the pace of change has not slackened. It has been overshadowed by the dramatic violence of the assault on the Twin Towers in Manhatten on 9/11, dominated by the daily news of military action and violent death in the Middle East, and after a half century of conflict on the African continent, it is still projected by the UN that over twenty countries will be characterised by conflict until 2020.

Meanwhile UN internationally agreed targets – Millennium Development Goals – to get access to healthcare and education and to tackle endemic diseases slip further and further behind as the world's population moves up from 6bn to 9bn in the next half century. The rapidly widening gap between the rich and the poor is opening up wider than ever, and the rapid growth of China and India (comprising over 1/3rd of the world's population) are increasingly regarded as an economic threat to the old OECD countries. Talks to establish fairer trade relations are deadlocked at the World Trade Organisation and the UN is generally regarded as powerless to intercede to stop or prevent violence.

While new access to nuclear weapons is an increasing concern, there are also over 650 million small arms in circulation – more than at any time in history, fuelled by a $5 billion arms industry. Not only does peace and stability seem further than ever from the political horizon – their impact is the greatest number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in history. Migration and questions of border control, identity and the role of the nation state have been thrown into sharper relief than ever in this first decade of the twenty-first century – particularly in Europe. In the wider global context we are swiftly moving into the urban century – in which human beings will for the first time in human history live in mega-cities rather than rural areas.

But alongside the challenges of peace-building and tackling conflict and violence coupled with the perennial task of eradicating poverty and gross inequality of access to resources and wealth, there is an increasing awareness of the need to deal with global environmental degradation – usually defined as climate change and its impacts. In essence our misuse of natural resources is in itself regarded now as a genuine threat to human survival.

In the past there has been a tendency to keep dealing with poverty and sensitivity to the natural environment in separate compartments. There have even been occasions when supporting poor people has been set against the desire to protect and conserve the environment. Native forest dwellers have been driven out as the enemy of conservation – indulging in fuel-burning destruction. The desire to save trees has in the past been set against the need to support poor native people. Tackling poverty and conserving the environment have been set at odds. Only one or the other could consistently be supported. At last eradicating poverty and conserving natural resources are being regarded not as mutually exclusive but rather as necessarily interdependent. Tackling poverty – internationally and locally and conserving the environment, reducing waste and supporting people in their basic human needs can be mutually inclusive. A new framework that builds a solid triangle of tackling poverty locally and internationally and ensuring sustainability is being developed as a real economic, political and social alternative. Making Poverty History is neither a campaign to

help tackle poverty in the south, while neglecting the north, nor is it an alternative to saving the planet. They must be worked together, fused into an integrated campaign. Eradicating poverty and ensuring sustainability is a task that consolidates a sense of the human independence of our planet. Built into this template for action, holding together eradicating poverty and generating sustainability, need to be a new element – conflict resolution and the work of peace building in an increasingly insecure world.

The great promises of economic globalisation have delivered paradoxical outcomes. Open economies and world-wide markets were regarded as the means to transcend protectionism and petty national interest – yet in this first decade of the twenty-first century, in the face of economic globalisation, there has been a resurgence of political nationalism throughout the world. Increased trade itself has not led to the eradication of poverty, in fact poverty persists and more and more are locked out from fair trade in the face of increasing protectionism. Human and workers rights continue to be neglected, while the trade in illegal drugs, people (for sex trafficking) and arms continues to dominate the whole economies. While the economic stress on the global – in reality the political stress is on the need to intensify focus on the local.

In the twenty-first century of migration and mobility the global is in fact local. As urban communities – like Armley in Leeds – become more and more international, the tensions and conflicts of the whole global find expression locally in our terraced streets and tower blocks. Two neighbours may find themselves living cheek by jowl – but divided over the conflict in Kashmir, for example. Residual conflicts from the whole globe are replicated at the neighbourhood level. Conflicts can no longer be confined to a national territorial zone, they migrate and intermingle, and re-emerge in new contexts.

Nor can there be a ready escape into either notions of virtual community (built exclusively around our mobile phone address book, centred n our work colleagues or leisure contacts), or so-called reality TV and soap operas. Our neighbourhoods are physical realities – spaces with doors and windows opening onto each other. We may pass in the street even though we are likely to know more about what goes on between people in a neighbourhood in Australia on the evening soap opera. In particular in urban neighbourhoods increasing turnover of residents means that we can no longer 'choose' our neighbours. We have to live with who we are. The basic question is whether we can really 'live where we are' (as opposed to the nostalgia homelands of our grandparents, whether in Country Mayo or Kashmir).

At the time of the terrible earthquake that afflicted Northern India, Pakistan and Kashmir, I saw two neighbours who had deliberately avoided each other previously come up the street together arm in arm. They usually walked down to the local shop on opposite sides – divided by the conflict over Kashmir (the source of conflict and violence since the divisions at Independence in 1948). I asked, "What has happened to bring you together?" The Pakistani whose family still lived in Azad Kashmir, hit by the earthquake, replied, "I saw a truck from India on the television taking blankets and tents to the earthquake victims in Kashmir – so we've decided to call the war off in our street." But tensions and conflicts elsewhere can often break out locally and the impact of violence in Chechnya, Palestine, Darfur, Kashmir, or Zimbabwe, should not be underestimated as a local force for concern. It was the great environmentalist Edward Schumacher who urged us to 'Think Global and Act Local', but in our rather more complex,

integrated, and interdependent world, perhaps we now need to 'think and act globally and locally at the same time'. Schumacher's dictum can no longer be an excuse for a kind of eco-separatism. I recall my grandfather's comment when I asked him whether we would ever be able to grow all our family's food on his allotment. He replied, "No – we'll never be able to grow be able to grow bananas – we'll have to talk people – even people we might not immediately like to get bananas." It was a primary lesson in the need for fair trade. The interest and passionate commitment of young people to Make Poverty History internationally is an encouraging antidote to those who declare that interest in politics is dead. Yet occasionally there is a sense that campaigning for justice, human rights, accountability, transparency, trade union representation and participatory democracy is for emerging African countries but not needed in countries like Britain and the USA where these concepts and practices seem to have 'burnt out'. Again, linking together North-South campaigns demands an integration that recognises the need for mutual change to eradicate poverty, ensure sustainability and work on conflict resolution. In other words, the concept of working for development should be a two-way interactive process. Mutual independence therefore implies that we too in the West, in older democracies, need the concept of working for development should be a two way interactive process. Mutual independence therefore implies that we too in the West, in older democracies, might have something to learn from traditional familial village practices in African countries. Bringing women engaging in community participation in rural Ghana to enliven women struggling to revive a local community centre in a poorer white working-class council estate in inner-city Leeds can work wonders by injecting a spirit of energy, life, dance and joy.

Writing in *Prospect* (March 2007), the historian Eric Hobsbawn, when asked to comment on the politics that would define the twenty-first century, commented, 'None of the major problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century can be solved by the principles that still dominate the developed countries of the West: unlimited economic growth and technical progress, the ideal of individual autonomy, freedom of choice, electoral democracy. As is evident in the case of the environmental crisis, facing these problems will require in practice regulation by institutions, in theory a revision of both the current political rhetoric and even the reputable intellectual constructions of liberalism. The question is can this be done within the framework of the rationalist, secularist, and civilized tradition of the Enlightenment.'

If economic globalisation has paradoxically led to a deepening inequality and poverty and destruction of our planetary environment, the violent tensions within national states have not led to the deepening development of the international means to resolve them. The general commitment to 'democracy' usually assumes not only a universally agreed definition of what it looks like and how it should operate but also takes for granted agreement on 'human rights' and what is meant by the 'common good'. In practical absence of any such agreement, the difficulties of international agreements – such as through the United Nations or the World Trade Organisation – remain endemic. Individual national sovereignty remains staked against international intervention or interference – whilst conflicts within and between nation states dominate the world's TV bulletins. While some argue for the abolition of international institutions altogether, others are working at reform to build agreements of implementable international law, conflict resolution and nuclear disarmament.

The paradox is that while politics – and identity – remain emphatically national,

only by acting internationally can we tackle the complex challenges of peace-building intervention, protecting the environment, and ensuring fair trade, yet planet-saving alternatives to local democracy seem to moving ever further away from the post-war efforts of the mid-twentieth century. Nor is the current trend towards the hyper-democracy of the electronic technology age which results in massive populist pressure online – leading often, as Tocqueville warned, to the 'tyranny' of majorities, going to provide a ready answer. Developing an internationalist sense of real human solidity that connects our rich and poor worlds together remains as crucial a task as ever.

In 1956, a small asbestos factory that manufactured industrial blanket linings and laggings closed down in Armley. But for over 50 years it had polluted the neighbourhood by blowing out the asbestos dust through a vent. Eye witness accounts recorded sweeping the dust-like snow off the window sills and doorsteps of the surrounding terraced streets. It covered a local school playground like snow that the children rolled into balls. It got deep into the lungs of over 400 people, infecting them through a single fibre with deadly mesothelioma – a disease with the capacity to lay dormant for up to 40 years and then strike. A local campaign to hold the company to account and seek compensation for environmental pollution by the relatives of the dying and deceased relatives lasted over a decade in the courts, during which time it emerged that having closed in Armley, the company had re-opened in a heavily built-up neighbourhood in Bombay, India (which was not subject to UK health and safety legislation). They too therefore would inherit the consequences suffered by the people of Armley. But the local campaign went not only national but international in the effort to demand justice, environmental responsibility and compensation. The global really became local as an Indian from Bombay now resettled in Armley linked arms with the victims from the Armley factory – since his own family feared they would be victims in Bombay. International solidarity is not only possible – it is local, it is intrinsic to rebuilding neighbourhoods.

Managing conflicts at local level is as much the stuff of politics as high-level meetings at the UN but in the consumerist era of market economics in which 'discounting' has become taken for granted as the main reflex, politics is now regarded as a media 'spectator sport', increasingly controlled by those in the commentary boxes. They are the dominant ones who define the terms of the debate. Notably driven by 24/7 news bulletins to fill on the hour, they quickly discount the past, regardless of a sense of history and give space to what they decide the parameters – or extremes – of the debate are. Moreover, politics now assumed to be subsumed to ubiquitous market economics, has taken on a managerial role. It is now about managing the system, not radical political alternatives or even contrasting emphases. Managerial language of TQM, human resources, and 'just in time' delivery' has taken over, coupled with a concept of human freedom that is too often limited to 'choosing'. Encouragingly some are already arguing that 'the old obsessions with choice, consumer satisfaction and market mechanisms in public service' are failing and there are calls to endorse a 'new concept' of 'public value', described as 'a quietly revolutionary doctrine'. The public-private debate may be reopening in the context of a renewed sense of the public good.

Meanwhile there are raging arguments about the contributions of 'faith communities' to the public realm. There are of course those who want to insist that faith communities be relegated to the private realm, allowing believers to hold onto their 'God delusion', even to join with others at specially dedicated

places of worship, but expected to keep their faith out of the public sphere. Faith must not be allowed to interfere with daily life or the running of the local council, the affairs of government of international relations. However, as the theologian Eduardo Medietta stressed, "For the majority of cultures around the world, religion thoroughly permeates and decisively affects the everyday rituals of survival and hope […] global religions are permanent constituents of human life. In fact, for most of the world's peoples, religion helps to construct the public realm. […] Religious spirituality remains both endemic and empowering for social transformation […] [it can] be deployed to help refabricate new communities."

In other words, faith communities have, and are not going to fade away. The question then is how do they contribute to the public realm and refabricating communities and empower social transformation. In contrast to governments dominated by the short-term and necessarily pragmatic in their efforts to resolve conflicts, it is usually faith communities that generate loyalty, trust, commitment and a sense of hope, the key values that are vital to good politics. Recent ideas of the development of deliberative democracy and extending democratic participation beyond merely voting or competitions between groups of elites look more and more to the quality of open discussion and interactive searches for answers to complex conflicts and problems. What the philosopher Kant called 'the public use of reason' is re-emerging as a helpful enabling concept. Developing a sense of 'public reason' implies challenging a politics too often dominated by instant responses and the emotivism of one's expressed feelings regardless of the facts of the case or the reality of the historical context. Working together in new ways at the local level to develop 'public reason' is the twenty-first century political challenge.

Einstein had a real problem of connecting 'the big' to 'the little'. His general theory of relativity would not fit with his detailed analysis of quantum physics. It was as if the world went round in two separate self-contained systems. In our interconnected interdependent would of increasing complexity and understanding, and developing the links between the large system or institution and the need for personal local service remains the greatest challenge of all. Too often top-down approaches, even attempts at decentralisation from large institutional systems, fail to provide for the needs for the individual person or indeed to reach to the real needs of local communities. Far too often as governments attempt to reach out they move to decentralisation only to revert to centralising measures to make savings, ensure joined-up working and target resources. Too often as the tidewaves of decentralisation creep up on the shore, the rip-tide back to the centre catches up with the people moving in the opposite direction. Having gone with the flow of decentralisation, local resources – especially core revenues, paying people to provide local services flow back in the opposite direction. As well as connecting the 'big' institution to the little local local service needs, ensuring that the ebb and flow of decentralising strategies does not catch out local initiatives need particular attention of local communities or to be 'refabricated'. There is an illuminating parable of the quarry. One day a woman walked through a quarry and asked three different workers what they were doing. The first worker responded, "I am here breaking stones." The second, "I am earning a living." The third, "I am building a cathedral." Notably cathedrals are built from the base upwards, but having the vision to imagine its towering spires in our context demands a new ethics of public reason – and perhaps the faith communities, too often decried as the cause of public problems, have a real role to play together in helping us construct it. Hegel suggested the state is 'a work of art', carefully constructed but rather than a

finished job, politics is a work in progress.

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