

Some Reflections from January 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Hypothesis: anxiety about an emptiness at the core of things is not addressed by individualistic feel-good programmes, so that we are now seeing a wish for moral debate at a societal level.

So we survived. The barely unconscious wish for a disaster of suitably millennial proportions has been denied. One confusion has been the wish to see the millennium as a point in time, when the digits roll over, rather than a period of a thousand years, enough time to think of a Second Coming. The failure of the so-called 'river of light' was that it was over in a flash. But, in an age of short termism, perhaps to take a long perspective also has little meaning.

Some of who live in London found that they or their friends made last-minute plans to go to the river. They reported that it was fun, the fireworks were impressive, the crush of the crowds could be frightening. Nothing very dramatic happened, it seemed, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The Dome represents something of this ordinariness: impressive but not that impressive. It has generated conflicting opinions over whether it is a huge success or a total disaster. The politicians and media, kept waiting on Stratford station, have to decide whether it is a triumph or to be treated with cynical contempt.

This is consistent with our increasing need to see our political leaders as either getting everything right or nothing - a need they themselves play into. The ordinary public, who are being surveyed after visiting, seem to be freer to give reasonably balanced opinions, which can then be mostly positive but with suggestions for improvements.

The Dome also seems to be representing an anxiety that there is an emptiness at the core of things. The euphoria which Blair is reported to have wanted to bottle, had even less fizz than the extraordinary mood following the death of Diana. This time the Prime Minister did not catch the mood of the nation.

A text in the Faith Zone in the Dome explains that Jesus Christ died 'tragically young', as if it was a terrible shame that his life was cut short before he could fulfil his ambitions as a carpenter. With evidence of this kind of emptiness of thought, what kind of a moral debate are we having, whether it is about our health or homosexuality or an ethical foreign policy or any other of the issues that attract accusations of woolly liberalism and forces of conservatism?

There is certainly some evidence of looking to have a moral debate. The main news story of the first week of the new millennium was about a suspected Nazi war criminal.

We have the prospect of a lengthy libel case between David Irving and Deborah Lipstadt / Penguin, which will revisit the facts and fictions of the Holocaust. This confirms that we can't leave history behind just by a change in the calendar, however significant (or simply neat).

The flu did not have to reach epidemic proportions to set up some questioning about the NHS, which has been a far more radical debate about core values than the Government has wanted.

More significantly, there is a moral debate around the repeal of Section 28, a symbolic piece of legislation in the sense that it has never been used. In Scotland, and now we can see a ripple effect also in England as the debate gets under way, this is being seen as a battle for the soul of the nation no less. It has become the focus of the debate (which is a polite word for some of what has been going on) on what kind of country the "New Scotland" is. The issue that finally mobilises this debate is not about major economic and political questions, as one might expect, but is about human relationships. The headline in the Scottish Sunday Herald on 23 January was: 83% of Scots believe schools should teach gay tolerance. (Compare the headlines in the London edition of the Observer on that day. Hundreds of Crippled Jets Put RAF in Crisis. Tory fury at 'tapas' plot over Hague. Mowlam's drug clash with Blair.) A 'national' newspaper originating in London cannot speak for the different pre-occupations. Can we begin to define more clearly the relationships between the four nations of the UK, as they take the lead in working through different pre-occupations to do with core values and seperatedness?

If we are to believe the articles in the inside pages, we may think we are in the Age of the End of Relationships, as the feature writers invite us to makeover our lifestyles, eg, looking after ourselves and not blaming unsatisfactory partners. (New You, Part three in Life Magazine, Observer, 23 Jan.) We understand that calls to Relate are specially high at this time. Style journalists describe the lifestyles of men who live by themselves and women who live by themselves. And an article on how people use the Internet suggests that we are losing the ability to communicate directly rather than electronically. In the way that all children like to draw, but most adults have become embarrassed at their lack of skill in this area of functioning, human relations may, according to this argument, become a specialist subject that has to be learned by those who cannot avoid being with other people.

The boundaries between the public and the private, the secret and the known, the confidential and the transparent, are all the time being tested - notoriously recently with Victoria Adams' revelations about her husband.

The self-help advice being peddled in support of new year resolutions are all about making over your life, with diet advice, exercise, and life coaching, which draws on an individualistic approach, don't think about others, think what you can do. It makes a virtue out of looking after the self. Should we be taking this seriously? Now that we know more about the selfish gene, are we more confident about shedding the skin of the social animal? If we communicate increasingly by associating through networks rather than belonging to a group, how does that change the way we relate to each other?

What would it mean if we are in process of making an evolutionary transition from being a group animal to a network animal? (This would be a process with a long history but becoming apparent now in ways that were not possible before electronic

communication.) Is not responding to an email the same as not responding when someone speaks to you? Probably not, but we may have to try and understand the difference. We have some experience that work relationships are increasingly conducted according to new rules. A manager is apprehensive that a colleague will take her to a tribunal and quote her words against her. Networking relationships are instrumental and temporary, more about opportunism than trust or loyalty. They emphasise first impressions, which can be manipulated by making up an identity. Anorexia and plastic surgery for young women may then be seen as by-products of this attempt to catch up with the evolutionary process. Spin doctors in politics are, in this way, a product of a shift from appealing to the loyalty of a voter to their party - an Old Labour tactic, when membership of the party was important - to appealing to the voter as consumer, making temporary allegiances. Short term contracts and portfolio careers are becoming the norm in a network society.

A quick analysis of our junk mail suggests that every day we are being encouraged to sell our home to make a quick profit, to move our money from one bank to another, to pay the Gas Board for our electricity and vice versa - eg, the disruption of powerful relationships in a stable world. The Dome, appropriately, was always intended to be a temporary structure.

The wish to have a moral debate, any moral debate, could be evidence, however, that in response to our emergent networking identities, we retain a strong need to re-affirm our inherent groupishness, with an anxious protest against the perceived emptiness at the centre.

Tim Dartington and Sheila Ramsay 27 January, 2000