

Some Reflections from September 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

This bulletin is based on a discussion by the OPUS Management Group (including two associate members) on Saturday, 30 September.

The fuel crisis in mid-September was about acting irresponsibly and responsibly. Citizens made the crisis worse by panic buying and then themselves rationed their own use of their vehicles, leaving the traffic flowing much more freely than usual. The crisis exposed the fragility of relationships and the effect on us of a just-in-time economy. With no redundancy in the system, relationships are fragmented so easily. Not only individuals in their selfishness who panicked but also local government was caught by the 'hoax' scare of further fuel blockades the following week. Infrastructures are that fragile. We were learning how near we are to breakdown, perhaps both individually and societal.

Why does society talk itself into calamity? It is as if we had been let down by the failure of the millennium bug and we were looking now to create a crisis, to enjoy a catastrophe. Then we can tell the story of how we survived the crisis. This was the anniversary of another victory of the few at the Battle of Britain 60 years ago and national hysteria at Diana's death three years ago.

There was furious feeling against the fuel protesters as little Englanders but perhaps there was also the lesson from the rest of Europe and in particular France, where the government gave in to the protesters. In France it is a matter of complex and stressful but public negotiation in a way this is not traditional in British culture.

Why did Blair not come out fighting, take them on and defeat them by argument? What was stopping him? There would not have been the same reaction by government or police to Rastafarians or miners! The police would have reacted differently.

There was huge public support but for what? Was it support for the protest or against a government unable to stand up for its own position? With a leaderless government you expect calamity. Some of us took pleasure in the government taking a knock and were prepared to put up with the discomfort and anxiety - the protesters were in that sense acting for us. Anxiety flows freely, finding an outlet, any outlet almost. Forces that bind anxiety have become released and given way to the flow of unpredictable outcomes.

It took the government by surprise, and everyone else, too.

There is a wish for confrontation, for small wars of limited duration, illustrated by the fuel crisis, as a way of dealing with complexity. The green space in a local community is used by young people playing football while others, older and without children, would like the green space dug up and cultivated. Neither listens to the other. (But these are small examples of intransigence, compared with the tensions and conflicts in northern Ireland or Israel.)

If we are talking about an apprehension about disaster, then this is about a catastrophe that has already occurred. Not owning the responsibility for what we have already done, we are fearful of our own destruction and annihilation.

Examples of self-destructive behaviour would be the US proposals to use biological warfare against the drug barons of Colombia, or the thought that a generation has been destroyed by crack cocaine or the Aids destruction of whole societies in Africa.

Perhaps we're also looking for a disappointment, for example with the Dome. Is disappointment with government similar to disappointment with parents - reality is never as good as our desires? There was also the phenomenon in Australia, we heard, of disillusion there in advance with the Olympics, but in the rest of the world we enjoy!

There has been a quickening of pace; dissident voices won't wait five years. Issues of authority and leadership have been largely evaded, not having an answer, and anyway we have had a buoyant economy. The government like parents are frightened of attack by the child?

Therapists have noted that they have been in tears or near to tears in sessions when they have been feeling the distress of their clients and patients. Their empathy for their patients has been activated so that they are questioning their own practices. Aware of their own fragility, they experience the desolation of others.

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