

A Prescient Article from the Wall Street Journal 20 Years Ago

27th September 2000

Article for The Wall Street Journal by David Howell

Protest in the Network Age

The Prague street demonstrations against the IMF should come as no surprise to anyone. They have been endlessly announced and advertised on the internet, tracked on live websites (www.s26.org, for those interested) and underpinned by training sessions, mission statements and global co-ordination of a kind which would do credit to any government organisation or slick armed forces operation.

This is the new routine of the network age e-enabled direct action which can conjure up and mobilise enormous numbers of pressure groups and individuals with a few clicks. The trail seemed to begin at Seattle and went on to Washington (1,300 arrested), Millau, Melbourne (50 ending up in hospital). Los Angeles, Davos, the City of London, and vandalism in Parliament Square. Now it is Prague's turn, and this is only the start. There is plainly much more to come.

Never mind whether the driving causes and underlying interests are good, bad, muddle-headed (as in the anti-globalisation case), liberal or reactionary, enlightened or selfish.

The information revolution, as widely predicted, has placed power and influence in new hands and, like it or not, that power is going to be used with increasing frequency.

What is happening globally is also happening locally. The fuel tax blockades and protests which have been sweeping Europe, in almost instantaneous copycat sequence, have caught Ministers and politicians completely off balance and amazed by the activists' speed and efficiency.

When in the UK protesters blocked the refinery gates in a nation-wide operation of military precision no-one knew who the organisers were or where they were to be found. The answer, it dawned on the confused authorities, was somewhere inside the invisible swirl of internet links, web communities, e-mail exchanges and mobile phone systems which suddenly seemed to have **taken** command.

To their dismay, the leaders of the Labour Government found it was no use appealing to the trades unions, or the Confederation of British Industries, or the other traditional corporate hierarchies. Nor was it any use denouncing the protesters as Poujadistes, neo-fascists and Luddites. Power had moved on and the painful task of the central authorities, was, and continues to be, to adjust to that unpleasant realisation.

Of course, Government leaders may argue with some truth that tax revolts, pickets and blockades are nothing new.

Within recent memory the UK has been paralysed by a coalminer's strike and rocked to the core by a poll tax protest. Such pressures, goes the conventional view, have to **be** resisted in the name of democracy. The alternative is civic anarchy.

But this is where the conventional assumptions are now breaking down. Thanks to the ever-more-accessible technologies crowding in on everyday life, Governments are losing their monopoly of coercive power, just as they have long since lost their monopoly of data and the control of information. It has to be time for the most radical of re-assessments about the skills and methods by which the processes of governance are conducted. This may sound like defeatism and appeasement, but it could be the beginning of wisdom. It could be the dawning realisation that the internet, by linking people and groups together in common purpose with light speed efficiency, has placed new and sharp limits on what Governments can achieve by passing laws, regulations and directives or, in the case of international organisations, by handing down grand global strategies for bettering the world which fail to take account of widespread differences of culture, history and circumstance in a mosaic of different communities, nations and regions.

At the very moment when modern societies have become more fragile and vulnerable to disruption, due to their immense complexity and computer reliance at every point in the supply chain. the power to halt and hurt has passed into the network itself - nebulous, momentary and hovering on the edge between welcome rejection of over-busy government, and unwelcome dislocation and anarchy.

In the British instance the harsh lesson for officials that things are not as they were has arrived via the simple outrage of truck drivers and farmers paying more for their diesel than their continental competitors. Here was a tax which would just not stick. Consent had dissolved. Ritual speeches continue to be made that there will be no surrender to such pressures, but of course there has to be.

Indeed, it could now be that not just the high tax inclinations, but the whole related high public spending strategy of the present British Government will prove impossible to implement - a disastrous drain on the authority of, and respect for, the Blair administration instead of the vote- winning formula it was supposed to offer.

So which way does government now go and which way do the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and numerous other international bodies now go? How do they persuade, curry conviction and retain legitimacy, when the counter arguments to their views, and the counter actions to their policies can be mobilised with such electronic spontaneity at so many points across the global network?

Not, evidently, by still higher taxes or by trying to buy peace and compliance with still bigger public expenditure packages

. Not by assurances that the authorities are 'listening' and then trying to carry on exactly as before.

Nor by promises to look after the losers in the globalisation process - promises which an increasingly well-informed and cynical populace know can never be delivered. Nor again by layer upon layer of new international agencies and committees, bringing in their wake new shoals of constricting regulations and directives.

Surely, Lesson One for political leaders is to understand that from now on the exercise of good government has to become far more modest, light and circuitous. The vocabulary has to change. Ministers need to show that they are servants, not arrogant celebrities, prepared to earn respect and loyalty in new ways.

The charge which used to be most frequently levelled at the former Conservative Government in the UK, and is now levelled at both the present Labour Government and at the high officers of international bodies like the IMF is that 'they are out of touch'. Their problem is that the world will no longer swallow generalised remedies and doctrines. It is unimpressed by ideologies. It wants diversity and variety, sensitive appreciation of millions of different interests, needs and circumstances. It will no longer tolerate being treated as a mass.

The information technology revolution for the first time provides the tools by which these personal wants can be expressed, precisely loudly, continuously, articulately, with massive media back-up and now with a mailed fist of devastating disruption within the velvet internet glove. If Governments like the Labour one in London can grasp what has happened, they may yet be able to **regain** some of **the respect they have forfeited**. If leaders like those in Prague this week can speak with understanding in place of didactic certainty they may yet be able to persuade the new web-linked armies of protesters that the globalisation process is the friend, not the enemy, of the kinder more pluralistic, more democratic and less divided world they claim they want.

And both sides may be able to use the internet to form new alliances for prosperity rather than to fight each other.

ends