

## Put Ethics Into Politics

THE ECONOMY used to be local; then regional. Now it is global. The economy used to be the means for putting food on the table; then the production of commercial goods. Now its defining characteristic appears to be a system to accommodate the politics of social destruction.

I am not talking about the environmentalists' complaint, that the industrial mode of production causes havoc with nature. Under present arrangements, it does. But there is an additional dimension that now poses the most serious threat to our civilisation: the arms trade.

Somewhere in the past the production of wealth was abandoned in favour of the production of destruction. A major slice of our productive capacity is now geared to the manufacture of weapons designed to destroy people and property. What makes this system so crazy is that apparently sane politicians rationalise it as necessary for the purpose of keeping people in jobs.

THE COLD WAR provided a kind of ferocious stability: enemies were too scared to Strike First, because the weapons of mutual destruction ensured that no-one won. Now, the eclipse of Soviet power means that, far from our being able to create a more humane civilisation, public policy is being driven by the balkanisation of global society.

The "world powers", instead of turning to a politics of decency, are resorting to the stepped-up production of weapons as a means of bringing "prosperity" to their citizens. But to achieve this, they have to export an increased volume of weapons to those nations that are so poor - or torn with internal political contradictions - that the prospect of bloody war offers relief.

Britain, for example, as the world's second largest suppliers of arms, measures its policies not in terms of ethics, but in pragmatic terms: 500,000 people are engaged in manufacturing weapons. The Major government - at a loss over economic policy - is stepping up its support for the production of sophisticated methods of killing people, because it does not know how to shift society in the direction of prosperity with peace.

The latest Defence White Paper offers this rationalisation: "Defence exports can reduce the cost of equipment by lengthening production runs and spreading overheads. They also help to maintain a competitive, high-technology, defence industrial and research and development base."

It's the same story in the United States. A cash-strapped military sector is searching for new markets. President Bill Clinton said on November 16 that he would launch an arms sales drive to support the ailing industry.

Until now, Washington insisted on blessing only those deals that served its foreign policy. No longer. Foreign arms dealers will be courted in the hope of offsetting the impact of the cutback in the Pentagon's procurement budget. Military contractors rely on foreign orders for a fifth of their business.

SO WHAT happened to ethics? There is no need for a conflict between ethics and the pursuit of profit. But for there to be an absence of conflict between these two depends on the nature of society.

The nature of our society is illustrated by what is now happening in Britain, for example, which has put together a £2 billion deal to sell arms to Indonesia, a country with an appalling record on human rights.

Can our ringing of the alarm bells be dismissed as millennial nonsense? Are we heading for a period of increased territorial conflict, as nations abandon the politics of consensus and substitute the threat of violence against their own populations? Will governments abandon diplomacy and use violence as the "cost-effective" way of dealing with cross-border issues?

I think not. Look at the problems posed by Russia. That giant of a country is suffering, and the pressures are building up to an ugly conflict. Ordinary Russian folk feel betrayed. They have lost their dignity: who wouldn't, feel let down, when the social system is so abruptly abandoned as wholly wrong? They could have expected sympathetic support from their erstwhile "enemies". Instead, they now see that the West is using them for experiments in "shock therapy", and to separate them from their relatives in neighbouring lands. So now we see the rise of a dangerous nationalism

On top of that, there is no end in sight to the collapse of industrial output. So policy is shifting in favour of an increasing dependence on the military-industrial complex for jobs through the export of weapons.

Put all this together, and we have the complete abandonment of ethics from global politics. Might is right, and we know where that, in the past, has led the world.

HENRY WINSTANLEY

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**Since 1945, there have been two hundred wars, in which 22 million people have died. Many of the 42 million refugees in the world are victims of these conflicts**

- Michael Cranna (editor), *The True Cost of Conflict*, Earthscan, 1994

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