

ETHICS AND POLITICS

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It is a very sad reflection on the reputation of politicians in the Western world that the title of this session “Ethics and Politics,” is perceived as an oxymoron, a figure of speech, which links two contradictory concepts. Like chalk and cheese, ethics and politics don’t seem to go together. Politicians are generally considered to be the least trustworthy professionals. This is a long – and widely – held view expressed in numerous aphorisms.

Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, said: “Politicks, as the Word is commonly understood, are nothing but Corruptions.”

George Orwell said: “Political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

The American essayist, H.L. Mencken said: “If experience teaches us anything at all, it teaches us that a good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.”

But nothing demonstrates more vividly the absence of ethical values in the conduct of world affairs, and the loss of trust in our political leaders, than the recent events that have led to the Iraq War.

Let me repeat that what I am saying refers to the situation in the Western culture in which I live and with which I am familiar. The situation may be viewed quite differently in other cultures, in the East, in Islamic countries, in Buddhist or other influences, although I am convinced that the same basic ethical values are common to all people of good will.

I want to remind you briefly of recent events in Great Britain. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, having clandestinely agreed with President Bush that Saddam Hussein must be overthrown by military means, had the task of convincing the Parliament to adopt this policy. There was a very strong public opposition to it, stronger than any I have seen during the 65 years I have lived in England. Tony Blair had, therefore, to resort to a false presentation of the situation: he told Parliament that there was a direct and imminent threat to the country and the world from the possession by Saddam Hussein of huge arsenals of chemical and biological weapons, and possibly even nuclear weapons. The Prime Minister based his declaration on a seemingly detailed and reliable intelligence dossier, although it became subsequently clear that this dossier was to a significant degree modified by his own staff.

It is idle speculation whether the House of Commons would have approved going to war in the absence of such a declaration. Personally, I believe that it would

not. But, be that as it may, we now have the facts: the threat was non-existent. Despite a long, intensive and costly search by a very large team of scientists and technicians, appointed by the US Government, no evidence of weapons of mass destruction has been found. It is now clear that Tony Blair misled Parliament and the British public. Whether it was a deliberate lie, or a blithe acceptance of the intelligence report, is immaterial. He took the decision which has led to an illegitimate war, and he must be held responsible for the consequences of his decision.

If policies were guided by ethical considerations, he would have resigned by now, or, at least, apologized to Parliament and asked for forgiveness. In old-fashioned terms, it would have been the honourable thing to do. But he did not, and has no intention of doing so in the future. He shrugs it off, and let ethics be damned.

I have dwelt at some length on the Blair debacle, because it is central to the theme of this meeting. There are two points I want to stress: one, the great importance, indeed the vital necessity, of returning to moral principles in politics; two, the application of these principles to the specific case of the Bush policies on the nuclear issue. This should lead to a strong call, from this meeting, for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

The al-Qaeda attacks of 11th September 2001 are presented as the official reason for the campaign against terrorism, a campaign presented by Bush as the struggle between the forces of good and evil, with his own side obviously being the good one. This has introduced an ethical dimension into the political scene, which is most welcome. The trouble is that Bush's ethics seem to be at variance with those held by most people of good will.

The dramatic events during the last century, mainly resulting from advances in science and technology, have made it necessary to adopt policies that are radically different from those advocated by Bush. He is basing his policy on the slogan: "You are either with us or against us." This deepens and perpetuates the differences in the world, whereas the actual trend is for all of us to be on the same side. We have to learn to live together, otherwise we shall all die together.

This was recognized as far back as 1955, in the famous Russell-Einstein Manifesto in which we posed the question: "Shall we put an end to the human race, or shall mankind renounce war?" And we concluded: "We appeal, as human beings, to human beings: Remember your humanity and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death."

Indeed, while we cannot predict what further advances in science and technology will bring, we can be sure that they will result in changes in two directions: one, a higher quality of life for all and enhancement of civilization; two, the means to destroy that civilization and perhaps even the human race. Since the latter path is clearly unacceptable, we must create conditions that will enable us to bring the institution of war to an end, by learning to solve conflicts by means other than military confrontation.

In the first instance this means basing world affairs on moral principles. I spoke about this at length a year ago, at the Third Summit, and what I said then applies very well to the topic of this session.

Next is the need to establish and abide strictly by the rules of law in international relations. Without this there would be anarchy in the world and, very likely, total annihilation. Indeed, this is exactly what may happen if we follow the unilateralist policies of the Bush Administration. In accordance with these policies, international treaties are adhered to only as far as they are in the interest of the United States; otherwise they are abrogated or simply ignored.

I find the Bush policies repugnant because of their blatant hypocrisy. The USA proclaims itself as the champion of democracy in the world, while actually imposing its will in a dictatorial manner. It is supposed to uphold the rule of law, yet it violates its legal commitments under international treaties. It castigates members of the United Nations for exercising their rights under existing rules, but takes military action against member states without the authority of the United Nations. It criticizes members of the Security Council for exercising their rights of veto, but uses the veto itself to protect a friendly country, that would have otherwise been declared an aggressor.

A central criticism of the United Nations made by the Bush clique is that it is ineffective, a useless and enfeebled organ, incapable of taking decisive action. This sort of criticism has traditionally been levelled at democracies by totalitarian regimes. Long discussions and protracted negotiations are an inherent feature of a democratic system, in which the needs and aspirations of many groups or nations have to be reconciled in a peaceful manner. The Bush Administration has no truck with such approaches, even though it professes to champion democracy.

In my view, such policies are unacceptable in a civilized society because in the long run, they would spell the ruin of civilization.

The most flagrant example of the dangers implicit in the Bush policies is in relation to nuclear weapons.

The inherent immorality in the use of nuclear weapons was recognized from the very beginning and found expression in the unanimous desire to eliminate these weapons. Legally, this is formulated in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which came into force in 1970, and now has 188 signatories. In accordance with the treaty, all non-nuclear states that have signed it have undertaken not to acquire nuclear weapons. At the same time, the five states which are officially recognised as possessing nuclear weapons—by virtue of the fact that they had tested them by a certain date—have undertaken to get rid of these weapons. The relevant Article VI reads:

“Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”

By signing and ratifying the NPT, the nuclear member states are legally committed to nuclear disarmament. The hawks in these states, in an attempt to retain nuclear weapons, have utilized an ambiguity in Article VI, which made it appear that nuclear disarmament is linked with the achievement of general and complete disarmament. But the NPT Review Conference—an official part of the implementation of the NPT—at its session in 2000, removed this ambiguity in a statement issued by all five nuclear weapons states. It contains the following:

“...an unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all States Parties are committed under Article VI.”

This should have made the situation perfectly clear. But not only is the United States not taking any steps to implement its obligations, it has included new policies, which directly contravene these obligations. The policy announced last year in the New Nuclear Posture Review and in later statements, as well as the decisions to develop new nuclear warheads, implies the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons in direct contradiction to the undertaking under the NPT.

Moreover, the Bush Administration seems to have managed to convince the public that only a part of the NPT, the part that applies to the non-nuclear states, is valid, and that therefore states which violate it—as Iran stands accused of doing—must be punished for the transgression. The part concerning the obligation of the nuclear states is deliberately being obfuscated. Let me cite two items which recently appeared in British national newspapers:

*“At a meeting of the IAEA today, the US will urge it to declare Tehran in breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. **The treaty seeks to confine nuclear weapons to Russia, Britain, France, China and America.**”*

I have emphasized the second sentence because it displays the complete reversal of the purpose of the NPT.

The other newspaper—none other than *The Times*—reports similarly:

“It [the NPT] was established to stop the spread of nuclear weapons beyond the original declared nuclear powers of the US, China, Russia, the UK and France.”

There is no mention of the obligation of the nuclear weapon states to disarm.

We are being told all the time how dangerous nuclear weapons are and that they must not be allowed to fall into the hands of undesirable elements or rogue regimes:

“Weapons of mass destruction ... nuclear, biological, and chemical – in the possession of hostile states and terrorists, represent one of the greatest security challenges facing the United States.”

What we are *not* being told is that these weapons are just as dangerous in the possession of friendly nations. We are *not* being reminded that even the United States has undertaken to get rid of its own nuclear arsenal. We are facing here a basic issue in which the ethical and legal aspects are intertwined. The use of nuclear weapons is seen by the great majority of people in the world as immoral, due to their indiscriminate nature and unprecedented destructive power. Their possession – and therefore likely eventual use – is thus equally unacceptable, whether by “rogue” or benevolent regimes.

The elimination of nuclear weapons has been the declared aim of the United Nations from the beginning, and resolutions to this effect are passed, year after year, by large majorities of the General Assembly. These resolutions are ignored by the nuclear weapon states, as are all attempts to discuss the issue by the organ set up for this purpose, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

There is a need to keep hammering home the point that America's stand on the NPT issue is iniquitous. It has signed and ratified an international treaty which commits it to get rid of nuclear weapons, yet it is pursuing a policy which demands the indefinite retention of these weapons. And now there is the danger that others may adopt a similar policy.

We have to keep on highlighting the fundamental inconsistency in the US policies. The USA must make a choice: if it wants to keep nuclear weapons, then it should withdraw from the NPT (which would probably result in a large increase in the number of nuclear weapon states). Otherwise, it must abide by the terms of the NPT and get rid of its nuclear arsenal. *Tertium non datur*. There is no third way.

I hope that a very strong statement on this issue will come from this Conference. Nobel Peace Laureates must not stay silent when peace in the world is threatened.