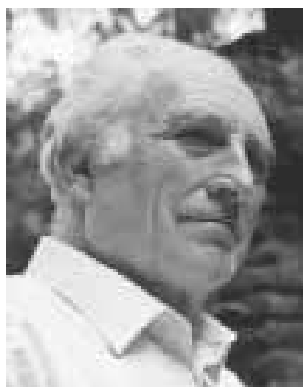


“TREASURY ETHIC”



Extraordinary revelations were recently delivered on the radio by John Major - ex Prime Minister. In reading from his book about cricket he finally strayed into wider considerations about sport in general, and his own part in its decline. I was so impressed that we bought the book - to be sure my hearing was not playing absurd tricks! But no, I heard him correctly.

He said he knew he had done less than he should have done. He said he should have acted more comprehensively to restore sport in schools, when he had the power to do so and, with hindsight, he knew this with all the clarity that comes to those who review their mistakes with honesty. He said that Margaret Thatcher's government began selling off "surplus" school playing fields but he had insisted that it must be shown that these were not needed before further disposals took place. The Labour government continued the policy, but as school sport diminished, more and more fields were said to be redundant and were sold.

He said that looking back now it would have been better not to have sold these fields at all. Open spaces, when they are gone, are hardly ever recreated. He felt that the Lottery, once introduced, would have insured that they were available to schools and the wider community. He said it had been a mistaken policy, driven by a Treasury ethic more in tune with the value of current income than with long term social investment. He regretted that, in the crush of government, he had not seen this clearly enough and should have focussed on this policy and reversed it totally.

Many disturbing implications of this extraordinary statement spring to mind. It seems that:

- A Prime Minister has, in reality, absolute power and can reverse approved policies totally.
- Yet no attention was paid to sustained public outrage at the loss of playing fields - which was formally expressed in 20 Parliamentary Written Questions, an Adjournment Debate and detailed reports from regional Sports Councils, Central Council for Physical Recreation, National Playing Fields Association and academic research into health benefits of exercise.

John Major implies that the policy to sell off playing fields was driven solely by "Treasury ethic". As Prime Minister he chivalrously puts up his hand, but the word "ethic" attached to the Treasury reveals the source of his predicament - and ours!

Financial management is **not** synonymous with "ethics" - which relate to moral values. The task of our "expert" financial servants should be to advise on the most effective monetary means of supporting democratically agreed ethical, social and environmental objectives which are sustainable.

Nearly all the environmental battles in which the Bristol Civic society has been involved since the 1960s have been rooted in our objections to planning proposals based almost exclusively on maximising development profit. Developers who are content with reasonable (ethical?) profit from projects which enrich the city and all its citizens are as rare as globalised investment which gives priority to enriching the planet. Nevertheless we had sufficient success to justify our frequent opposition to the "Treasury ethic".

The recent Reith Lectures spelt out in most vivid terms the fairly modest financial sacrifices required of the industrialised world to relieve extreme poverty in the non industrialised remainder and to arrest the damage to our planet's climate caused by globalised greed. A handful of Scandinavian countries are almost the only ones to make good their international promises of support; and the worst, most wealthy polluters are the most reluctant. Is this "Treasury ethic"?

Bristol University's Research Review No. 14 summarises overwhelming evidence of the significant extent to which humans are responsible for exceptional global warming. We have no tenable excuses for inaction. (Eskimos now endangered from travelling on thin ice have a symbolic message for mankind!)

Proposed "Urban Extensions" of Bristol into and beyond the Green Belt, maintaining a peripheral deprived underclass in "volume house building" which requires ever longer commuter roads to the City Centre and reduced opportunities for planning appeals may all be in accord with "Treasury ethic". They have no place in civilised, sustainable "ethics". Subsequent regret for past mistakes requires a radical change in dominant priorities - **NOW**.

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