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OUT OF TOUCH AND OUT OF TIME

We have no wish to comment on the recent election – neither the campaign nor its outcome – other than to recall an old Chris Farlowe song which seems apt for all the major parties and policies “You’re out of touch my baby, my poor old fashioned baby....you’re out of time”.

But so, regrettably, is much of the organic sector as it parades its global marketing tat and dances to another takeover tango. Likewise, the conservation bodies - who have finally picked up the conductor’s baton and think the ball is going to last all night when in reality the booze is running out, the money too and the rich uncle has discovered he’s pot-less.

There is a faintly bitter irony that during an election campaign, which ignored all environmental issues, any mention of resource limits and had not even a sniff of doubt about business as usual, the business newspapers finally recognised the condition which is now called “peak oil”. Although none of them acknowledges the consequences, preferring to concentrate on the business opportunities. Which is a bit like the florist gearing up posy production at the start of the plague.

It is now nearly 10 years ago since we began to publish graphs and figures, produced by David Fleming under the title “The Lean Economy”, which highlighted the approach of the peak of hydrocarbon energy production and, indeed, pointed out the energy rationale for the Gulf War long before it happened. (We are reproducing some of those figures on our website www.efrc.com and www.organicresearchcentre.com)

It gives us no satisfaction that others have now recognised the issue – even a stopped clock is right twice every twenty- four hours. But it does conjure up a smattering of righteous indignation remembering the environmental “guru” who told our potential funders and supporters that we “had lost it” and the peaking of oil supplies was a non-issue. Actually, some environmental and organic “leaders” are still saying the same thing today.

No matter, then and now (in spirit now), we were egged on by our founder David Astor, a man renowned for his insight and prescience, who believed that the economic and social implications of approaching the limits of finite resources without credible technical, economic and social alternatives in place would be far more horrendous than anything civilised society has been confronted with to date.

Oil depletion is one factor; the steps needed to combat climate change are another; both enough to stop global economic growth dead in its tracks with dire social consequences. In some parts of the world water shortages or the loss of fertile soil will not only stop economic growth, but also will threaten survival and be likely to lead to conflicts that undermine widespread security and stability.

We are not saying that this full horror is imminent but that its harbingers might only be a few streets away. The trends we see emerging during the next couple of periods of government were not given the time of day in the election campaign but in case you are interested we think that some of them are:

- Climate change control measures will have a greater impact on economy and society than has so far been recognised.
- Volatile and expensive oil supplies will have a greater impact than is currently recognised.
- Unreliable economic growth due to the above and international instability (in part due to resource and environmental pressure) will mean funding for “spending departments” both at state and EU level will be limited.
- The above factors will significantly impact on global food trade and energy costly food distribution/retail systems.
- Increasing nutritional impoverishment and food deserts amongst poorer sections of society.
- Increasing health problems due to poor nutrition.
- Increase in “social exclusion”, disempowerment and social/political unrest.
- Increased demand for niche foods from richer sections of society
- Pressure on all natural resources will grow locally and globally due to current economic and trade policies and biological limits will be passed leading to collapse will occur in some situations.

The policies we would like to see put in place flow from this analysis. We acknowledge that government is talking about some environmental issues but it is clear that the issues are not fully understood nor are adequate resources or policies being put in place to address them; and the fundamental conflict between “sustainability” and “economic growth and competitiveness” is not recognised.

As far as policies for agriculture, food and environment are concerned we would like to see an abandonment of the pretence that sustainable production is compatible with a WTO formed competitive global market; we wish to see

- More resources from government for relevant departments and policies.
- A more credible “vision” to assist in building morale, resources and effectiveness within the relevant departments.
- Development of a low emission, low energy input food system focused on healthy food security.
- Development of trade and supply chains in food that is “appropriate” to these conditions.
- Development and promotion of crop and animal production systems appropriate to these conditions.
- Promotion of nutrition and dietary changes appropriate to these conditions.
- Recognition that the UK is an urban/suburban society and that “rural communities” are not separate (if they exist) and plan accordingly.

As far as the organic sector is concerned we believe that the globalised organic industry is now as much part of the problem as the solution. The principles of the organic movement are sound and, as Fritz Schumacher believed, could be part of the main building blocks to a genuinely sustainable future. As such, they provide the basis for policies that can address the consequences of approaching the “limits to growth” – appropriate marketing and trade being one of them.

But to develop and utilise these principles as building blocks, those organisations and companies who claim allegiance to the organic movement, but seem at times to be lost in a schizophrenic daze, must remain focused on the business we should really be in – the “saving the world” business.

Lawrence Woodward