

**Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 39, 23 March 2008:
The Chinese Silver Lining Issue**

The Rule Of FUD

America, Britain and much of the rest of the developed world is gripped by a wave of FUD: Fear Uncertainty and Doubt about the economy, about a possible global recession, even a depression.

FUD or Fear-Uncertainty-and-Doubt is normally the enemy of those trying to drive society towards ethical goals, altruistic options, long-termism or the common good as opposed to short-term self-interest. FUD, allegedly a marketing invention of IBM trying to frighten customers away from the products of a rival, usually drives people towards the parent, towards the known, to authority, the familiar, to warm reassurances. Hence it is the enemy of change, innovation and risk-taking. The people it drives most easily are the psychological Settlers [1] but in times of crisis, we can all behave like Settlers, driven to meet needs of survival, to be safe, to safeguard identity, to reassure ourselves that we belong.

FUD-as-normal is a major inhibitor of moves towards paradigm shifts such as a leap away from fossil fuels to an economy run on renewable energy. FUD is the sales pitch of the nuclear industry: the fear of the dark, visceral, primal, survival against the cold: who else 'will keep the lights on' ? Peddling Doubt about climate change has been a powerful driver to keeping us all dependent on our familiar cocktail of fossil fuels.

In Issue No 20 of this newsletter (see http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_20.doc) we discussed the power of context, one of the seven CAMPCAT factors. Today all campaigners in countries affected by the banking crisis triggered by US mortgage lending (and that is most) are operating in a new context: one in which merchant banks are immobilised, and politicians and business leaders are crossing their fingers, hoping for the best, and painfully aware that governments and even the misleadingly reassuring-sounding "central banks" can do relatively little to moderate what may be a breaking wave of more bad news. They do not know how much bad debt is in the system nor what the global markets will do as it surfaces. FUD rules in places used to feeling quite the opposite.

The Silver Lining

You do not need to be a rocket-scientist to spot the potential silver lining. On 18 March the US online green journal Tree Hugger published its guidance on becoming "recession ready". It boiled down to buy local, buy good books, get a bike (sell the SUV) and invest in efficiency.

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The point for campaign strategists though is that this reflex – to reduce exposure to risks – could be converted into a ‘big idea’ for politicians who in the new context have few places to run. Britain’s Gordon Brown is a good example. Stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan – former World bank economist Joseph Stiglitz postulates that those wars will cost the US \$5 - \$7 trillion and cost others \$6 trillion [2] – with a slowing economy, high levels of debt amongst the voting public and public spending pushing his own limits to the brink, his government has just published it’s first ‘national security strategy’ [3] highlighting global instability due to climate change amongst pandemics, espionage, a potential resurgence of nuclear weapons and terrorism to name but a few fears and threats. It’s not a happy atmosphere.

Politicians must be hoping that by not talking up a recession they can hope to help avoid one. Even bankers and brokers are unwilling to speculate in media interviews lest they appear to be exploiting fears, like those who deliberately started a run on bank stocks. The media dialogue is an almost open field for anyone with a credible idea. And credible means in no small part, something with popular traction. This is where campaigning NGOs have an unusual opportunity.

The opportunity is simply to take the entirely rational public concern about our futures, and demand that public expenditure, fiscal policies and regulation – tools available to government – are used to help insulate individuals against future threats. Government cannot easily underwrite market risks, such as the value of homes but it could do a lot to protect people against rising energy costs for example. If homes were retrofitted to become highly efficient and converted to renewable energy, they would be significantly cheaper for future pensioners. ‘Resilience’ would be much improved if homes became more autonomous – less dependent on or independent of the grid, for water or electricity, less vulnerable to terrorism or climate shocks or insecure gas or oil imports. Once too mundane to merit serious political attention, in an era of FUD such ideas could gain acute political traction.

Renewable energy also offers windfall opportunities to governments, rather like the sale of airwaves. When governments appropriated the electromagnetic spectrum and sold it off to broadcasters they simply made money from thin air. Like an untapped oil field, wind, wave and solar are resources that could be turned into major income flows for governments. Whether you approve of this or not, it has some political attractions, and any large scale programme to convert communities into energy independence would involve spending that stimulates the markets.

This way FUD could fuel investments with long term public benefits by alleviating short term individual fears. This will not happen without a political catalyst, and that’s a campaign opportunity because NGOs can speak out on these matters when political leaders fear to do so. Normally FUD drives people away from investments such a switch to renewables because the costs are immediate and the climate threat looks long term and diffuse. Now the threats are more personal and immediate, and renewable energy, water conservation, local food and alternative transport can all be sold on grounds of safety, security, reliance, independence and reducing risk.

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China Boycott ?

It's boycott speculation time for China. In February Stephen Spielberg announced [4] his conscience over the humanitarian disasters of Darfur would no longer allow him to play a part in promoting the China Olympics because of China's support for the government of Sudan. Numerous campaigns urge a boycott of Chinese goods (eg www.boycottmadeinchina.org) over human rights and the treatment of Tibet, while others have done the same over the inhumane treatment of cats and dogs for the fur trade [5]. Most of the news coverage however reflects calls to boycott the Olympics, or the opening ceremony.

Calling for sportspeople or politicians to boycott the Olympics itself is a bit of a non-starter. Any government which withdrew its team would incur the wrath of its tv-viewing 'sporting' public and lose its hoped for moments of glory. Individual celebrities such as Spielberg are in a different position, with relatively little to lose and a good deal to gain at least in 'mindspace' for them to make a point. If you want to support Tibet in its struggles, this is a good way to do it, if your celebrity is all your capital.

For campaigning NGOs though it offers other opportunities. Whether over human rights or issues such as climate change (and the embedded/ exported CO₂ involved in displacing most manufacturing from North America and Europe to China and then importing the goods), China is a vast and largely untouched target.

A simple call to boycott Chinese goods even on those grounds would be futile. Chinese political culpability on climate for example is nowhere near as clear as that of G W Bush in his rejection of Kyoto back in 2001. The capacity of NGOs to gather support for a general boycott is so limited that it immediately would be seen as utopian and so gather very little support outside the Concern Ethical minority [6] for whom boycotting is a regular occupation.

One thing is certain though, and that is as more and more public (ie media) attention focuses on China as the Olympics approach, the actions of China become of more and more media interest and the threshold for campaign action progressively lowers. In these circumstances the scope for directed boycotts, focused not on generalities or composites of ills but on specifics, where it serves to gear up an existing agenda with a credible political or commercial route to resolution, and where politicians, media and other leaders (such as businesses and brands) have already taken a position consistent with the logic of a boycott, becomes far greater. All the more so if it also answers a call or aligns with progressive forces from within China itself.

Finally, if such a boycott is not directed against "China" but against, for example, elements of Chinese business, or even more so, against specific Chinese-Western business practices that cause environmental or social damage and are not a straight assault on the Chinese nation or government itself, then a boycott may actually 'work'.

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The campaign literature is heavily papered with debates for and against “boycotts” but much of the argument is specious. Few boycotts can be judged purely on reduced sales or purchases, and although there are examples where a social screw has turned off an offending economic tap, this is increasingly difficult in a globalised multi-dimensional economic world. Instead what counts is if a boycott gets a result, and that maybe simply advancing the development of an ‘agenda’, creating the conditions, another new context, for delivery of future change. What, for example, do the US Presidential hopefuls have to say about the problem of exporting CO₂ pollution to China and importing the results ? Perhaps too late to find out now ? I don’t know but there is plenty of time between now and the opening ceremony for these and other connections to be made.

This is a time for NGOs to use their soft-power (their media capital) by getting together to make common demands, and providing the supporters, hard and soft, with simple action propositions that can be magnified in the blogosphere.

New Campaign resource

Have a look at Nick Gallie’s website: <http://nickgallie.org/index.php>

[1] see Using Value Modes at <http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/usingvaluemodes.pdf>

[2] <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/mar2008/stig-m01.shtml>

[3] Nigel Morris, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brown-publishes-first-national-security-strategy-798385.html>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7244133.stm>

[5] see eg <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4476664.stm>

[6] see Using Value Modes at <http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/usingvaluemodes.pdf> and http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/boycotts/boycotts_list.htm

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