

Getting ready for Rio – Archbishop asks timely questions

Written by David Brunnen
Saturday, 28 April 2012 08:41

In the third of our 'readying for Rio' editorial series we look beyond the world's fixation on economic growth or the need for universal digital access and ask delegates to consider more fundamental questions about the way we regard money and trade.



When Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the reviews of two new books for the May issue of [Prospect Magazine](#), timescales would have made RIO+20 and its sustainability agenda a distant consideration.

But time has moved on and Rowan's gentle observations and thought-provoking questions can now serve as another primer for those committed to contribute to issues of governance – issues that have spent far too long languishing on the global 'things we really should be doing' list.

The Archbishop's review brings together Michael Sandel's 'What money Can't Buy' published yesterday and the Skidelskys' (father and son) 'How Much is Enough', scheduled to appear in June just prior to Rio+20.

The former provokes us into asking about the limits of packaging and commoditisation – how, for example, would you view the sale of your own kidney and is this any different from selling your blood?

It raises in Rowan's mind the lack of intellectually rigorous opposition to '*a philosophy that has radically distorted how we view public services and education for the last few decades*', and it reminds us that this notion of exchangeability (of anything) challenges us to work harder to counter the '*skill and sophistication of apologists for the universal commodification of life*'.

If we believe that some things should remain priceless we must, in this world of market efficiency and consumer choice maximization, argue against the corrosion of morality that

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reduces absolutely everything to an actuarial value.

In the second book, the Skidelskys write of a Faustian bargain that has thrived on the Keynesian assumption that eventually capitalism will deliver sufficiency and sustainability and will no longer be needed, but “*capitalism, it is now clear, has no spontaneous tendency to evolve into something nobler. Left to itself, the machinery of the want-generation will carry on churning endless and pointlessly.*”

With monetary accumulation as an absolute goal, Rowan argues, that we have lost sight of shared values, and the notion of a ‘good life’ (where we might have *reason* to be happy) has been turned into an endless quest for *feeling* happy, as measured, of course, by a government-sponsored index.

And so, reasons the Archbishop, we need to see how eccentric this all seems in the broad context of history and culture – and we must ask what are ‘*the habits and processes that will educate our passions and allow us to shape a credible narrative of the self [that can be] understood against the backdrop of what the ‘excellence’ of human nature might consist.*’

If all this seems somewhat ‘other worldly’ I commend to the reader a thorough and contemplative reading of what is clearly ‘*a wake-up call to a desperate need to rediscover some intelligible way of talking about humanity . . .*’

Take it as a sermon from a gentle pastor,

take time, make space, to contemplate the poetry of his prose,

reflect on inequalities, when billions live on less than \$1.25 a day,

and, in the stillness, question the priorities that take you to Rio.

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Readers of this editorial also read ' [Sustainability: the end game for the next generation](#) '



The UN Conference in Rio (June) - Rio+20, so named because it falls 20 years on from the first 'Earth Summit' - will be reported for Groupe Intellex by Marit Hendriks, a Groupe Intellex Associate and director of Nextgen Events Ltd - the UK's premier platform for Next Generation Access development.