

Foreword

change

DO YOU REMEMBER, from your school-days, that Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453? It was a catastrophic event for Christendom, the end of a thousand-year empire that had spawned some of the finest ideas, achievements and monuments in history. It was an end long in the coming and fully expected. However, as the inevitable siege came closer, the appeals for help fell on deaf ears. All their western allies were too busy, too slow or too complacent. The Venetians finally sent help, but too late.

The Turks then built the magnificent Ottoman Empire and nearly conquered Vienna. But the

great edifice, longer-lasting than the British Empire, fell apart after the First World War and we live with the consequences in the Middle East. Again, the signs of decay were there but the empire had grown too feeble, comfortable and corrupt to cope with momentous changes.

Civilisations do come to an end, all of them. Can we describe our globalised, market-based system as a ‘civilisation’? If so, then it is reasonable to expect it to end – and the signs are all around us. It is a civilisation rebuilt over the last hundred years on the easy availability of cheap oil. The easiness and the cheapness



are now over and the consequences, only just beginning to emerge, will be overwhelming. Food shortages and price rises are not just news stories; they are irretrievable and permanent. The planet's resources **are** finite. The party is over and we must rescue our best achievements. More importantly, we must plan for the survival of the millions of innocent, and usually poor, people threatened with starvation and war.

I returned last week from a five-day stay on the Holy Mountain, Mt Athos in Greece. It is the last surviving outpost of the Byzantine Empire mentioned in my first paragraph. Two thousand Greek Orthodox monks live apart from the world in 20 monasteries of ravishing beauty on a peninsular that is largely independent. There they pray for the world, using a liturgy unchanged since the early days of Christianity. They seek no union with the rest of us, just the peace to be allowed to pray. But there is more: they are almost self-sufficient. They place no value on success, material wealth, progress, change. They have created a mini-civilisation that lives lightly on the earth and has lasted over a thousand years with little change. It is an inspiring example of what is possible.

Thanks to us, not the monks of Mt Athos, massive change is now inevitable, so we must now plan ahead as never before. We build fishing fleets when we know there will soon be no more fish. We plan airports when we know that flying is not only destructive but will soon decline. Are we still building major roads? Of course! But it is no longer acceptable for government, companies, individuals to build structures and policies that they **know** to be unsuitable for a rapidly changing age. Ask politicians and civil servants what oil price they

are assuming when planning, say, a housing development and they will avoid the question. In my city of Bristol we are contemplating massive public expenditure on transport and on housing. What we do now must pass muster 20 years hence, when oil's price may be \$500 a barrel or more and when the climate will be different. Compromises will no longer work. The policies we pursue at all levels must be a very clear green. A little light humour from Ireland reinforces the point:

A gynaecologist in Dublin was driving home after a long day's work, exhausted and sleepy. The traffic lights on St Stephen's Green were red and while waiting for them to change he fell asleep. When the light turned green he was still asleep. In most cities the cacophony of protest and abuse would have been deafening. Not so in Dublin. The driver of the car behind him tapped on his window, the doctor sleepily lowered the window and the man put his head through and asked: "Would it be a particular shade of green you are waitin' for?"

James Bruges' *The Big Earth Book* fearlessly tackles it all. It is inspiring reading. Plan no major changes before reading it!

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