

Silence and Catastrophe: New Reasons Why Politics Matters in the Early Years of the Twenty-first Century

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The age of megaprojects

BERNARD CRICK was revered and respected for his writing against anti-politics and his dislike of intellectual timidity. So he might well have found the following risqué observation both politically relevant and intellectually satisfying. Look around: we're living in an age marked by large-scale adventures of power that touch and transform the lives of millions of people and their bio-habitats in unprecedented ways. Nowadays often described as 'megaprojects', these big-footprint power adventures include not just carbon filtration plants (the world's first has just opened in Norway), under-sea tunnels and mining operations centred on gold, or coal, uranium, tar sands and rare earth metals. They also include shadow banking, inter-city high-speed railway networks, new airports and airport extensions, the research and development of new weapons systems, liquid natural gas plants, new communications systems and nuclear power stations. Megaprojects are distinguished by their astronomical design and construction costs (at least US\$1 billion) and by their substantial complexity, scale and deep impact upon communities of people and their environment. In power terms, they are typically hybrid arrangements that involve consortia of variously sized companies as well as funding and logistical support from governments.

Megaprojects defy the conventional distinction between markets and states. They are not uniquely 'capitalist'; and their power dynamics typically violate democratic ideals and institutions. Sometimes born of elections and signed off by parliaments, megaprojects resemble sizeable tumours of arbitrary power within the body politic of democracy. They violate the familiar rhythm of politics asso-

ciated with elections; details of their design, financing, construction and operation are typically decided from above; and especially when it comes to military and commercial megaprojects, things are decided in strictest secrecy, with virtually no monitoring by parliaments, outside watchdog groups or voting citizens.

Such projects are a mixed blessing for democratic politics. Yes, they create jobs and measurable wealth, exchangeable commodities, scientific-technical know-how and improved services. Many make our lives easier—the invention of the Internet is proof positive of that. Often a source of local and national pride, they can generate large profits, but even when no golden harvest results they add hugely to the private fortunes of their owners, managers and shareholders. Megaprojects make some people mega-rich. But this is just half the story.

Given their high sunk costs, their complexity and scale, measured in terms of the numbers of people whose lives are affected, megaprojects can have damaging effects. It is not just that they resemble predators that wreak havoc in a democratic environment or, to switch similes, that megaprojects suspend democratic politics through the enactment of permanent forms of emergency rule. When megaprojects malfunction, as they are prone to do, they destructively impact upon human beings and our biosphere on a scale unimaginable to our ancestors.

Scale provides a clue as to why this is the case. Megaprojects are systems of highly concentrated power whose footprints, or radius of effects, are without precedent in human history. Once upon a time, even under imperial conditions, most people on our planet lived and loved, worked and played within geographically limited communities. They

never had to reckon with all of humanity as a factor in their daily lives. Whenever they acted recklessly within their environment, for instance, they had the option of moving on, safe in the knowledge that there was plenty of Earth and not many other people. Whenever bad things happened, they happened within limits. Their effects were local. When things went wrong elsewhere, at a distance, over their horizons, it was none of their concern or business. They could say (as the old Scots proverb has it) that 'what's nane o' my profit will be nane o' my peril'. Distance and time protected them from the trials and misfortunes of others.

The new adventures of power radically alter this equation. Their size and connectedness with regional and global processes ensure that growing numbers of people and swathes of their environment are affected by things that happen in far-distant places. These projects pose potentially a double misfortune for our world. Their unparalleled ability to put in place systems of arbitrary power that enable some members of our species to lord over many others, and over our biosphere—what the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called 'titanism'¹—is matched by the growing possibility that whenever their risky ventures go wrong, the disasters that result always have incalculable and potentially irreversible damaging effects, on a gigantic scale.

Powered by silence

Megaprojects do go wrong. During their design and execution phases, they suffer construction problems, budget blow-outs and delayed completion schedules. The cost-inflation effects of Hong Kong's airport at Chek Lap Kok—the most expensive airport project ever—were so great that for a time the whole of the local economy suffered. London's Olympic Games bid was originally costed at £2.37 billion; the probable final cost will be around £24 billion. The Sydney Opera House project (dubbed by its architect Jørn Utzon 'Malice in Blunderland') suffered a cost overrun of 1,400 per cent and opened ten years late. In today's Australia, a land (it seems) of megaprojects, only 1 out of 15 megaprojects approved during the past decade (Conoco Phillips's US \$3.3 billion liquid natural gas

project) has been completed on schedule, and within budget.

When up and running, megaprojects are plagued by chronic operation problems and 'normal accidents' triggered by unforeseen and irreversible chains of tightly coupled disruptions.² Sometimes the mishaps do irreparable damage. Hence the household names: event sequences that include the Bhopal gas and chemical leak, the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl and gigantic oil spills courtesy of the Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon. Disasters of their type are growing in number and frequency. They point to a grim future—one in which whole peoples and many parts of our planet are the potential victims of risky power experiments whose dysfunctions generate cross-border, potentially life-or-death effects.

Why do they happen? Why do megaprojects so often fail to measure up to the lavish claims made in their defence? Is it because (as popular folklore and serious analysts sometimes propose) these projects are typically in the hands of alpha-males whose 'serial' thinking is inferior to women's capacity for 'parallel' thinking? Or due to the fact (alleged recently by the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers) that natural selection favours self-deception, or perhaps because humans have been turned loose on the world in the industrial age equipped with prehistoric brains that recognise only simple Newtonian causes and effects, and can think only in primitively visual terms?³

Reductionist one-track explanations are unconvincing. There are multiple causes and causers of megaproject failures and each case is shaped by their different combination. Such forces as simple human miscalculation; the blind arrogance and impatience of leaders; inadequate 'hedging' for surprise events; bad decisions caused by poor coordination and diffused responsibility chains; systematic lying (what policy analysts call 'strategic misinformation'); and unintended chain reactions all play their part in ensuring things go wrong, when they go wrong, as they sometimes do.

The gargantuan size and hyper-complexity of megaprojects make matters worse, but more than their 'cognitive failure' (Francis Fukuyama's bland term) is at stake.⁴ Substantial evidence is mounting that their dysfunc-

tions stem ultimately from their refusal of robust internal and external public scrutiny. Not all disasters are human and megaprojects don't always fail, it is true. Yet when they do fail, in 90 per cent of cases, the proximate cause is the privatisation of power. Those in charge of operations suppose, mistakenly, that their mega-organisations can be governed in silence—silence within and outside the organisation. There's a paradoxical dynamic at work in this anti-political trend because the silence is *produced*, usually through intensive public relations campaigns which have the effect of cocooning the power adventure, shielding it from rigorous public scrutiny by fabricating positive stories of its performance within media-saturated settings. The strange dynamic closely resembles what anthropologists call the 'Rashomon Effect' (named after the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film *Rashômon*).⁵ The whole point is that the power relations embedded within the megaproject come wrapped in a canopy of multiple realities; hidden agendas are protected by various efforts at producing silence that functionally depends upon volumes of public rhetoric, things being said and displayed to the outside world.

When that happens, silent complacency about the complex operations wins the upper hand, both within and outside the megaproject. Institutional dysphasia sets in; group-think, wilful blindness, unchecked praise and anti-learning mechanisms (Daniel Ellsberg) flourish. Thinking the unthinkable, public questioning of the goals and *modus operandi* of the megaproject seems unnecessary, a taboo topic. Those in charge of operations discourage bad news from moving up the inner hierarchy. Cults of loyalty reinforced by aloofness and cold fear are their thing. There is no management by walking around, or by talk back. Troublemakers are ousted from the organisation. Contrarians are blanked, or rebuked as 'Chicken Littles'. Discussing the un-discussable requires guts, which are usually in short supply. Silence traps employees into distancing themselves from matters of ethics; they draw the conclusion that it is someone else's job to solve the problems, or that problems will resolve themselves. Journalists play along; a standard combination of promises of access, sinecures and over-dependence on official hand-outs

renders them obedient. They become 'plane spotters', captive cheerleaders of the power adventure, silent cogs in its machinery of compliance.

Silence

The public silences produced by large-scale adventures of power are surely among the strangest, most paradoxical features of media-saturated societies, which otherwise thrive on high levels of open clamour and public hubbub that fuel complaints about excessive media scrutiny and sensationalism, and demands for a new politics of noise reduction.⁶ So it's worth probing these megasilences in depth. Given their fundamental importance as a power resource in the design, implementation and operation of megaprojects, it's unfortunate that a political treatise on silence and its various effects remains unwritten. It is as if a great political silence has descended on the subject of silence, that its study is reckoned properly to belong elsewhere—for instance, in the fields of semiotics, anthropology and socio-linguistics, where the analysis of human language has underscored the many ways in which 'the stupendous reality that is language cannot be understood unless we begin by observing that speech consists above all in silences'.⁷ Just as the spaces, punctuation marks and patterns of aeration within any written text establish strategic silences that serve as signals that direct readers in their encounter with the text, so (it is pointed out) all communication with others rests inevitably on invisible beds and blocks of silence. Silence is not just the aftermath of communication; every moment of communication using words backed by signs and text is actively shaped by what is unsaid, or what is not sayable. Communication is the marginalia of silence—the foam and waves on its deep waters.

Proverbs and aphorisms pick up this theme. They foreground the significance of the unsaid as a maker of meaning, the ways in which silence talks, the advantages of well-timed silence, even (as the old Swiss saying goes) the superiority of golden silence compared with silvern speech. Theologians reinforce the point by emphasising the vitally important role played by sacred silence in all of the world's religions. Think of the

Kaddish prayers in synagogue for recently departed loved ones; or the Quaker assembly practising the principle that human silence enables Divine Presence: silence is a technique of self-discipline, a powerful solvent of worldly cares, a sign of respect for a deity, an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of words to capture the experience of sacredness.⁸ Historians chip in with reminders of the many early modern efforts to codify etiquettes of everyday silence.⁹ There are library shelves stuffed full with manuals on the delicate arts of cultivating silence as a desirable way of communicating with others. Idle talk was condemned. Respectful silence was praised. There were warnings that what is said cannot be taken back. Lurking behind the moralising were fears of rebellion founded on what August Comte first called a 'conspiracy of silence'. He that is silent gathers stones, ran an old English proverb. It hit the mark: silence could be impolite, speaking volumes, such that yawns could be silent shouts and underdogs could speak back to their masters by means of mocking silence—a practice later dubbed 'dumb insolence' by British army officers. If toothy silence could express scorn, then it followed that there were more than a few circumstances in which subjects had to learn when and when not to be silent. Children were expected to understand that silence was a form of polite behaviour appropriate to beings of little status. Silence was certainly gendered: women were widely expected to wear the fine jewels of calculated quietude. Their faithful reserve and obedient hush, without appearing to be speechless, was deemed imperative. The same went for subjects of government. 'Silence is sometimes an argument of Consent,' remarked Hobbes.¹⁰ The caveat 'sometimes' was important. It underscored the importance of *respectful* silence among underlings. 'Tell not all you hear, nor speak all you know,' servants were told. Others warned that fools are wise as long as they are silent. The optimists added: silence seldom hurts.

Catastrophes

How wrong that maxim proved. It's true that in matters of politics, hush can have civil effects, as when a call for silence precedes the entry of a judge into a court of law; or

when crowds are requested by the authorities to observe a minute's respectful silence; or when jurors are obliged to remain publicly silent about their deliberations (as in the grand jury system in the United States). People politely rise, respectfully stand, or they hold their tongues. The political effects are benign, and limited, certainly compared to the dilapidating effects that flow from dysfunctional megaprojects. When things go wrong within large-scale adventures of power, many ancillary organisations and services grind to a halt. People are made homeless; some are robbed of their lives. Habitats are pushed beyond the limits of sustainability. They seize up, or breakdown.

'Catastrophe' is another term for such devilish outcomes. It is a potent word (originally from ancient Greek, *katastrophe*, 'sudden turn, overturning') that cries out for definition and begs to be used carefully, especially because (if I'm right) the numbers of large-scale misadventures are rising. I emphasise that to speak of catastrophes—unexpected sensational events that inflict long-term ruinous damage on humans, or our biosphere, or both—is not to indulge apocalyptic thinking or to be nostalgic for halcyon times when life was calm and peaceful. The new catastrophes of our age are not the climax of inevitable historical trends; they should not be understood (say) as markers of the final triumph and breakdown of Western metaphysics, as Heidegger proposed.¹¹ The new catastrophes are not inevitable. More than a few are triggered by bizarre projects that should never have been attempted; with hindsight, had the megaproject been conceived and run differently, plenty of other catastrophes could have been avoided. That is a reason why these catastrophes aren't taking us backwards. We aren't returning in any simple sense to the pattern of vile events that paralysed the world from just before the outbreak of the First World War to 1950, a forty-year 'age of catastrophe' when whole societies stumbled from one calamity to another through the wreckage of economic collapse, inter-state rivalries, total war, totalitarianism, murder and genocide.¹²

The catastrophes of our times are different. Their *slow-motion quality* is striking. There is no Big Bang, but there are plenty of loud explosions whose numbers are growing in

frequency. Our catastrophes are *cumulative*; and their *sources are different*. They are not products of fascism, capitalism or socialism. They are the effect of big adventures of power operating in many different settings, and at *many different points on our planet*. Our catastrophes cut deeper and more aggressively into our *biosphere* and distinctive as well (thanks to communicative abundance) is that they stand centre stage in *real-time media events* that trigger fascination, fear and foreboding on a global scale. Catastrophes shatter the public silence that bred them in the first place. They attract millions of witnesses. They are also the raw material of risk-hedging business investment deals ('catastrophe bonds', they are called at the Chicago Board of Trade and on Wall Street) and (to name an early 'classic') *The Last Man on Earth*-style blockbuster movies and other forms of popular entertainment.

Fukushima

Catastrophes are difficult to capture in words; as the French writer Maurice Blanchot reminded us, those who experience them firsthand are often unable to communicate their horror.¹³ Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* (a short play written thirty years ago in honour of Václav Havel) comes close to capturing the point that silence is the currency of catastrophes both before and after they strike. Some part of their ugliness stems from their destruction of the ability to communicate with others. Ugly their details are, as we now know from the catastrophe that occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant during the months of March–April 2011.

Fukushima quickly became the greatest industrial catastrophe in the history of the world. Triggered by the largest-ever recorded earthquake in the country's history (so large it made our planet spin faster on its axis), the disaster was not simply the effect of 'natural' causes, as many observers initially claimed. The catastrophe came covered in the fingerprints of organised silence. Fukushima records show that warnings by experts and citizens about safety hazards were swept aside, right from the mid-1950s, when, against the strong advice of the Japan Scientists Council, the United States backed the policy of developing nuclear power in Japan using

American-designed, enriched-uranium plants unsuited to earthquake zones voices of dissent were ignored, or silenced. The silencing or 'blackout' policy was defended by successive governments, and by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), which became skilled at forging and doctoring safety data; issuing blanket Rashomon Effect assurances through the media that their plants were invulnerable; and harnessing the *kisha* club system of embedded journalism to the point where the company's organised dissimulation made it difficult to improve safety arrangements in the face of unreported dangers. The old habits of hush guaranteed, during the earliest phases of the unfolding disaster, that company directors and government officials were determined to speak with one voice, regardless of what was actually happening on the ground. Silence embraced one disaster after another. The president of the company crumbled under the strain; knowing (as the Japanese say) that the dog had fallen into the river, he stopped attending meetings and quarantined himself in silence in his office for five days and nights. Millions of television viewers soon witnessed fires and minor explosions, even a whole nuclear reactor flying apart in a cloud of dust and debris. More than 10,000 tonnes of highly contaminated water was dumped into the nearby ocean; despite protests from the wider region, the company carried on spraying seawater on several reactors and fuel cores, in the process generating many hundreds of thousands of tonnes of highly radioactive waste, for which it still has no disposal plans. With evacuation plans in disarray, and several reactors melting down, over 100,000 people, many children among them, were forced to flee the Fukushima area, many into temporary shelters, uncompensated and jobless, anxious about their exposure to contaminated food, water and soil, their futures tattered and torn. There was confirmation that a geographic area of nearly a thousand square kilometres—an area roughly one-eighth the size of metropolitan London—would remain uninhabitable for the foreseeable future; that quantities of strontium, caesium and plutonium isotopes, so-called 'hot particles', had been detected in local water tables and in car engine air filters as far away as Seattle; and that something worse than a meltdown had happened at the

plant: a hot fuel 'melt through' of layers of the reactor plant's cracked and compromised the bottom casing. Tepco, facing massive cleanup and compensation costs, tried to regain its media footing by outlining a roadmap for the future safe 'cold shutdown' of the plant. Canny journalists who first visited the site replied that full decommissioning and robotic clean-up of the wrecked and radioactive plant would minimally take a decade; the more prudent in their midst pointed out that nuclear disasters never end.

Political effects

Those who coined the old proverb that silent people are dangerous people could never have foreseen just how dangerous are those anti-political people who organise and manage public silence in the early years of the twenty-first century. Covered-up disasters on the scale of Fukushima are stomach-turning; and with the exponential growth of megaprojects, the probability of catastrophes triggered by organised silence is rising. Tagged with names like 'Three Mile Island', 'Chernobyl', 'Lehman Brothers', 'The Royal Bank of Scotland' and 'Deepwater Horizon', catastrophes are becoming unexceptional. They are a new normal.

So what are their probable political implications? The question's pertinent because historians such as Jean Delumeau and Norman Cohn remind us that past catastrophes typically triggered public mood swings and reactions. Think of the world of medieval Europe, where events such as the Black Death (which wiped out a quarter, perhaps a third of the population of Europe in the space of three or four years) and periodic outpourings of belief in the end of the world served several times as the spark that ignited the gunpowder of millenarian movements.¹⁴ The gigantic earthquake that devastated Lisbon in 1755 ignited violent political tensions in the Kingdom of Portugal, damaged the monarchy's colonial ambitions, inspired various innovations, ranging from the birth of modern seismology and earthquake engineering to Enlightenment criticisms of theodicy and fresh philosophical thinking about the sublime. Closer to our era, the battlefield slaughter of the First World War trampled on beliefs in one-way progress (think of Walter Benjamin's angel of history,

turning its back on the future, gazing backwards on 'one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'¹⁵). The catastrophe triggered fears of the end of the world mixed with hopes of universal redemption through apocalyptic violence, the refusal of 'bourgeois' parliamentary 'chatter' and magnetic attraction to loud-talking 'Men of the People'. The catastrophes associated with the Second World War nearly destroyed parliamentary democracy. Few prophecies of perfection surfaced. For many, the world instead felt emptied of meaning and transcendent purpose, a nightmare reality (as Hannah Arendt noted) haunted hereon by the problem of how to understand and restrain human evil, for instance through human rights, rule of law and other monitory democracy mechanisms in cross-border form.

Freedom of communication: new horizons

So what about our times? It is too early to forecast the full political impacts of the catastrophes of our age, but they are already triggering observable effects. Catastrophes are symptoms of *democracy failure*. They are warnings that big power adventures are exercises in the destruction of politics. By establishing spaces of arbitrary power that defy election cycles and bear some resemblance to medieval fiefdoms where barons rule over commoners, these adventures carry us towards a future where mechanisms of freely chosen representation by citizens and keeping tabs on those who exercise power play a minor role in most people's daily lives. Big power adventures gone wrong do damage, or permanently deform, citizens' lives; and they have potentially hurtful effects upon the whole of humanity, and the rest of our biosphere. Not only do catastrophes turn patches of our planet into permanently uninhabitable zones; they pose worrying questions about irreversible tipping points. They prompt 'greening effects', starting with consideration of the possibility that the human species is passing through a door of no return, that we are falling victim to our own titanism and (a point forcefully made by Haruki Murakami when reflecting on the long-term significance of the Fukushima catastrophe) that we may be

incapable hereon of living self-reflexively as 'uninvited guests on planet Earth'¹⁶.

Catastrophes fuelled by silence are politically significant for another reason. They show not only that politics based on open communication systems greatly matter to the future of our world. They force us as well to rethink the reasons why (let's call it) the First Amendment principle of 'free and open communication' is desirable—far more precious than our ancestors could possibly have imagined.

Is it possible to inject new energy and life into the old political principle of freedom of communication, to effect its re-description so that it assumes a new and expanded political relevance in the early years of the twenty-first century? Can we leave behind the old arguments for 'liberty of the press' that we've inherited from the age of the printing press and print culture? Can we move beyond the conventional consequentialist views that freedom of communication is a good thing because it is a means of informing and mobilising voters, investigating governmental power, providing intelligible frameworks of interpretation, lending different styles of life a stamp of public acceptability, binding disparate groups into common publics and educating them in the virtues of democracy? In other words, is there a way of regarding freedom of public communication as a political principle uniquely suited to our new age of catastrophes?

There is. Simply put, the principle of freedom of public communication is a means of damage prevention, an indispensable early warning mechanism, a way of enabling citizens and whole organisations and networks to sound the alarm whenever they suspect that others are causing them harm, or that calamities are bearing down on their heads, in silence. 'See something, say something' is a widely used motto invented by the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority and today used elsewhere, in many different settings. The motto captures the deepest political significance of freedom of public communication. In principle, it rejects silent nonchalance in human affairs. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,' wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*,¹⁷ but the elegant last-sentence formula of his key early work must be revised. There are moments when silence is not an option. Refusal to hold one's

tongue in the face of organised silence is necessary because it brings things back to earth. It serves as a 'reality check' on unrestrained power; it is a potent means of ensuring that those in charge of organisations do not stray into cloud cuckoo land, wander into territory where misadventures of power are concealed by silence wrapped in fine words of trust, loyalty, growth and progress.

When rethought in this way, the early warning principle of communication has global implications. It is not just that it no longer indulges bland rationalist (Habermasian) fantasies of conjoining citizens into harmonious agreement, or that it is no longer wedded (as earlier justifications of freedom of communication were) to a First Principle, be it Truth or Happiness or Human Rights or God, Public Service or the Common Good. Suspicious of organised silences and arbitrary power, a champion of the weak against the strong, especially when the weak find themselves silenced by the strong, the early warning principle of communication is politically meaningful in a wide range of contexts. It is on the lookout against all forms of arbitrary power, wherever they take root. It is just as applicable to transport projects in China and multi-billion dollar tar sand extraction schemes in Canada as it is to the 'modernisation' of military forces and credit and banking sector institutions elsewhere on the planet. Gripped by a strong sense of the contingency of things, the principle is a fair-minded defender of openness, a friend of perplexity when in the company of cock-sure certainty.

That explains its candour. Nothing about the behaviour of human beings comes as a surprise to the early warning principle of public communication. It doubts that human beings are straightforwardly 'gaffe-avoiding animals'.¹⁸ It sees that humans are capable of the best, and the worst. For that reason, the political principle stands against hubris and the privatisation of risk. It considers that concentrated power is dangerous; it supposes that human beings are not to be entrusted with unchecked power over their fellows, or their circumstances. It stands against stupidity and dissembling; it is opposed to silent arrogance and has no truck with bossing, bullying and violence. The early warning axiom is attuned to conundrums and alive to difficulties. It is serious about the calamities

of our times; it tracks the calamities to come. The axiom stands opposed to those postmodernists who, with a sigh, treat catastrophes as proof of the rottenness of our 'modernity', or as marvellous challenges to the reigning banalities of mass culture. The early warning principle of communication offers a powerful reply to their political wistfulness. The reply, simply put, is that societies plagued by pockets of public silence are asking for trouble. For when big-footprint adventures of power succumb to the unsaid, sweep things under the carpet, become victims of what some writers have called the '*non-dit*', they flirt and dance with disaster.

A politics of catastrophe prevention

But what exactly does the early warning communication principle imply in practice? What is to be done about the organised silence that breeds catastrophes? Can anything help prevent them? A politics of catastrophe prevention is possible, and quite literally it can begin at home, driven by the recognition that our lives begin to end the moment we become silent about things that matter. The story is told that one evening in 1974, shortly after the American chemist Sherry Rowland had discovered that CFC gases would destroy the ozone layer, his partner Joan asked him, a man of unusual calm, how things were going at work. 'It's going very well,' he replied. 'It just means, I think, the end of the world.' As soon as he explained its significance, Joan bellowed, scoured the house and threw out every spray can, vowing never to buy one again. That was the beginning of Sherry Rowland's political campaign against CFCs. Following the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, for which it is in deep trouble in the courts, British Petroleum has launched a rudimentary programme of 'town hall' meetings for its employees and managers. Électricité de France S.A., among the world's largest energy producers, operates a full media disclosure policy. The family-run global clothing retailer C&A has long embraced watchdog 'performance channels', close links with radical nongovernmental organisations, annual citizenship seminars and sworn dependence upon a legally freestanding unit (SOCAM)

responsible for monitoring questionable practices within the company. These companies take their cue from risk-management bodies such as the Oxford-based Major Projects Association (MPA), which urges large-scale projects to adopt 'stand back reviews', periodic 'pulse checks', 'honest reporting' and an internal 'challenging' culture that draws upon 'intelligence' from multiple 'stakeholders'.

As the Leveson Inquiry is currently demonstrating, parliamentary committees and public inquiries can meanwhile bare sharp teeth. Longstanding laws against 'wilful blindness' can be activated by courts. Pains-staking, investigative journalism—the clever patience and good quality writing at newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*—serve counter to plane-spotting 'churnalism'. Citizens themselves can invent and operate silence-breaking mechanisms designed to prevent or minimise the impact of catastrophes, as in Saskatchewan, where (Elaine Scarry reminds us¹⁹) dispersed rural communities have signed legally binding mutual aid contracts, or as in Japan since the Fukushima catastrophe where radiation detection counter-systems operated by citizens have been built, helped by the recent launch of the world's first mobile phone (Softbank's Pantone) that doubles as a Geiger counter.

The common thread running through these manifold efforts to scrutinise and resist arbitrary power is as simple as it is demanding. They doubt the claimed virtues of golden silence. They understand that pockets of silent power are both bad for democracy and politically dangerous in that they have twisting and buckling effects on people's lives. These political experiments in the art of breaking the grip of arbitrary power are early warning signals. They call upon citizens to do more than engage in reasoned deliberation, or to vote. They invite us to recover what Bernard Crick once beautifully called the 'pearl beyond price in the history of the human condition': politics, which includes the art of making public noise, smart public noise, well-targeted din and disquiet loud enough to shatter the eerie silences that so easily can cause things to go so terribly wrong for so many people.

Notes

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