



# TouchWood Ethics NEWSLETTER

Enduring success is based on ethics and values.

Issue 3: December 2006

Welcome to the Newsletter. It contains what I suppose is called an essay. It comes out of my spending some time reading what Albert Schweitzer had to say about ethics around 1920. It's very hard to have a conversation about ethics in business today, especially in Australia. Why is this? Perhaps, argues the essay, because we are no longer optimistic about the possibility of being ethical and surviving. That's always been true, but things that have been happening over the last few years are seriously undermining the notion that progress is inevitable, so there's more at stake in being ethical. See what you think.

Best wishes for the season, whether it's Christmas or Hannukah or just that it's summer and the end of the year. Enjoy, refresh.



## Are we progressing?

It's one of the underlying beliefs of our society that we are always progressing towards a better life, a better society. It is not even a belief – it is more of an assumption that sits behind our conversations about events, be they local or global. But what happens when events occur that create cracks in that certainty?

Our attitude towards ethics is bound to these underlying ideas about progress. If those ideas are under threat, then so is our attitude towards ethics. Is this what is happening now?

### The idea of progress

All of us who were born after World War II have spent our whole lives with the belief that life is getting better. After the enormity of the calamities of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – two world wars and the Depression – the sentiment that prevailed in western society was that life would get better now, continually. And there have been no more world wars since then. The biggest remaining blight on the prospect of world peace, the Cold War, spent itself out in the late 1980s.

Materially, life improved enormously in the decades after 1945. We experienced the age of consumer goods which became available to an ever-widening proportion of the population. The

theory of progress had lots of evidence – motor cars, televisions, telephones, bigger houses, households full of new furniture, swimming pools, computers, overseas holidays.

Socially, the idea of progress has had a few shake-ups. In the 1950s the idea of the perfect life in the suburbs was what prevailed. But many children of the suburbs found it stultifying. It was rigid and confining, and it left too many serious issues buried underneath those new wall-to-wall carpets. Opportunities for women, attitudes towards Aborigines, creativity, were some of the things that languished in the process of moulding comfortable suburban life.

The ructions of the 1960s and early seventies did not overturn the idea of the progress of civilisation. Rather, they gave the idea new impetus. Progress was reconceived and refreshed. The Beatles commented on the situation with typical irony: “I have to admit, it’s getting better, better all the time”. Progress now included liberation (rather than tight social roles), inclusion (beginning with multiculturalism) and creativity (such as stepping across traditional boundaries in art and music).

Technology is the biggest driver of the idea of progress. It has advanced so fast that it very easily generates the illusion that all aspects of life are improving. It is not just the existence of new technologies, but the fact that so much of this technology has become part of most people’s daily lives.

The mobile phone is perhaps the most dramatic example. It would be fair to say that most of the take-up of the mobile phone has occurred in less than five years. Moreover, during this period of time the mobile phone has expanded its capacity and can now be a camera and photo storage device, a radio, a music storage/replay device, an email facility and a receiver of news services.

The constant developments in technology make it easy to believe in the idea of progress. However, the movement is so fast that it has created a treadmill effect across society. People are so intent on acquiring the technology and replacing it often enough to keep up to date, that the focus of attention is on immediately practical matters rather than what lies behind them.

To continually acquire new technologies, people have to focus on getting the money to pay for the upgrades and on learning the skills needed to use new devices and new functionalities. The prior question – what is the larger effect of what is happening? – is pushed aside.

## **Progress under attack**

Despite the aura generated by advancing technology, the idea of progress has received some serious shocks in recent years, perhaps fundamentally so. Although the belief itself is not being openly questioned, its foundations are being eroded. What has happened to threaten the idea of progress?

The attacks on September 11, 2001 in the USA that felled the two towers of the World Trade Center had a huge impact across all of western society. People’s sense of safety was seriously destabilised. The idea of an unpredictable foe who could strike anyone anywhere is a corrosive force. The bomb attacks in London on 7 July 2005 which killed 52 people were sufficiently removed in space, time and method from the US attacks to sustain the belief that this kind of terrorism is an ongoing factor of life.

The strategy which eventuated out of the September 11 attacks, of making the world a better place by defeating tyrannical governments, has been playing itself out disastrously in Iraq and Afghanistan. The quick and clean resolutions which would have renewed faith in the prevailing western view of progress did not transpire. If this is a market for world views, millions of people are not buying the western view, and millions more within the western world are not seeing any confirmation that their world view is self-evidently the best for everyone everywhere.

The environmental situation is a threat of a different kind, but one that is potentially far worse. The situation is not new – the Club of Rome issued a report in 1972 that warned of impending global environmental disaster. However, the evidence is becoming incontrovertible and intrusive, and more widely acknowledged in the public arena.

In Australia, the severity of drought appears to be increasing, and the availability of water for cities, industry and farming is coming seriously into question. This worry is accompanied by the frequency of bushfires; ironically, the resource that is most helpful in the case of fires is water.

Elsewhere, Hurricane Katrina in the USA in 2005, which devastated the entire city of New Orleans, was an indicator that predictions about global warming and its effects deserve to be given serious consideration.

On top of these concerns, the belief of governments in progress would appear to have lost any vigour. There was no doubt in Australia in 1972, when Gough Whitlam came to power with the Labor Party, that the agenda was change and improvement in society, even revolution, at least in vision and attitudes. Importantly, this was accompanied by a commitment to improve fairness and access to services for more people, particularly those who were most disadvantaged.

Currently, the Australian federal government's commitment to either progress or fairness is weak. Its failure to sign the Kyoto Treaty which would have been a small step towards environmental responsibility was defended primarily in terms of Australia's business interests.

Its championing of the Work Choices changes to industrial relations was argued in terms of what was good for the economy and employers. It marginalises any government responsibility for ensuring fairness in the workplace, something that from an ethical perspective is particularly important where there is an imbalance of power in relationships.

What is lost here is any sense of social progress. The only progress that is pictured is improvements in the economy, and even then, not for everyone. What is illuminating is how the loss of a sense of progress (in civilisation, rather than just the economy) walks hand in hand with a loss of a commitment to fairness and ethics.

## Ethics and progress

Many years ago, Albert Schweitzer wrote about the connection between the progress of civilisation and our commitment to ethics. Writing just after the first world war, he said "civilisation originates when men (people) become inspired by a strong and clear determination to attain progress....It is only in ethics that we can find the driving force for such action, transcending, as it does, the limits of our own existence".

Schweitzer's argument is that civilisation rests on our belief that the nature of the universe supports both optimism and ethics. He saw that in the time he was writing, people had lost their sense of meaning and optimism, and ethics had therefore become confused and superficial – "we exist in an atmosphere of mere ethical phrases or declare ourselves ethical sceptics".

Things go on, according to Schweitzer, as long as people retain a belief in progress. But if that belief starts to collapse, ethics crumble along with it. Schweitzer felt that this reality characterised his time, and we can look at the events of the ensuing years from this perspective – these thoughts were expressed around 1920, the years before the Depression and the descent of Europe into the second world war.

Nearly a century later, we have to consider that we are facing a similar dilemma. Our blithe belief in progress, which was made easier by the triumphs of technology and capitalism, is facing threats which are greater than technology and capitalism are able to deal with. The temptation is to follow the path that many governments and businesses are taking – to increasingly narrow the focus to financial outcomes, excluding from consideration any issues of ethics or humanity.

The paradox of this approach is that it fails to realise the real source of success. People do not follow leaders because they can read a balance sheet and cut costs. People follow leaders because they create meaning and purpose, they invite them to participate in projects that look further than self-interest, they inspire.

The narrow financial focus is essentially pessimistic. It says we cannot afford to think about people or social responsibility. We cannot afford to consider whether people are satisfied or engaged at work, or whether they are under stress because of unhealthy work/life balance. We cannot afford to consider the social and ecological effects of our enterprise. We have to keep running, faster, faster.

Of this predicament, Schweitzer concludes: "Given over to events in an attitude of mind which is powerless because it is entirely without any true and ethical ideals of progress, we are experiencing the collapse of material and spiritual civilisation alike".

These are dramatic words, but we need to be aware that external collapse is prefigured by internal realities. The seeds of the demise of Enron and HIH, for example, were sown a long time before they came to culmination. The failure of ethical vision took place years beforehand.

## Sowing new seeds

Making room for ethics in government, business and society is in some respects about recovering the ethical perspective. We know what the basic human values are. We know, from hindsight, what was wrong at Enron and HIH. The basic values of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, fairness, respect for human dignity, unselfishness, compassion, humility and generosity beckon us to live up to them.

What is new is the challenge to re-examine our ideas about progress, and explore what it means in the world we are now living in. This quest is inexorably linked to our views about ethics. We have to tackle both together. To quote Schweitzer again:

The future of civilisation depends on our overcoming the meaninglessness and hopelessness which characterise the thoughts and convictions of men (people) today, and reaching a state of fresh hope and determination. We shall be capable of this, however, only when the majority of individuals discover for themselves both an ethic and a profound and steadfast attitude of world- and life-affirmation.

We need a contemporary understanding and appreciation of the nature of the physical world we are living in and what makes society function optimally. Combined with this we need a commitment to ethics that, in Schweitzer's words, "reaches down into the spiritual nature of humanity" and enables us to live optimistically.

[Quotations from Albert Schweitzer are from *The Philosophy of Civilisation*, Prometheus Books, New York, 1987. The book was completed in 1923 and was first published in English in 1949.]

### Feedback

Let Glenn know what you think of the newsletter and the website. It's all part of the endeavour to bring an ethical perspective to business, one that enables people to work with integrity and organisations to operate with high principles.

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