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pour le Réarmement moral

CAUX

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Dear Friends,

Another week at Caux, and with the end of the Conference for Business and Industry the “conference weather” – rain, mist, cold – has given way to “outdoors weather” – sun, blue skies clear of everything except para-gliders. Most of us have had the chance to enjoy it, except possibly the 20 – 30 people who have been engaged in an intensive two-day meeting on MRA communications and publications. (You will find a brief report of this in the next World Bulletin.)

The CCBI itself, with its six hard-working Forums on the mass media, environment, small businesses, information technology, economic policy and the Junior Round Table, ended on Thursday. At the final meeting, Cornelio Sommaruga held us riveted as he told in detail of his part in the campaign that led to the banning of anti-personnel land mines, during his presidency of the International Red Cross.

Bernard Margueritte, the new President of the International Communications Forum, moved us all deeply with his conviction and his humility. He has going with Bill Porter, now the “Founding President” and a self-described “lapsed agnostic”, to pray in the chapel, and to lay the future of the ICF in God’s hands. He pledged “to maintain faithfulness to the spirit of Caux”, and the “conscience to conscience approach” of the Forum.

In a separate development, as they say on news broadcasts, Margueritte’s wife, Polish architect Joanna Giecewicz, announced the launch of a new Forum on ecology and the environment. It may come to rival her husband’s in its size and impact – scope for some gentle family competition?

Earlier, Philippe Lévy, the head of Transparency International (TI), Switzerland, gave last week’s Caux Lecture. TI is the main NGO committed to combating corruption world-wide, which to quote Lévy “acts like an invisible tax that unfairly penalises those least able to bear the burden – the poor.” You will get an idea of this occasion from the enclosed press release. It was followed by an evening of vigorous Scottish and Moldovan dancing. Participants, specially the many from East Europe, then settled down to a reading of “Letter to Woolongong”, a play by Jara Moserova, the Czech President of UNESCO, which depicts what it is like to try to resist the pressures exerted by dictatorial regimes. Dr Moserova was on hand to discuss it afterwards, particularly with those for whom these are realities which shaped their parents’ lives, but are outside their own experience.

Tom Delfgaauw, Vice President for Sustainable Development of Shell International, conducted a fascinating dialogue with 150 participants from business and industry about the process of re-thinking Shell’s business principles and their application, following the Brent Spar affair and in Nigeria, when it was realised that “something had gone seriously wrong”.

When I first started to help organise industrial conferences at Caux, in 1973, I remember participants being mainly older men – always men – in suits. These days they seem to me to be predominantly younger people, often in tee shirts. It’s like when policemen start to look young – you know something is happening to you rather than the policemen!

The conference itself has evolved with the years too. The theme of the first one was “The role of industry in building a new society” – a task normally associated at the time with the radical left. As the world moved on, so did the conference. Sometimes we were ahead of the game, for example, in building relationships of trust with Japanese business people, leading to the birth of the Caux Round Table, and at other times less so. An attempt to address the problem of international debt in the ‘80s, for example, fizzled out – or appeared to, until we realised that one of those involved, Bill Peters, was making a major impact with the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Bill was present again this year, to update us on the campaign, before setting off to lobby the G8 meeting in Genoa.

Despite many evidences of God’s spirit at work, several of us most closely involved have begun to feel that the CCBI was not matching its potential at a time of huge interest in the morality of business. We felt a new departure was needed, new people, new ideas. So it has been both a wrench and a great relief this week to discover that a group of younger business people do indeed have new ideas, and for Richard Pearce, the Conference Secretary, and me to hand over co-ordination responsibilities to them. Menso Fermin (The Netherlands) and Steven Greisdorf (USA) have agreed to carry forward the leadership of the CCBI, building up a core team to do it with them. Watch this space ... !

Through the summer, 27 volunteers, recruited in part via the internet, are helping to head up service teams and other work. The first group have done their three-week stint and handed over to another group. They will be missed, both as friends and for their important contribution to the work. One, who has changed her plans to stay on longer, told some of us “It’s been great fun. Wherever I am, whatever I do, Caux and MRA will be part of my life from now on.” A woman from the Middle East, who had been to Caux before said, “It’s different now. I am part of it. It’s mine.”

During the gap between conferences, a number of us were able to travel to the funeral of Mme Jacqueline Fiaux, Jean’s mother, one of the pioneers of the Oxford Group before the war. If anything, gratitude for the lives and work of the founding generation of MRA grows with the years, and it is as keenly felt by young people as it is by those of us now in middle age.

Alongside all this run the Caux Scholars Programme, which brings students and graduates from all over the world to study the art of conflict prevention at Caux, and the Foundations For Freedom Summer Programme, with 25 young people from Russia, Moldova and Ukraine exploring leadership and teamwork.

And now, after a 48-hour breather, the house has filled again for the session on “Aims and Values for the New Century”. Launched yesterday, it is taking the form of an honest conversation on private and public decision making, drawing on the experience of Hope in the Cities, and much else. Next week’s newsletter will no doubt bring news of it.

With warm greetings from Caux,

Chris Evans.