November 8, 2004

'Moral Values' and the U.S. Election: A View from Overseas

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FARNELL, Scotland
Like many farming hamlets in Scotland, Farnell has no shops, banks, or gas stations. You're more likely to see pheasants than automobiles along the roads. The milkman still calls at stone houses where cable TV and high-speed computer lines aren't yet available.

Yet visiting here last week, I've rarely felt closer to a U.S. election. Our host's television antenna picked up two competing networks (BBC and ITN's ITV) that provided nonstop all-night coverage from anchors in Washington. Throughout the week, the British papers were drenched with campaign coverage. People here spoke learnedly about the political distinctions between Florida and Ohio -- far better than most Americans could talk about the differences between, say, Scotland and Wales. Even on Sunday, when it was all over, the London **Times** lavished more than seven full pages on the event, including charts and graphs detailing the finer points of voter demographics.

Should that interest surprise us? No, for three reasons. First, the power of the U.S. presidency directly affects the lives and well-being of people all across the world. Second, the special relationship of language, culture, and history between the United States and Britain intensifies the interest in what happens "across the pond." Third, this election was particularly significant, given tensions here over Prime Minister Tony Blair's support for President Bush and the war in Iraq. Add to that a stark political fact -- that public opinion in Britain, and in much of Europe, overwhelmingly supported John Kerry, and was devastated by Bush's reelection -- and you can understand why the British public gorged itself on the intricacies of the U.S. Electoral College and battleground states.

As it did so, one particular exit-poll number was so fascinating to British commentators that it turned up in every paper I've read since the polls closed. The number is 22, and it refers to the percentage of U.S. voters who saw "moral values" as their most important reason for voting as they did. No other issue -- not the economy, not terrorism, not Iraq -- was cited as often. As interpreted by commentators over here, "moral values" usually referred to three specific issues -- abortion, gay marriage, and stem-cell research -- that featured in the campaign. Seen that way, it played squarely into a stereotype of U.S. culture as intolerant, puritanical, and consumed by sexual issues.

In fact, U.S. culture is more complicated. "Moral values" also figured strongly in exit polls in 1996 and 2000, when this troika of issues was not in play and when first a Democrat and then a Republican were elected. What's more, the values discussion in the United States these days is rich and nuanced. Yes, the headlines speak of pornography, family break-up, and teenage pregnancy. But they also stretch from academic cheating and corporate fraud through political duplicity, media irresponsibility, and sports scandals -- moral issues all.

Yet that, alas, isn't the point. Despite such logic, the phrase "moral values" now has a negative political charge, particularly among articulate overseas observers. For those of us concerned with ethics and integrity, that's an important point. Notwithstanding the use of the word "moral" by the great English philosophers, we may have to put the word on hold for a time. There are some exceptions -- like *moral courage*, in which the positive valence of the latter word seems to neutralize the negative charge on the former. More often, however, *moral* is interpreted as "moralizing," "prudish," or "intolerant," and its users labeled as arch-conservatives.

In a similar way, the recent campaign also may have tainted the word "religious." The overseas media, seeing the United States through the lens of Democratic strongholds in the Northeast and along the West Coast, thinks Kerry was voted down by a fervent right-wing Christian fundamentalism. Again, the picture is more complicated. Yes, 78 percent of evangelicals favored Bush. But that produced only 20.7 million votes. Far more important were the more middle-of-the-road Protestants (36.9 million for Bush, 25 million for Kerry) and Catholics (16.3 million for Bush, 14.7 million for Kerry).

Yet that, too, isn't the point. Never mind the fact that religion long has been seen as a respectable source for ethical values. The word "religious" now appears to be joining "moral" in the quarantine file of terms suspected of political infection.

For those of us laboring in the highlands of ethics, what should be our response? We should try, over time, to burnish these words back to their original brilliance through careful use. Meanwhile, it won't help to whine over their loss. Words, like fashions, rise and set. If our purpose is to help people understand *how* to think rather than *what* to think, we need to avoid even the appearance of partisan entanglements. Opinions on the election -- what to think -- are hanging from every tree, while frameworks for thinking about the ethics of political choice -- how to think -- are rare indeed. If our listeners dismiss our language and never grasp our frameworks, that's our fault, not theirs. This election reminds us, once again, that ethics is vital to our political future; that we must strive to communicate it in responsible, inclusive language; and that the most helpful communication comes from a place far beyond the divisive stereotypes of the last few months.