

LEADERSHIP REQUIRES COURAGE – BULLYING DOES NOT

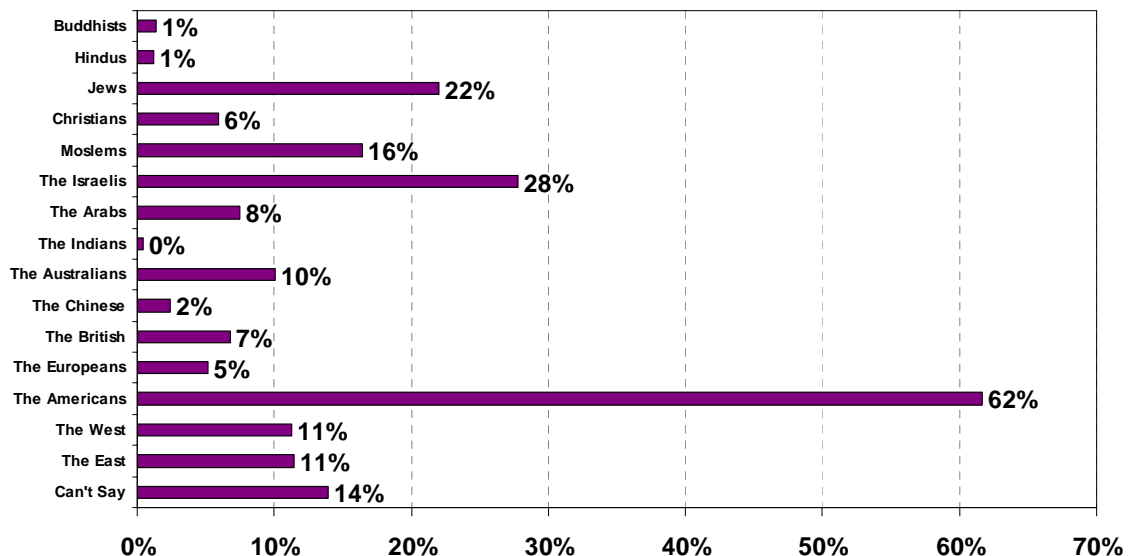
For businesses to ignore the lessons of the last week in Bali would be worse than burying the proverbial head in the sand. Champion of democracy, remaining superpower and the world's biggest polluting nation to boot stood steadfast in its corner, unwilling to budge and refusing to join even a much compromised consensus at week's end. That is, until Kevin Conrad from Papua New Guinea unequivocally asked the US delegation to lead, or "get out of the way". Minutes later, Paula Dobriansky and Jim Connaughton caved in and an isolated United States finally joined the union of nations, albeit grudgingly. Later, the White House expressed "serious concern" even with a roadmap that has no milestones.

All of last week, Connaughton had repeatedly paid homage to George Bush's "leadership" on climate change. In reply to a question, he said "we will continue to lead. But leadership also requires others to fall in line and follow." Profound or comical? Every time anyone put him in front of a TV camera, he tirelessly listed the many technological capabilities his country possessed to help save the planet. Not surprising, considering that polls show that the majority of the American public are indeed conscious of the threats from global warming and would like to see positive action taken to combat the phenomenon. Yet, the proceedings in Bali have received very little airtime on domestic US television. All of Saturday and into Sunday, in the 24 hours that followed the last-minute U-turn there was hardly a mention on Fox News Channel, the country's "most powerful name in news". A virtual blackout.

During that time, BBC and CNN replayed the Conrad footage over and over again, at least in their international broadcasts. So did TV channels around the world. Knowing their audiences, media tend to feed their patrons with what they want to hear and see. If the David versus Goliath moment in Bali was not worthy of mention in the United States but was deemed a pivotal moment for the rest of the world to watch, the omission would reconfirm the view that the American perspective of world affairs is indeed unique.

"In your opinion, which of the following groups are responsible for the terrorism our world is living with everyday?"

Indonesia



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A survey on democracy was conducted last month by Roy Morgan Research at the behest of the Asia Pacific chapter of the International Association of Political Consultants. Respondents from urban centres in six regional countries representing big and small, rich and poor, East and West were asked a series of questions. In what is a major irony, 62 per cent of Indonesians saw the leading prosecutors of the so-called War on Terror as one of the groups “responsible for the terrorism our world is living with today”. Many will claim not to be surprised with the Indonesian response. But what about 34 per cent of Thais and 36 per cent of Indians? Or, 38 per cent of Australians?

The rest of the world is unwilling to accept US foreign policy based on “my way or the highway”. The obvious distinction needs to be made, however, between US foreign policy and everything else American. Local businesses and professionals working with US counterparts everywhere can only continue to reassure them of the popular acceptance of American people and culture, science and technology, products and services. So would all peace-loving individuals, anywhere. Who would deny the contribution of that other American, Al Gore, favourite defender of Planet Earth? He has been abused and ridiculed by the oil lobby in his own country, for years. He will be pilloried again for the candour he expressed last week, naming his own country “an obstruction”. But 190 other countries will remain grateful.

In contrast, a multi-million-dollar global advertising campaign championing the fact that a particular oil company is also the world’s biggest producer of alternative energy begs this question: what percentage of their global fuel production is from alternative or renewable sources today? Instead of the usual spin, it would be refreshing to see them run advertisements telling Americans that other people pay more for a litre of petrol than they pay for a gallon. The rest of the world has thanked their hosts and gone home with a compromise that will at least allow the next US administration to talk specific emission targets and discuss essentials like carbon trading.

Every business, regardless of origin, industry or size can only stand to gain by exploiting commercial opportunities offered by the heightening global awareness of a planet in peril. There is no need to wait for the Copenhagen talks in 2009, because initiatives taken today to minimise packaging, transportation and energy consumption will pay back when carbon trading becomes a reality tomorrow. Consumers across the spectrum, from shampoo to cars, are ready to be engaged. All they need is the truth, delivered with courtesy.

It is reassuring to hear that the delegation of the Australian mining industry has returned, eager now to export clean-coal technology, not just coal. Pessimists will smell “government subsidies” in that enthusiasm. Optimists won’t care what the motivation is. Transfer of technology is one of the three key pillars of the framework agreed in Bali. Businesses producing and marketing new technologies need returns on their investments, regardless of who ends up paying for it. In the end, it is the consumer. In a borderless global environment, that also includes the people who will stop chopping down rainforests because they will get paid to renew them. For all of us.

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