



————— **Article 1 of 1** —————

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Clueless in Seattle. (WTO protesters)

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In so many ways, the WTO protesters and the ministers who had to put up with them richly deserve each other

IT IS hard to say which was worse--watching the militant dunces parade their ignorance through the streets of Seattle, or listening to their lame-brained governments respond to the "arguments". No, take that back: the second was worse. At least the rioters had a good time. It was the politicians who made the biggest hash of things. Bill Clinton wants to invite the protesters indoors. France's trade minister says here is the proof that economics and politics cannot be kept apart: statism lives! Britain's trade minister doubtfully insists that "free trade can be fair trade", as if to concur that it quite often isn't (but never fear, he is on the look-out for any sign of unfairness). God help us.

Placid, even-tempered liberals (among whom we would normally count ourselves) will deplore our exasperation. Governments must live in the real world, they point out. Concerns about trade and globalisation are real, and can be legitimate: they deserve to be addressed. Indeed they do. So here's an idea: let governments start addressing them. Let them explain that trade is first and foremost a matter of freedom--that if a government forbids its citizens to buy goods from another country it has infringed their liberty. (Why were there no anarchists among all those "anarchists", by the way?) Let them explain that trade makes people better off, especially the

explain that trade makes people better off, especially the poorest people in the poorest countries. Let them explain that trade improves the environment, because it raises incomes, and the richer people are, the more willing they are to devote resources to cleaning up their living space. Let them explain that the WTO is not a global government, but merely a place where governments make agreements, and then subject themselves to arbitration in the event of a dispute.

Under each of these headings, governments have not merely failed to make the case for free trade. They have pandered to their (unappeasable) critics, moved half-way to meet their demands and lent credence to their bogus fears. When it comes to trade, governments entertain no presumption that people might actually know for themselves what is best. Ever mindful of producer lobbies, governments downplay or deny the fact that freer trade raises incomes: that is why they must be on hand to ensure that trade is "fair". And rich-country governments themselves have given rise to legitimate fears that the WTO will take on a role beyond its proper competence. Calls for the body to develop a new agenda on the environment and on labour standards--demands that will push it into matters that, at best, belong in other forums, and which could easily end up hurting the poorest countries--have come mainly from the United States. By acknowledging the need for such an agenda, the administration has conceded much of the ground to its stone-throwing critics and undermined broader support for freedom to trade.

"Clueless" is putting it kindly.

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