

UNDERSERVED AND OVERLOOKED

By Bishop Council Nedd II

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501 Capitol Court NE #200, Washington, D.C. 20002

202/543-4110, Fax 202/543-5975

E-Mail Project21@nationalcenter.org, Web <http://www.project21.org>.

Companies manufacturing new drugs to combat illnesses from the flu to AIDS are at risk of losing their patent rights. Supporters of this say it will make drugs cheaper and more plentiful. Stripping drug companies of this financial security, however, removes the incentive for them to continue the costly process of developing new and more effective drugs.

I recently escorted a delegation of American patients' rights activists to a meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss this problem. The WHO is a United Nations agency that acts as a coordinating authority on international public health matters. Unfortunately, it is plagued by an undemocratic and elitist element.

The WHO's stated objective is "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health." Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Geneva to find other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) objecting to my delegation's request to participate in discussing a global strategy and plan of action on public health, innovation and intellectual property.

Not only did these NGOs object to our presence, but they sought to have us barred from participating. In particular, the delegation from Thailand worked with those NGOs to have our delegation removed from the meeting. They failed, but their actions were shocking to those of us who expected at least a modicum of tolerance for opposing viewpoints.

Thailand's leaders, over the years, have stood accused of human rights abuses by international observers. A 2006 coup led by the Thai military led to a suspension of the country's constitution, a cancellation of planned elections, bans on political activity, the arrest of prominent government officials and suppression of the free press. Recent elections were considered far from free and fair, and the country is also known for virtually unabated activities in a sex industry that many liken to slavery.

Who would want an ally like that? The answer, it seems, is James Love - a disciple of leftist luminary Ralph Nader. Love heads an NGO called Knowledge Ecology International. He opposes drug patent protections, and doesn't seem shy about trying to squah any and all debate. He collaborated with the Thai delegation on the motion to have patient advocates' testimony - including mine - at the Geneva proceedings stricken from the record.

With so much WHO focus on post-colonial Africa, I now know what my father meant when he said, "Meet the new boss, the same as the old boss." I should not be surprised this seemingly privileged white man is acting with virtually no hesitation in imposing his values and political agenda on the Third World.

Mr. Love's attitude is one that manifests itself generally among the liberal elites who step into the public sandbox and proclaim it their own personal playground. The paternalistic mindset is almost neocolonialist in its depreciation of native peoples. I can't say I wouldn't be shocked to hear such people say "the Negro can't take care of himself" or "they are like children who need a firm parent."

I do not have enough guile in my body to claim to speak for everyone, and neither would I want that authority. But some people obviously do.

There is also a socialist hegemony at play in the WHO, which makes it no surprise that Naderites are flourishing there. Does a contempt for the free market justify the suffering of the less fortunate in the long-term? I cannot make that decision on Mr. Love's behalf, but neither do I have to live with it.

Then there is his affiliation with Thailand. Is Mr. Love aware of the allegations against the Thai government? No doubt. Does he care? Apparently not. When it comes right down to it, some white males of privilege really seem to believe they know better than everyone else and they will do what they have to do to make their point. In his case, Mr. Love apparently found an ally in Thailand.

We need to return to the founding tenets of the United Nations and World Health Organization, and take heed of the challenges and contributions of all people. We cannot afford to cede control to those who believe that intellectual property is something that can be plundered and pillaged as spoils of class warfare.

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Project 21 member Council Nedd II, the bishop of the Chesapeake and the Northeast for the Episcopal Missionary Church, is the honorary chairman of In God We Trust (<http://www.ingodwetrustusa.org>) - a group formed to oppose anti-religious bigotry. Comments may be sent to Project21@nationalcenter.org.

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