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I love quotations. Perhaps my all-time favourite is by the American columnist and short-story writer Don Marquis: "If you make people think they are thinking, they'll love you, but if you really make them think - they'll hate you." It is an appropriate introduction to the following observations that I present as food for thought.

There is a multinational conglomerate with truly massive global assets and income. It has numerous subsidiaries worldwide, almost all of which have been competing with one another for local and/or overall supremacy for a very long time. Indeed, they owe their very existence to competition among themselves and, as a consequence, they have been at each other's throats almost all the time. The various subsidiaries offer roughly the same major product - perhaps a more accurate description of what is on offer is a reward - and its customers are asked to accept, on trust, that they will ultimately receive it. The various subsidiaries have evolved complex hierarchies of administrators and associates who exact and readily receive funding with breathtaking ease. Many associates and customers work for the company voluntarily for no recompense other than the promise - given and accepted on trust - that they will ultimately receive their reward. Those who do not work for or are not associated with any of the subsidiaries will not.

The company also receives massive amounts of free assistance from the numerous states in which it is ensconced. It gets free advertising on TV and radio, owns and controls numerous dedicated broadcasting outlets worldwide and many assets are state-supported. The freely donated assistance, much by customers, is massive in quality and quantity and is responsible for a lot of the worthwhile and effective contributions to society, but these are spin-offs - not the main product on offer. US branches received some \$81 billion (£50 billion) in donations last year. The leaders pontificate - as if by right - on any issue under the sun and are listened to, even by our democratically elected leaders. The young and impressionable are specifically targeted with corporate publicity and propaganda and, in this and other countries, taxes are used to support the education of children under the tutelage of devoted associates and administrators, often in controlled schools.

In the past, the firm has managed to eliminate its critics and not that long ago one subsidiary openly and unashamedly put out a contract on the life of a UK national; the then British (Thatcher) government hardly blinked an eye at this threat. In a recent discussion on TV a key national representative, associated with one of the major antagonistic subsidiaries, claimed its policies were incompatible with democracy; a point not picked on by other participants. It seems odd that in the wake of the Enron and Worldcom fiascos this company, which has been around much longer, is thriving and apparently growing in power and influence, even though there is no evidence whatsoever that any customer has ever received the primary reward on offer.

There may be a deep clue to the conglomerate's success in an incident that I recently witnessed while in a colonial outpost, built by the company a long time ago, in a poor isolated town in the mountains of Mexico. I was pondering the fact that the only visible wealth in the town was draped around the walls of this building, when a very poor very old lady in a black shawl entered, got down on her knees and crawled along the stone floor to put money in a donation box. The only real result of this - it seemed to me - must be bleeding knees. What amazing power the CEOs wield, from half a world away, to make this poor old lady subject herself to this painful ordeal so willingly.

There have been numerous struggles for supremacy between the subsidiaries over the years and a particularly catastrophic one occurred between two leading antagonists in the 12th century. Is it not curious that the two avowedly most passionate supporters of the main western subsidiaries appear intent on actions arguably - and many will argue - contravening international law? Apart from possibly resurrecting a 21st-century rerun of the 12th-century conflict with truly catastrophic global consequences, what will shame us all will be Britain's complicity in undermining the United Nations. Just as democracy, with all its weaknesses, is the only half-decent political ideology around, so the UN, with all its weaknesses, is the only half-decent inter-nation show on the planet.

I finish these thoughts with my personal lemma to Marquis's quotation: "If you hated this article I might have succeeded in making you think, and if you liked it, I guess I must have been preaching to the unconvertible!"