

21 November 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

When I lived in England, in the latter half of the 1980s, I discovered that I was allowed to vote in General Elections.

Though I was a citizen of Canada, not the UK, I was, legally, just as much a subject of Queen Elizabeth as my English friends were, though still 'inferior' in their eyes. Still, it meant that, in Her Majesty's eyes, I should exercise my right to vote for a Member of Parliament in London, rather Her Parliament in Ottawa.

Australians could vote too. So could New Zealanders. But not the Americans. I let them know this.

Left, Right, and Middle

I loved politics back then. I still do, but with the forbearance that comes with advancing age, the sense of having 'seen it all before' (though I haven't), and with the wheezy wisdom that avid readers of *Ecclesiastes* know very well: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun."

So there.

In England, it felt as though I was living much closer to the Sun, the centre of things. That's the colonial legacy, isn't it?

I listened to *This Week in Parliament* and *Any Questions* on the BBC. I read the major newspapers (the 'broadsheets') especially on the weekends when there were long articles and supplements in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and the newly established *Independent*. I debated the big issues in the Common Room.

The quality of journalistic commentary and analysis was higher than I'd known in Canada. Even 'Letters to the Editor' were deftly written, well-reasoned, and sometimes very funny. Mind you, I steered clear of the Conrad Black's *Daily Telegraph*. It was just too 'right wing' for my pseudo-Bolshevism.

I never purchased *The News of the World*, which was not unlike *The National Enquirer* (remember that?), but I'd sometimes flip through a copy at the newsagent's shop near the College I lived in, for that florid 'tabloid' could not be found amongst the newspapers in the Common Room. After a quick glance over my shoulder, lest a tutor be hovering nearby to purchase twenty Rothmans and

The Times Literary Supplement, I might even have gawked at page three of *The Sun*. It was, shall we say, more risqué than the blander *Toronto Sun*.

To my innocent, middlebrow Canadian sensibility, the British press excelled at both highbrow and lowbrow, the 'quality press' and the 'gutter press'. The 'high' was much higher than I'd known, and the 'low' was very much lower. In the same fashion, the political Right in Britain seemed 'hard right' to me, and the Left 'extreme left'. By comparison, Canadian politics occupied a bland, mushy middle, like the porridge I grew up on.

Perhaps that's why I voted with enthusiasm in Britain. The politics stirred me. The issues loomed larger. The elections seemed to be about something more than who could make the better porridge (constitutional crises notwithstanding). There seemed to be more at stake in the choice between Tory and Labour in Britain than there had been between Tory and Liberal in Canada.

That kind of atmosphere makes life more exciting when you're twenty-something and given to dreamy idealism.

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!" wrote William Wordsworth, safely ensconced in England, but awash in memories of the French Revolution in 1789. I felt some of that fervour in 1989, in a mild, introverted, Canadian way, so as not to stand out and be noticed.

Margaret Thatcher, 'the Iron Lady', ruled rigidly from 'Number 10'. She went to war with the Trade Unions, metaphorically speaking. Then she went war, in a literal way, with Argentina to re-take the Falkland Islands for Britain. Her popularity soared, Huzzah!

The oratorically-gifted but strategically-hampered Neil Kinnock, a balding Welshman, did his best as Leader of the Labour Party to shore up his waning support within the disintegrating Trade Union movement.

The miners went on strike. The miners lost. Badly. The handwriting was on the wall now. The Western World was turning to the 'Right' and there was no turning back. The Gospel of the Free Market was preached loudly and believed in religiously, even by the 'working classes'. It still is, alas.

So, in a fit of contrarianism, I read the heretical Karl Marx, looking for Capitalism's loopholes.

But beyond these cat-and-dog fights between Capital and Labour, Right and Left, all the newspapers agreed that a larger existential threat was hanging over the world's head. It was not Climate Change. It was Nuclear Holocaust. The Hard Left was for disarmament. The Hard Right was for sticking it to the USSR

before they stuck it to us. It was 'Better Red than Dead' versus 'Better Dead than Red'.

The prospect of nuclear devastation scared me to death back then. (It ought to scare me still, and it puzzles me why it doesn't.) So, I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the UK, if only to maintain my spotless reputation for backing losing horses.

Ronald Reagan gave his 'Tear Down This Wall' speech. Then Mikhail Gorbachev descended from the Ural Mountains, mouthing those new Russian words we'd never heard before: 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost'.

Gorbachev appeared on British TV, waving to a crowd outside 10 Downing Street after a meeting with the Margaret Thatcher. I remember a loud, Lancashire voice, like Ringo's, shouting, "Peace in the future, Gorby!" 'Gorby' didn't understand much English, but he got the gist. He lifted his hat and waved it in the direction of the voice, exposing the big birth mark on his head.

Peace-in-our-Time *did* come. Sort of. The world changed in 1989. I returned to Canada late that autumn, and it felt as though a page of history had turned forever, and all would be well now. No one believed the world could change so swiftly and so decisively. But it did, right before our eyes.

Then it drifted. Then it changed some more. When Tony Blair became Prime Minister in Britain, the old Labour party re-styled itself as 'New Labour', to distance itself from its radical roots. The aged, militant Marxists were put out to pasture. Blair befriended Bush and backed his bloody venture in Iraq. Inequality soared. Now it's as though we're at the entrance to a new circle of hell.

Who could see *that* coming? Who could have predicted the rapid rise in authoritarianism throughout the world today, not least in 'the former Soviet Union' (not much 'Glasnost' there now, is there?). And what are we to make of the baffling assaults on democracy in the world's self-styled 'Greatest Democracy' immediately south of our border?

Perhaps there *can* be "a new thing under the sun" after all? For better, I pray, not for worse.

An Abrupt Coda

I really went on a tangent, didn't I? When I sat down, I thought I was going to write about something else, but I never got to it. Maybe another time.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew

Gorbachev, Thatcher, and Reagan

