

## CHANGE AND DECAY

### The Backdrop to the General Election

Commentators are right when they tell us that the forthcoming UK General Election promises very considerable political uncertainty. The outcome is the least predictable for many years. Sadly, this uncertainty needs to be placed against a backdrop of what fundamentally can only be described as extensive national change and decay.

Addressing a conference last year, I found myself moaning about what I saw as “blind complacency within the UK about our national future”. I would like to spell this out.

People of my age are likely to be more sensitive to this, who have witnessed, in their lifetimes, the retreat from Empire and the erosion of historic English ideals and assumptions. But I think we can all recognise in British Society :

- a decline of deference and the strengthening of individualism at the expense of collective loyalties ;
- a growing confusion in social *Mores* (reflected less in crime and gratuitous violence than in family life and personal relationships) ;
- a loss of national identity and cohesion, to the point that the UK could even unravel or implode. (Devolution in Scotland and Wales ; but also ethnic and other religious divisions – see further below) ;
- the replacement of acceptable past icons (from Senior Civil Servants to Wolfclub pack Leaders ; from Cabinet Ministers to School Teachers) by celebrities, glitterati, footballers and their ‘WAGS’, etc ;
- a change in constitutional process defined by the decline of Parliament and of Cabinet decision-making and the rise of a prime ministerialism apparently less affected by the checks and balances and precedents of the past – and certainly less constrained by an independent civil service formerly expected to “Tell Truth to Power”) ;
- a corresponding rise in the power of the mass media (itself part prudish, part prurient, but mostly cynical and ‘dumbed-down’, which mocks the political class and has provoked from the latter an equally corrosive habit of ‘spin’) ;
- after decades of progressive equalisation, the beginnings of significant new divergence between the rich and the poor (mainly at the expense of the middle 2nd and lower-middle classes) ;
- a spiritual rootlessness of which the public reaction to the death of Diana – for those of us who remember it – was one of many symptoms, as is the decline in church attendance.

No doubt the foregoing list could be further expanded. Looking ahead, however, and admittedly in the spirit of pessimism evoked above, I am myself fearful of the following :

- a fatal ‘de-skilling’ of the national work force, as the result of failings in our public education system (science, technology, vocational skills), of a kind which could undermine our international competitiveness. These days, 20% of our school leavers are functionally illiterate (the figure in China is 4%). According to ‘Engineering UK’, there is annual unmet domestic demand for 50,000 engineers

- (possibly an overstatement but the figure is certainly in the many thousands).  
Productivity is flat or in decline ;
- the erosion of beneficial social cohesion as a result of inter alia the immigration issue: I think of the social and economic problems of the Afro-Caribbeans on the one hand, and the potential political disaffection of Asian Muslims on the other – and the UK now has nearly 3 million Muslim citizens (1 in 10 children below 5 years of age). Already 20% of babies are born to mothers born overseas – in London, the figure is as high as 60%. Between 7 and 8 million citizens are foreign born. Among primary school children, 1 in 5 do not speak English at home. Ethnic ghettos have sprung up in our major cities, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. According to the Professor of Demographics at Oxford, if present trends continue, the white population may become a minority in the UK by 2070 ;
  - the ‘greying’ of the population (a shrinking percentage of workers may show themselves reluctant to pay for the needs of a growing percentage of ‘wrinklies’ – and, by 2030, the over 65s will have increased in number by 50%) ;
  - the emergence of a new, selfish and greedy plutocracy. The rewards of FTSE 100 Chief Executives are now said to be 185 times greater (it was 47 times, in 2003) than the average remuneration of their employees. The very rich are also good at tax avoidance – few pay IHT, for example). The best paid 1% in the UK now hold 20% of the national wealth – the top 10% hold 50% ;
  - the adverse impact on the professional and middle-classes of the newest technologies. Computerisation, in particular, may in due course create swathes of unemployment, among these groups ;
  - a move towards Republicanism, after the present Monarch has passed away, and Prince Charles has ascended the throne (yet the Monarchy gives the nation something which Presidential Prime Ministers do not) ;
  - a continued de-Christianisation of the UK, in favour of consumerist paganism (the latter certain further to alienate Muslims).

That, for British fundamentals. On domestic housekeeping, I say nothing about our deficient housing stock ; our mouldering roads and our overcharged airports ; our troubled National Health Service. And then there is the declining British international persona. For much of the modern era, the skills of our diplomats and the professionalism of our armed forces were widely respected. Today, the morale of the FCO is low. And I agree with Clare Short’s recent comment that the UK military ‘did badly in Basra. The deployment to Afghanistan’s Helmand province in 2006 was a disaster. Libya was not thought through’. Where we were once in the van against the former Mau Mau terrorists to Kenya, we are, for example, absent today from the battle against Boko Haram in Nigeria, that former jewel in the Commonwealth crown in Africa. We certainly now need to ‘bulk up’ our diplomacy and armed forces. The latter are facing a further 10% real cut in spending ; the former has already been subject to a 30% cut since 2010 – and there has been a loss of language skills (including Russian and Arabic) and regional expertise. From the European Commission, there has been an exodus of British staff from policy influencing roles, and we now have only half the staff numbers of Eurocrats to which we are entitled.

In an unprecedentedly outspoken and critical comment, the normally staid ‘Economist’ this month claims that Mr. Cameron is a ‘foreign-policy irrelevance’, who has been ‘not so much cautious as apathetic, ineffective and fickle’. Mr Cameron has been ‘almost absent in dealing with Russian revanchist aggression against the Ukraine’. In EU Summits, allegedly Cameron ‘has been under-prepared and over ambitious’. In his attempts to block the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as

President of the European Commission, he ‘repeatedly got it wrong, finding himself isolated with little to show for his intransigence’. Six of his Tory cabinet ministers are reported to be ready for the UK to leave the EU. Lord Hannay has compared David Cameron’s referendum pledge with ‘a man threatening to jump from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge unless his demands are met’.

But enough of ‘Little England’. Moving from the national to the international scene, we have grown accustomed in recent decades to peace as a normal state of affairs. We have expected conflicts to be short-lived and containable and assumed that the international community can cope with whatever arises. Sadly, however, the paradox has arisen that globalisation can foster intense localisms and narrow nationalisms. The wider world can prompt human beings to seek the comfort of small, like-minded groupings. The new communications technologies and social media platforms can be exploited to foster fanaticism and transmit destabilising radical ideologies.

In particular we face :

- the adverse potential consequences for the UK of the rise of China and India to superpower status, and of Russia to Fascist self-assertion, while the US declines and the unreformed EU (already in some ways now a disappointment – and according to Eurobarometer, there has been a dramatic drop in support for the EU across the continent) showing signs of fading into insignificance ;
- big changes in Islam as we have known it. Thousands of young Europeans now adhere to a death cult (over 500 of them, British citizens). What is really happening inside Islam? Are the Fundamentalist practitioners of violence just an awkward handful of nutcases ; or is there underway at the moment a much more significant shift in Islamic attitudes, fuelled by the Salafist theologians and paid for by the Saudi royal family? If the latter, are we witnessing the birth of a completely new age, involving a break with more liberal and intellectual Islamic traditions ? Certainly, the Middle-East today bears a worrying resemblance to the Balkans in 1913. As one of the Queen’s Chaplains wrote in The Times in March 2015, “Islam and the Koran have two faces, one benign and one violent” ;
- the emergence of ‘Cyber Warfare’ as a real new danger, capable of paralysing public services and inducing civil chaos ;
- a rising risk of nuclear conflict, perhaps greater than that which we faced in the ‘Cold War’ (already, nine countries now have nuclear arsenals – and if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon so also will some of its Arab neighbours). This, at a time when the future of our own deterrent is in question, on financial grounds ;
- climate change, of a kind that might make these islands uninhabitable. Also the on-going global population increase (according to the UN, the present world population of 7.2 billion will rise to 9.6 billion by 2050 and to close to 11 billion by the end of the century). Can the planet sustain them all?

Let me quote, to finish, the words of Lord Hannay of Chiswick, in the conclusion of his memoirs, “Britain’s Quest for a Role”, 2013. Already mentioned above, he is one of the outstanding British diplomats of the post-war era. Formerly our ambassador to both the EU and the UN, he knows what he is talking about. But he writes as follows :

“My principal concern is that we may be at a point when the main international structures which have been so laboriously built up since the end of the Second World War, and even more so since the end of the Cold War – the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the

EU, NATO to name the most prominent – may begin to fray and crack and to lose their relevance”.

One thing with another, there is a lot to think about. Now, who am I going to vote for on May 7<sup>th</sup>?  
And what difference will that make?

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