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A LONG FAREWELL OR A RENEWED VOYAGE: Britain's Options and A New International Order

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Do not go silent
Into that good night
But rage, rage
Against the dying of the light.

- Dylan Thomas

Do not cover up the scars
.... lest it prove a hollowed shell
And lest the feet of new-torn lives
Sink in voids of counterfeiting
Do not swell earth's broken skin
To glaze the fissures in the drum.

- Wole Soyinka

We know that history at all times draws
The strangest consequence from remotest cause.
....
Time present and time past
are both perhaps present in time Future
And time Future contained in time past. .....
.....
All time is unredeemable.

- T.S. Eliot

I.

The Long Farewell

It is routine to say that over the past three decades the United Kingdom has bid farewell to empire, to any claim to industrial pre-eminence, to great powers status, to leadership in providing social and welfare services, to being among the pace setters in output per person, to great power status. It is almost equally routine to say that it has yet to adjust to the external changes which brought about these multiple leave takings. Broadly speaking both perceptions are correct but both suffer from amalgamating unlike categories and from paying too little attention to attitudes (or convictions) and styles (or stances).

The end of empire and of great power status were inevitable and at least the former was in many ways desirable. The economic

performance and failure to articulate and pursue a consistent international role were neither inevitable and ever consciously chosen. The decline from leadership to middle rank among industrial economies in provision of social and welfare services relates directly to the sluggish growth but also to a failure to achieve any significant reduction of economic inequality after the early 1950s.

The style of the farewell appears to have been - and to remain - that of Shakespeare's Wolsey - "Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness...." Britain has certainly not consistently stood in the last ditch against change. Suez was an aberration, of the hardline opponents of the New International Economic Order, Britain, has appeared the least self confident and most tempted to change course.

However, this style has paralysed purposeful seeking of change. Britain's - left and right, private and public sector, sacral and sectoral, mandarin and trade union leader, dons and businessmen - have normally viewed change as something often inevitable but almost always damaging. The normal response has been to seek to delay it as long as possible, limit its scope and contain the resultant damage. Doubtless this stance does limit the risk of massive mistakes but it also prevents a positive attitude toward or use of change.

Today very severe national and international structural challenges - cultural and political, social and ethical, ecological and economic - confront Britain (in common with the rest of the world). The long farewell and the stance built by it appear to provide very poor foundations for facing them.

II.

Illusions and Panaceas

Many who would accept the "long farewell" view of 1947-77 would argue that it has nonetheless provided the context for a "golden age" and/or that North Sea Oil will reverse the relative decline. To the extent their case is that there is no more reason for Briatin to seek to copy others (eg. Japan economically or the

Netherlands in developing a post imperial international role) it is correct subject to the major caveat that Britain has rarely chosen in a clear manner ; it has drifted. However, many of the arguments go further and appear, at the least, to be based on failing to ask basic questions. For example:

1. Britain has good relations between workers and management. Does it? Are low strike records evidence of that or of the reverse? Is Grunwick atypical of small firms because of pre-dispute structures or because the tensions exploded into confrontation rather than being successfully suppressed by management? There is very little evidence to support the generalized assertion that "they" - "we" divisions are less common or narrower in Britain than in other industrial capitalist states.

2. The non-material aspects of British life are very rich because there is less concern for material "progress". Why then the very marked tension resulting wherever material progress slows down? Why are both large elements of the middle class and of the working class so vehemently determined to raise their share of material goods, whatever happens to anyone else (as evidenced at the latest TUC meetings and the Tory Conference) For whom are non-material rich and full? (For the intellectual and professional middle classes yes, but how much further and how generally.) To judge by many of the expressions of youths, blue collar workers, minorities and unemployed not for them. Is Britain really "better" in this area than other societies - some observers argue the reverse.

3. The welfare state guarantees a reasonable life and equality of opportunity to all. Does it? Do the benefits reach the most needy? (Their spokesmen deny it and cite hard evidence.) Are public services really improving in terms meaningful to users? Are they even comparable to the present general North European average? How much equality of opportunity really mean - equality of opportunity to achieve highly unequal rewards?

4. British democracy rests on broad participation and power in the hands of the people. If so why is there such nearly universal complaint (by very different individuals and groups) that they are excluded? Does the state bureaucracy as it

actually operates give much power to people or much breadth of participation? Do public corporations? Or private multi-nationals? Or trade unions? Or political parties? Or churches?

5. Zero growth will save the environment. For those who are materially deprived and live in manmade wastelands? Without violently corrosive battles over shares? As a means to nail down existing inequalities and justify the continued rollback of the welfare and social services?

6. North Sea Oil will save Britain. If it is used to provide the need for making choices and changing structures? If it allows a retreat into Little Englandism (left, right or centre variant) with internal bonuses (wages or welfare or profits or tax reductions) to paper over conflict? For how long? With what results when the oil boom tapers off and goes into reverse?

III.

To Change Or To Be Changed

Both the stance of the "long farewell" and that of the argued special virtues of Britain lead to resistance to change. This does not prevent change - it merely changes the tense from active (to change) into passive (to be changed). Thereby, the need to make choices is evaded but at the price of having choices made for Britain by events.

Certainly changes are proposed, choices are posed. However, the changes made are usually either minor or responsive not initiatory. For example, assistance to workers and communities hurt by change is after the damage and concentrated on propping up (slowing or halting change) not pre-identifying points of stress and concentrated on positive transformation. In that context of course workers insist on keeping the same jobs and communities the same firms; no other credible alternative is open to them. Similarly, the choices tend either to be rhetorical platitudes or positions hastily abandoned when real differences are perceived - or both. Technological modernization is an example of the former, the attempts to restructure industrial relations of the latter, overall economic policy of the combined variant.

Is this pattern of drift really desired. recently it has meant growing inequality, increased feelings of exclusion and non-participation, eroding public services, loss of material welfare for fairly broad groups and continued deprivation (serious deprivation) for many others. Over 1980-1990 oil might alleviate some of these tendencies only to have them recur in harsher form at the turn of the century. Unless that is acceptable there is a need to trun the "long farewell" into a renewed voyage.

IV.

Toward What Destinations?

Before embarking on a voyage it is prudent to consider desired destinations - at least in terms of general directions. Otherwise the navigating decisions are more than a little hard to take and any evaluation of their acceptability even harder. Three broad requirements (destinations) can be advanced for Briatin:

1. Distributive Justice

   Clearly this must mean more than equality of opportunity (albeit more of that is needed too). Some standards as to equality of results are also needed - probably including ceilings as well as floors. Distributive justice has not normally been concerned only with income and wealth but with workplace and community (or production and state) relations as well - vide the Jubilee Year both in the Old Testament and in Christ's preaching in the Synagogue. Ability to shape ones own life both individually and - at least equally important - by direct participation in at least many of the communal or collective decisions directly affecting it is critical. That leads into a second destination:

2. Participation

   This cannot mean simply voting - albeit in many structures more of that would not come amiss. It needs to involve more thorough and more varied restructuring. On the one hand those directly affected by decisions need a larger and more direct share in taking them. On the other decisions need to be decentralized to a much greater extent when possible and based on aggregated bottom up inputs (not top down directives without prior indirect participation) when decentralization to take them closer to

those directly affected is impracticable. There is no one model for participation - indeed to seek one is something of a contradiction in terms. What is clear is that - even if this may appear a contradiction in terms - decentralization and participation should receive more central attention and uniform priority (and rather less lip service by those who practice the exact reverse) than it has had to date as well as more creative imagination and diverse initiatives.

3. Sustainability

To keep on providing either distributive justice or participation for society (and its economy) must be sustainable. This is not a simple issue. Transgressing inner limits by failing to provide adequate material and institutional resources or by failing to make change transformation is a violation of sustainability. So is transgressing outer limits by breaching ecological barriers or creating (perhaps in the quest for change) stresses and tensions which are unbearable for many individuals. Failure to relate these four limits to each other and to distributive justice and participation has tended to create an excessively confused debate - often verging on a dialogue of the deaf.

V.

Critical Choices/Tradeoffs

Evidently one cannot arrive at distant destinations immediately. The Christian traditions of the radical imperfection of human institutions and of the struggle for justice in history hold to that contention as strongly as do empirical social sciences and common sense. Equally, given the limits (material, institutional, human) to change there are tradeoffs and choices. Key areas in which dialogue leading to considered decisions are needed include:

1. The degree of equality to be pursued as well as the areas (power? participation? education? income? wealth? privilege?) to be stressed and the pace of change to be sought. The tradeoff here is not with growth except in the sense that growth may make some aspects of equality easier to pursue because there is sometimes less resistance to making others better off than to losing absolutely oneself. (The breadth of "differential restoration" claims from university professors to boiler makers,

dentists to constables, brakemen to clergy raises some doubts as to how generally valid that assertion is.) Basically the tradeoff is with polarization and tension and "too slow" a change is as polarizing and divisive as "too rapid".

2. The nature and rate of growth. What should grow - public services? Other services? Consumer durables? Overseas investment? For whose benefit? How fast should each grow? The first question is probably the more critical. There is no reason to suppose that service or public service led growth is impossible. (The UK has a rather smaller service sector relative to overall output than the USA and a smaller public service one than Sweden or the Netherlands. These are clearly not economies suffering from inability to grow or evident pathological structural transformations.) The tradeoffs at this level are value or preference (or class) judgements. If one favours consumerism plus inequality one's answers will be different from these if one believes enough is enough and inequality should be sharply limited by floors and ceilings. In the same way the tradeoffs on overall growth rates are with leisure and stress. (Material as non-material is a tradeoff associated with consumerism but not necessarily with other types of growth.) However, today to sustain present levels of welfare, let alone restore them to early 1970's standards or reverse the plight of these largely excluded, Britain needs growth including growth of exports. (Oil can be useful in this particular context - if used to reduce the stress of other more basic change and fill the resource gap until such transformations bear fruit.)

3. The nature of employment. Presumptively product employment is critical to effective participation. Any variant of the dole is socially, institutionally, and humanly corrosive even if it is necessary and the immediate alternatives are even worse. However, that does not mean that 40 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, 45 years need be the standard working life. Indeed unless one posits very high, service (and especially public service) centered rates of growth, the 40 - 48 - 45 pattern is inconsistent with full employment (however defined) and would condemn increasing proportions of would-be employers (especially youths, minority community members, women) to exclusion from productive employment. The tradeoffs are between very high growth

(probably either technically unattainable or unacceptable on human and ecological stress grounds) and both more diverse and less extensive working lives. Reduced hours, longer vacations, breaks for continuing education, earlier retirement - all are perfectly practicable technically and practically so economically Equally, all require rather more serious attention in terms of their positive values and their impact (good or bad) on life styles than they have received to date.

4. Protection of the human and material environment. Change (whether growth or transformation) imposes strains on people and on ecological systems. Beyond some point - presumably usually relevant to place and time and type of stress - the strains are unacceptable. However, the irreversible, fatal, global and national damage case is not the typical one. (Ironically it is perhaps most likely that this constraint applies to massive, sustained global increases in the use of coal - a singularly ecologically undesirable energy source on numerous less apocalyptic counts as well.) Freezing ecology in the form it happens to have today (extreme preservationism) hardly seems an absolute goal - some changes are probably desirable (eg. making the tse tse fly an "endangered species") and others have mixed value results (eg. woodland to sustainable cultivation shifts and vica versa to site the more common British case of 1977). To make two blades grow where one grew before is often a good thing, but to be sure one must examine the context - in the hills of the Lebanon it has as times clearly bee a very bad thing with consequences which are now irreversible.

VI.

Britain And The World

It can be asked how the foregoing relates to Britain's contribution to international order transformation. On the face of it the issues and choices are last in a British not a global context. However, fo at least three reasons that is probably too narrow an interpretation.

1. Britain's impact abroad and its choices internationally are like to be dominated by what type of society making what choices Britain is at home. Denial of basic human needs at home and the

effective support abroad is not a very plausible combination. (Granted a society can practise distributive justice at home and predation abroad. However, doemstic commitment to and progress toward distributive justice, participation and sustainability at home is a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for making a positive contribution to them internationally.)

2. Britain's ability to participate credibly in any international order changes has been eroded by the "long farewell" and especially by the delaying, limiting, containing rather than choosing, shaping, transforming approach to change. It is hard to see how this erosion can be halted internationally without altering the domestic stance and direction.

3. Unless Britain changes its own image and some aspects of its performance at home it is hard to see how it will have material resources, experiences or ideas to contribute to reshaping the global order.

VII.

British Choices And British Christians

Perhaps a more basic query is what any of the foregoing has to do with Christianity, the Church or British Christians as Christians. Many - probably including a majority of that minority of Britains who attend services - would contend that it is wholly secular.

Whether this is so depends on ones perception of Christianity. If the Church is in (even though not all) the world it must be engaged in temporal concerns so far as they relate to the nature of man and of God. Distributive justice, participation and sustainability all appear to fall squarely within that definition. The words are "man does not live by bread alone" not "man does not live by bread"; Christ did feed the 5,000 materially as a prelude to feeding them with the word of God.

If that is a valid perception of the calling of the Church to minister of temporal affairs as part of the struggle for justice in history and of the calling of Christians to inform their total lives by their faith then one has another - and longer -

farewell to reverse. That is the decline not simply (or even primarily) of Church influence on state or control over artifactual canons of conduct but of Christian involvement in issues of central moral because of central temporal importance. The dialogue on activism versus aloof evangelism or pietism is itself a very narrow one - most Christians do not comprehend it because they neither see Christianity as integrally informing their secular lives nor are deeply committed to any eschatalogical , pictistic or mystical faith. To challenge that modern variant of "Laodecianism" (neither hot nor cold) is hardly likely to reduce tension but without a real transformation of stance and commitment at the congregational and individual Christian level one must wonder whethe the Church in Britain is not itself in danger of engaging in a "long farewell" however clearly it relates them to the Bible, the Gospel, the Father or the theological heritage.

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