London Calling

Diana Simmonds

You may have heard about Thatcherism. It's a political ideology that turns strong men into knock-kneed sycophants, reduces uncompromising TV current affairs interviewers to forelock-tugging knights of the realm and has, if we are to believe what our newspapers politely print, wrought an economic miracle in Britain.

That's one way of looking at it. But it's all true, especially the bit about the TV tigers. (Sir) Robin Day and (Sir) Alastair Burnett, who've become (and this may be hard to believe but is so) even more unctuous than our own breed of brown-nosed Pollie Toadies (Crappus lickus minori). On the face of it, London and its satellite nation of "the South-East" is certainly prosperous. It hums with dynamism and the sound of free-marketeers counting their profits. Its traffic is an almost permanent thrombosis of frightful density and expensive machinery. Many people in this region are visibly better off than they were in 1979 when something like 43 percent of the population voted for the lesser of two evils rather than what was then passing for government.

What they've now got is a curious new world which is of some interest to Australia.

Home ownership, in relatively low income groups, is at an all-time high, largely because of the Tories' original cornerstone policy of selling off publicly-owned local council housing to tenants. Low interest rates (in single figures six months ago) also lured millions into ever larger mortgages and second home purchases. Consumption of luxury white goods is now regarded as a basic human right along with multiple overseas holidays (preferably the Caribbean or Mauritius) each year — which do not, of course, include the now customary ten days skiing and two cars which are also essential to a reasonable lifestyle.

Presiding over all this, Mrs Thatcher has become more and more the perfectly coiffed steamroller, flattening opposition in her own party and demoralising it in the official Opposition. This decade's freshly-formed centrist parties — once so cocksure of electoral success — have crashed, reformed, reshuffled, realigned, regrouped. At the same time, in several recent by-elections, they have taken second place to the Tories, pushing the Labour Party into a hair-raising and previously unthinkable third place. Nevertheless, they can be seen as a cross between comic opera and the various post-war Italian governments and, except in the minor contests, are not worldbeaters.

Not comic and almost qualifying as tragedy is the predicament of the British Labour Party. Privately, its leader, Neil Kinnock, has let on that he doesn't expect to be prime minister. This means that, from the very top, the Labour Party gives itself no hope of winning the next election.

Kinnock is the Allan Border of British politics: an able man who could have expected the highest honours if his career hadn't coincided with the least talented and most luckless period in his side's history. As it is, Labour flounders and Kinnock is reduced to snapping at Mrs Thatcher's heels with the effectiveness of a prematurely aged Welsh corgi. However, she who has survived the Belgrano, Westland and Sarah Keays, to name a few major scandals, is unlikely to be hummed to death by a toothless pooch at this stage.

The relevance of all this to Australia is the apparent penchant of Liberal politicians (and others for all we know) to jet off to Westminster the minute they're let out at the end of term, to learn at the feet of the mistress. What they bring home with them is a dangerous mixture of baggage which ought to send the average airport X-ray berserk.

For starters, they've realised the value of saleable ideas, especially if they can be presented as new. They need not necessarily be good ideas, or even workable ideas, but if they appear to promise a hike or two up the financial and social ladders for those who've got their feet on the rungs already, or can dream that they are about to make those steps, then they'll probably find favour with significant numbers of voters.

Possibly even more dangerous than these false images however, is the rose-tinted view the privileged visitor to Britain brings back. Lately we have heard mention of pleasant evenings at West End theatres, Glyndebourne and the (southern) countryside with its sparkling profitable sunrise industries. All absolutely delightful of course, and bound to fill the tourist with well-being and determination to create something similar back home.

For Glyndebourne's lawns and picnic hampers from Fortnums, however, substitute Liverpool, whose poorer areas are still crushed by 60 percent unemployment; for the night at the theatre try sleeping wrapped in cardboard in the rat-infested back alleys that serve the glittering mile of Shaftesbury Avenue; instead of the enchanted Glyndebourne and the (southern) countryside with its sparkling profitable sunrise industries. All absolutely delightful of course, and bound to fill the tourist with well-being and determination to create something similar back home.

Unlike Mother Theresa — also a recent caller on Mrs Thatcher — it's doubly suspicious that any of our pollies would have observed to the PM that her achievement in turning Britain into a Third World country was quite remarkable; but then it's unlikely that our fact-finding pollies saw that...
Third World. To do so they would have had to travel a couple of hundred kilometres north of the capital or, while in London, to travel by bus or tube to their destinations. If they did they would have seen that the infrastructure of the city is in ruins, starved of investment in equipment, staff and public safety requirements by ten years of marketplace imperatives. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, buses—which parted company from timetables years ago—were also forced to abandon their normal routes because private car traffic made their progress impossible. Two tourists were stabbed to death on populous central underground stations which have become the haunt of gangs of unemployed and unemployable youths. Dozens of commuters were killed and injured when a train crashed at Clapham in south London. The cause: cost-cutting over the years by a railway management starved of funds and courage by central government whose single imperative was profitability—at all costs.

In Australia, the apparently stylish “new” ideas being touted evermore confidently, come from the shiny side of this grubby reality. Disillusioned, bored voters are notoriously susceptible to glittery gew-gaws: the electoral success of Nick Greiner in NSW is evidence of that. The problem with market imperatives and the freedom of that market to dictate policy and outcome is that the health, safety and general well-being of the public often come between a capitalist and his or her profit. When this happens, unless the market and its operators are firmly held in check by the strongest legal means and political will, it is always people who’ll come off worst.

If the ‘70s were characterised as “the Me generation”, it’s hard to see how the ‘80s could be seen as anything else—to the power of ten. Me, mine, greed, personal gain, creature comforts, sod the rest of you. I’ m okay, and if you’re going to lie down and die, please do it somewhere else is, in essence, really what Thatcherism is about. Even the elders of her own party know that and have said so—that she shames them and the historic ethos of the Tory party which, at its best, was about benevolent paternalism rather than despotic materialism.

Unfortunately, the personal crassness and general professional ineptitude of the majority of Australian politicians gives no room for confidence that, if the worst comes to the worst, benevolent paternalism will prevail here. Fitzgerald revealed (to what real effect?) what the rest of us already knew: that despotic materialism is what motivates most of them. If the Thatcher ethos gets a grip here, it would result in devastation akin to that wrought on the continent by rabbits and superphosphates. However, unlike these scourges, we can’t shoot or ban them: a great deal of imagination and energy is required instead. Now.

(Diana Simmonds recently returned to Britain for the first time in three years.)

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