

## Letter From London

by Derek Turner

### A London Political Bestiary



From the West End, to the Square Mile, out into the most featureless South London suburbs, London is full of political resonances and the memories of old controversies. From all kinds of streets, roads, avenues, broadways, high streets, rises, hills, crescents, parks, mews, and terraces, native or adoptive Londoners have gone out into the world to make their country feared or famous.

The streets of Belgravia, Fitzrovia, Mayfair, Bayswater, Chelsea, South Kensington, and Notting Hill are littered with houses once inhabited by statesmen, generals, and thinkers who have changed this country and the world, from Thomas Carlyle's House in Cheyne Walk to the blue plaque marking Karl Marx's cramped and complicated residency in Soho. (The building is now an Italian restaurant!)

Nonconformist, mercantile, and relatively cosmopolitan London has often been at odds with the relatively tradition-minded agricultural hinterland. During the Civil War, London was solidly pro-Parliament, to the extent that the Royalists never seriously considered attacking it. (Their one halfhearted attempt, in 1642 at Turnham Green near Chiswick, was defeated very easily by some badly trained bands of London apprentices.) London is still at odds with the countryside—one sign of this appeared during the fox-hunting debate, when opinion polls invariably showed a very large majority of Londoners opposed to hunting. This may be partly out of pity for the mangy and skinny urban foxes that eke out a diseased and precarious living rooting in London's dustbins.

Londoners have occasionally fought one another with considerable enthusiasm: for religious reasons, as during the Gordon Riots dramatized in *Barnaby Rudge*; for political reasons, as happened over John Wilkes' battles to represent the restive electors of Middlesex; or for eth-

nic reasons, as at the so-called Battle of Cable Street in 1936, when East End Jews, seeking to halt Mosley's Blackshirts, fought the police with knuckledusters, razors, and paving slabs.

Most areas in London have a distinctive cultural and political aura of their own, although many of them share a certain degree of Whiggishness, brought about by Londoners' distance from the natural world. The connotations of "Hampstead," for instance, are familiar to all who take an interest in British politics. One of London's most beautiful and exclusive suburbs, Hampstead has become almost synonymous with "champagne socialism." The suburb has long been popularly thought to contain very wealthy people who, because of their angst about being wealthier than most other people, indulge in theoretical Marxism. Michael Wharton, the *Daily Telegraph* columnist who writes under the name "Peter Simple," uses a stereotypical Hampstead character named Mrs. Dutt-Pauker (who lives in a house called "Marxmount") in his column to make points about "liberal" values and the nastiness or stupidity of those who advocate harmful social policies for everybody else, while shielding themselves from any ill effects.

Before Hampstead came to symbolize what it does now, there was Clapham, where the powerful Clapham Sect, led by William Wilberforce, advocated utopian and often radical political goals (including, to their eternal credit, the abolition of the slave trade) that were often at odds with the aspirations of the proverbial "man on the Clapham Omnibus," an archetypal figure sometimes invoked, by those fond of clichés, to represent popular opinion.

Before the Clapham Sect was dreamt of, Low Church, Whiggish opinions were typical of the Square Mile and its northern outlying suburbs of Hoxton, Hackney, Shoreditch, Stoke Newington, and Stamford Hill. Stolid City burgesses and aldermen had little time for quasi-mystical "organic bonds," the divine right of kings, or patriotism—they were too interested in trade. (They might be described as the neoconservatives of their day.) They often disapproved of sex, gambling, acting, drinking, literature, and music as well. The City (London's

financial district) was often instrumental in changing policy by simply refusing to lend money for imperial adventures and by backing schemes to boost the prestige of business.

The new epicenter of what we now call "liberalism" is Islington, nicknamed "The Socialist Republic of Islington" in the 1970's because of its egalitarian insanities and now the home of the Blairs and many of their closest allies. Islington is a strange combination of government-owned housing (65 percent of residents are council tenants) jam-packed with recent immigrants, the dysfunctional, and those decent people who haven't quite made it to civilization, as well as some of the most desirable houses in London, which can change hands for millions of pounds.

Islington is now famous as the home of New Labour politics—vapid soundbites delivered by pager to a bloodless, sexless, raceless, classless elite that lives on mineral water and vegetarian quiche and holidays in Tuscany. Only 85 percent of Labour Party members own their own homes, but 100 percent take holidays in Chianti-shire! Hugo Gurdon's comment in the *Daily Telegraph* that "Mr. Blair is a man of hidden shallows" could—and should—be extended to cover almost all of the Islingtonian Labour Party.

All of London's evocative proper names are full of political subtexts, nuances, and dread significance (to the conservative-minded). There are three shorthand terms for inept, politically correct, and moderately corrupt local government, where Labour has been running a virtual one-party state for decades by uniting those who feel class resentments with those who hate Western civilization and white people, those who believe that men and women are the same, and those who delight in sexual deviancy. These three unhappy places are Lambeth, Hackney, and Southwark. The trio has junior siblings in Greenwich, Lewisham, Tower Hamlets, and Newham.

I remember looking at the unlvely Joan Ruddock, Labour MP for my inner-city constituency of Lewisham Deptford, on the night of the cataclysmic 1997 election. Surrounded by the usual inner-city Labour mafia—rough-looking Scots and Irish, shaven-headed men wearing AIDS ribbons, dizzy middle-

class women, students, and splenetic industrial goblins—and flushed with an even easier-than-usual victory, the erstwhile minister for women spoke gloatingly of how she wanted to thank “all the ethnic minority workers who were such a great help in making Lewisham a Tory-free zone.” Her photo opportunities in the local press with black graffiti “artists” had obviously paid off!

What ideological horrors—what tedious ectoplasms—are evoked by the simple word Bloomsbury! What very different emotions are conjured up by Smithfield—the scene of shameful martyrdoms, Dissolution bonfires, and the first printing presses in England! How can one avoid thinking unpleasant things when contemplating modern Notting Hill—scene of the triumphalist annual Carnival and, viler still, of William Hague’s backward-baseball-cap-wearing, breakdancing, mango-juice-drinking extravaganza? If only Adam Wayne, G.K. Chesterton’s *Napoleon of Notting Hill*, could come and clean up his city on the hill!

Unprintable thoughts are evoked by Peckham, now probably the least British place in South London, but which was once a byword for respectability (which is why the Grossmiths introduced the infuriating Mr. Franching of Peckham into the London classic, *Diary of a Nobody*) and which was even renowned for the education on offer in its academies, which is why a young Irishman called Oliver Goldsmith went there to teach.

Then there are Spitalfields and Whitechapel, once the home of Huguenot silk weavers and Henry VIII’s artillery corps (as well as the haunt of Jack the Ripper), which is now 95-percent Bengali. (Whitechapel should now be called Brown-mosque.) While I lived just off Brick Lane, on a street named after a medieval merchant-adventurer, a local election was held. Neither side bothered to print its campaign literature in English.

It is unceasingly strange to take the five-minute walk between Bishopsgate, where beautiful modern buildings and clean people predominate, to Brick Lane, where dirty shops noisy with Asian music and enlivened with Indian film posters sell things that I would have thought couldn’t be given away. When I am feeling gloomy, I sometimes think that the destiny of London lies in the East End rather than the West. This impression was heightened by my chance discovery in Fitzrovia of a Camden Council

plaque marking the sacred spot where the first members of London’s Nepalese community foregathered.

But—apart from mere details like the best classical music and theater in the world; Westminster Abbey, St. Paul’s, and Wren’s other churches; and the National Gallery, the delightful parks, and the world’s best choice of beer—London is the birthplace of the *Spectator*, the Carlton Club, and the Antigallican League. It is the city where such people as Johnson, Goldsmith, Reynolds, Hogarth, Burke, and Smollett lived and worked, and the home of sardonic wit—such as the simple line about the notoriously scruffy Charles Fox that appeared in a contemporary Tory newspaper: “Mr. Fox appeared at St. Stephens in a clean waistcoat.”

I have only to travel along the river by boat to Greenwich, as politicians have done for generations, to dine at the Trafalgar Tavern on its stilts above the Thames, or go to the Temple, the center of London’s legal world founded by the Knights Templar, with its lawns that sweep down to where the river used to run before Bazalgette embanked it. This is a place where tradition still holds sway, where Goldsmith and Johnson lived, where the first-ever performance of *Twelfth Night* took place in the still-standing Middle Temple Hall, where chain-mailed Norman knights sleep in a round church based on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is a great city. The great silver tower of Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs is a reminder—if, unfortunately, a rare one—of how grandness of vision and excellence of execution can survive in a mediocre age.

The London Assembly and mayor have had the effect of increasing the costs of local government and making it even more impersonal. The Assembly will certainly not strengthen the local identities that make London so endlessly interesting—on the contrary, it will tend to draw power toward the center and curtail the rights and ceremonies of the medieval Corporation of London, London’s best-run local authority by far. What is worst about the London Assembly is that it is likely to be dominated by the left, as was its predecessor, the ill-famed Greater London Council also led by Ken Livingstone, the nasal-toned, polyester-clad enthusiast who is also now mayor. Massive postwar immigration, family breakdown, and all the other problems with which we are all too familiar have given the left a

massive advantage in all of our inner cities.

Although much of what goes on in Parliament is not of specific relevance to London, and what the present Commons does do for London—such as call the Metropolitan Police “racists” because they failed to solve a murder case—tends to be bad, London culture and conversation set the tone for the country’s political life (unfortunately!). It is, therefore, worth mentioning some of the heroes who have made Westminster the envy of the civilized world and who have, at some time, lived and breathed the super-charged air of SW1.

No, I don’t mean Burke, Pitt, Peel, Wellington, Disraeli, or Powell; I mean such truly world-historical figures as Sir Boyle Roche (1743-1807), a famous propagator of “Irish bulls,” or spoonerisms. Sir Boyle is justly famous for his quizzical bull on posterity (“Why should we beggar ourselves to benefit posterity? What has posterity ever done for us?”) and his exasperated “I wish, Mr Speaker, that this motion were at the bottom of the bottomless pit,” but his conservatism was profound, and he had a due reverence for the role of the King and Burke’s compact between the quick and the dead.

“I stand prostrate at the feet of royalty,” he once explained movingly, and then warned of the perils of Johnny Frenchman:

If these Gallic villains should invade us, sir, ’tis on that very table maybe that honourable members might see their own destinies lying in heaps atop of one other. Here, perhaps, these murderous martial men would break in, cut us into joints, and throw our bleeding heads on the table to stare us in the face.

Mournfully, he reflected that “The cup of our trouble is running over but, alas, it is not yet full,” while, waxing mystical, he stared into the British crystal ball: “All along the untrodden paths of the future, I can see the footprints of an unseen hand.”

Sir Boyle was a generally loved figure in the House of Commons, mainly because of his earnestness but also because of the absence of the sort of nasty post-Marxists who now are doing so much damage to the whole Western world, with their “humanitarian wars” and their hatred of all traditions and local diversity.

It could be said of the kindly treatment always received by Sir Boyle what an Ulster MP once said of Northern Ireland: "We have to go back centuries for a parallel to such treatment and even then we don't find it."

Sir Boyle's resolute refusal to be "on message" should be emulated by the present crop of Labour MPs, who rather disgustingly try to outdo themselves in sycophancy to Tony Blair. This has caused Blair to start treating Parliament in a rather cavalier fashion (excuse the pun!) by usually neglecting to turn up for Prime Minister's Questions and by declaring war on a sovereign state without bothering to take Parliament into his confidence.

Other, too-little known Westminster heroes include the imperialist who noted memorably the taxonomically unclassifiable quality of the British lion when he boasted: "One thing of which you may be certain—whether the British lion is roaming the plains of Canada or climbing the mountains of India, it will not draw in its horns or slink into its shell!"

Sir Wilfrid Lawson, the temperance campaigner, showed that even teetotalers can make jokes when he observed of one of his strongest opponents, a man well known for his hail-fellow-well-met qualities: "The Hon Member is about to make a speech on the subject of drink, for I see him sitting there evidently full of his subject."

Even if Sir Wilfrid must have generally been rather tiresome company (this excellent joke notwithstanding), we could all do with more people like him nowadays, and we definitely need many more Sir Boyles, more individualists speaking and voting in Westminster and living in London. This is just one more reason why Labour's class war against the House of Lords is so much to be regretted by all those who love England, as it is tending to push out the eccentrics from that house and usher in the social workers and polytechnic lecturers. London's dining rooms will be duller—and Britain's governance, worse—for their Lordship's absence.

There is still a deep well of resilience in London, a kind of good-humored pride which is summarized in "the Blitz spirit," a little phrase all real Londoners understand instinctively. This spirit may well be the saving of London. But it needs to be focused and directed toward specific ends, and the performance of the present-day Conservative Party does not

exactly inspire confidence in our future. One must hope that the inexperienced 19th-century Conservative MP was right when he said: "We on this side of the house are not such fools as we look."

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## Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

### American Italics, or Revelation According to P.T. Barnum



As in some picaresque dream, the carousel that has been spinning out a tale of broken hearts and mistaken identities begins to slow down, the roulette wheel grows disenchanted with the last bourgeois revolution, and all of a sudden even the drum of the concrete mixer that is shadowing the Venetian's limousine all the way to the airport grinds to a gravelly stop. *Lady and gentlemen*, as my friend Gusov might say when in a pompous mood, *I have been to Las Vegas, I have seen the beginning of the end, and I now know what the salt that has lost its savor tastes like*. But meanwhile, like the dove with the olive leaf in its beak, I am returning to the ark of the narrative, and now the stillness and the smell of the sea are once more all about me, and already the water taxi is going full throttle under a waning moon that looks like a *piano nobile* badly divided among the brothers after a century and a half of family quarrels.

The place where we chose to stay could have been Augustan Rome *constructed in a majestic Greco-Roman style*, that is to say, Caesars Palace, or Italy as Mazzini invented it and hence of no particular period, the Bellagio. *More than a thousand fountains, enhanced by music and lights. State-of-the-art fog and audio systems. The Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art. Synchronized swimmers, divers, contortionists, trapeze artists, and others perform incredible feats. This facility is a non-commercial venue dedicated to the presentation of high-quality art exhibitions*. Or it could have been Paris—Paris, France—because there is one in Vegas, you know, complete with *the Eiffel Tower tour and Restaurant. Rustic finishes have been ap-*

*plied to ensure that each structure is unique and appears appropriately weathered for its age. The ambience is very European and charming, and the shops are provincial and unique.* Or I could have gone to the Excalibur. *Ever dream of traveling back in time to an age of jousting knights? This is your opportunity to enter the world of King Arthur. Or else we could have stayed at the Tropicana, a bit of Polynesia in the desert, with its colorful prints and wood-and-bamboo furnishings.*

But for reasons no longer obvious even to my longtime gambling companion, I had decided on the *upscale Venetian, along nearly a quarter-mile of Venice's famed Grand Canal, where for a small fee you can take a gondola ride and be serenaded in an authentic gondola by a singing gondolier wearing authentic gear.* We breakfasted at a restaurant called *Tintoretto*:

#### TINTORETTO

#### MENU

Starting at 4.00 pm

The Home Made MAMMA

Dinner \$21.95

—Breakfast Any Time—

Served with Italian Toast and Potatoes with Bell Peppers and Onions  
Veggie, Cheese, or Ham Omelette  
\$6.95 each

Bagel with Cream Cheese  
and Lox \$9.95

15% Gratuity will be added  
on parties of six or more.

I suppose I ought to say something about the gambling. Not contented with having added an extra number to the wheel, thus boosting the house's advantage over the player from 2.7 percent to 5.26 percent in what they call "American" roulette, these P.T. Barnums have even redesigned the single-zero "French" roulette wheel—known throughout Europe, incidentally, as "American"—to make the wells more shallow, the frets flatter, and the center cone lower. Hence what, in the better London clubs, is still a suicidally dangerous game of observation, extrapolation, and inference, is here reduced to a mechanized variant of lotto, ideal for old ladies who wish to lose their life savings slowly, one dollar at a time. In London, betting a thousand pounds per spin is barely respectable, while here, after Gusov and I had kept \$1,000 on the