

## AN EPILOGUE AS PROLOGUE -- 50 YEARS LATER

I never had much interest in revisiting the sites of my protracted schooling, but some good friends of former days tempted me to attend a reunion at the University of Virginia in 1996. In the course of a pleasant visit I wandered over to my old haunt at Alderman Library and thought to seek out my thesis of 1966: "The Reconstruction of the Conservative Party of Great Britain 1945-1951" only to find it missing. This rankled because it represented two years of hard effort and I believed it might be a useful resource for anyone studying modern British politics, especially that neglected chapter in Winston Churchill's long career when he served as leader of the opposition.

From that day I had meant to supply a copy; which now, belatedly, is being done in both electronic and manuscript form, in the hope, perhaps vain, that someone will make use of it. Re-reading it now, I am glad to say it holds up well.

In the course of my research I examined on microfilm every edition of "The Times" of London from January, 1945, when talk began of the need to hold a general election after ten years, through the election of 1951 which returned Churchill and the Conservative Party to office. At Alderman Library I also had, remarkably, bound copies of "The Economist" from that period and even the humor magazine "Punch" that was a rich source of political cartoons of the period, which were included.

The period 1945-51 was highly significant, fraught with crisis and national humiliation as Britain was forced to give up a great power status she had enjoyed for 250 years. There were frequent strikes, power shortages, rationing as bad as during the war, a devaluation of the pound, income tax rates as high as 98 percent and confiscatory estate taxes on the wealthy. But of greater importance in my view is that policies were laid down that would ultimately change the character of the British state and the British people. This became a template for others, including the USA.

While there had been important social legislation prior to the Labor government of 1945-51, this was the time in which was laid down the foundation of the modern Welfare/Regulatory State, which has grown to the extent that government spending in the United Kingdom now represents almost half the economy. It should be noted this is somewhat below that of other nations of Western Europe, but considerably above that of the USA, which might indicate what is in store here.

Why the thesis went missing I have no idea. Upon receiving my degree in June, 1966 I had no thought that one year later I would be a candidate for the Virginia House of Delegates representing the Roanoke Valley; or that I would devote the next eighteen years to a political career; which, after numerous successes ended in defeat for the U. S. Congress in 1984, followed by twelve years as a weekly columnist for 25 Virginia newspapers, dealing mainly with political and economic issues. In that role it was very useful to draw upon my experience as an historian, politician and businessman.

It is possible one of my numerous political opponents might have lifted the thesis, hoping to find a howler that might be useful; which has happened a few times to other candidates, though Mrs. Clinton's thesis on the great radical, Saul Alinsky, remains safely locked from public view at Wellesley.

In his memorable speech to Congress in 1951 General MacArthur spoke of the world having turned over many times since he took the oath at West Point, as indeed it has in the 50 years since this work was submitted to the History faculty. As Jefferson remarked, "The world belongs always to the living generation." My approach and my conclusions would be quite different today from those of 1966, informed as they have been by experience and the hammer blows of events, scarcely imaginable then. Could even the most prescient have predicted in 1966 that the Chinese, thought to be among the poorest people on earth, would in our time be lending vast sums to the USA. Or that fifty years later an avowed socialist would make a strong run for the presidency of the United States, enlisting an army of college students. Those of a conservative bent might well say, "Warning shots have been fired and should be heeded." But by whom and how?

If we allow ten years for the recovery from the ravages of World War II, we might say that the most significant historical development in the Western, industrialized democracies these past fifty years has been the rise of the Leviathan State, which seeks to distribute the wealth of nations in ways that accommodate the desire of a majority of voters to consume more than they can or are willing to produce.

But back to the main point of the "reconstruction" of the Conservative Party 1945-51. Alert Tories concluded that if their party was to survive and prosper it must come to terms with the Welfare/Regulatory State put in place by the Labor government. Once returned to office they nibbled at the edges of what Labor had done, leaving most of it in place. But the narrow Conservative victory of 1951, with Labor receiving slightly more of the popular vote, did not indicate much appetite for a return to the orthodoxy of the past.

One could say Dwight Eisenhower did the same thing in the 1952 presidential election and beyond that by embracing the phrase "Modern Republicanism." This signaled broad acceptance of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, whose rather modest nostrums seem almost quaint now. And while Republican candidates have raged for decades against deficit spending and the rise of the Leviathan State in the USA, the pillars of the American welfare state remain inviolate, with substantially more than half American households receiving direct financial support from the federal government.

All of this was brilliantly set forth in one of the most prescient books of the 20th Century: "The Revolt of the Masses" published in 1930 by the Spanish historian/philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Its thesis was that inevitably and with increasing insistence the mass of the people would reject taking the leavings from the aristocratic and bourgeois dominance and gain through the ballot box ever larger slices of the pie. In sum, having discovered they could vote themselves money they would proceed to do so, which might bring to mind proposals circulating in the 2016 presidential campaign for free college, free child care, free health care and paid family leave. But the main point of work was that this process would change the character of people and nations.

Reflecting on these fifty years I would conclude that conservatism must always fight a rearguard action and that the Left never gives back what it has gained but always clamors for more, not necessarily because its leaders believe in the efficacy of that which they have proposed but because they believe it helps to assure their power, which is always congenial to its holders. And in a modern democracy, access to power generally translates to an access to wealth for the individual.

Lacking any realistic vision of a different path, nor any conviction of its moral superiority, the Western states will be compelled to adopt that grand old British tradition of muddling through, hoping that some great political or economic catastrophe can be avoided, or at least postponed. If it can't be, not even the wisest can say with confidence what form an aftermath might take.

History is a vast narrative, filled with falsehoods and false conclusions, from which the student seeks to pluck morsels that interest him, as I did as a boy growing up during World War II wanting to understand the political structure of the world I would inherit. Along with the daily paper or TV news it also provides material for our very personal narrative that seeks to provide an explanation or rationale of where things stand that is comfortable to our own situation and bias. After more than sixty years seriously studying history I am compelled to admit that the narrative of an elderly, affluent, white gentleman residing on a lovely and peaceful small estate in Bedford County, Virginia will be markedly different from that of most of my fellow Americans, so much so, in fact, that we might as well be living in different countries or centuries.

So, the question arises, was all this effort to learn history worth it? In high office it might be, if grave disasters such as the invasion of Iraq or attempts at "nation-building" in Afghanistan could be avoided, but such hopes for the subject are largely in the domain of pipedreams. Thankfully, after a few years teaching history to college students I escaped it as a career, which I now regard as a mug's game.

But the prolonged effort required to produce this thesis, re-produced in exactly the form it was presented, did teach me how to approach a vast body of material, organize it and draw sensible conclusions in decent prose. In whatever field, the great opportunities in life will come to those who can do this.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ray L. Garland". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Ray L. Garland,  
Bedford County, Virginia.

1 September 2016.