

Our Wounded Body Politic

Frank Regan

This winter of 2022-23 has shaken our society and awakened us to a situation in which the lives and welfare of millions of our fellow citizens are seriously at risk. As one who professes to be a follower (not a worshiper) of Jesus of Nazareth, I hear constantly in my heart words of his which I consider to be his most beautiful: 'I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full' (Jn 10:10). He did not come to found a new religion. He came to share our lives, to tell us that we are loved and together we can make life like a kingdom of peace, justice and joy (Romans 14:17). Today's situation is in danger of being one of death in abundance, a low hallmark of what it is like to live between hope and despair today in the sixth largest economy on the planet.

We live in an era in which things important to a healthy polity are in decline, not to say, fast deteriorating: ecosystems, quality of life, standards in public life, equality, human rights, decent pay, secure work conditions etc. Elections come and go. Nothing seems to change – except the offices of prime minister and chancellor. The gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless has deepened. Government, be it here or elsewhere in the West, functions at the behest of social media billionaires, giant transnational corporations and banks, and vested interests of various sorts, personal or institutional.

Our Culture

Culture is a whole way of life, lived in family, neighbourhood community, the town or city, in close relationship to the earth and the wider society. The experience creates a process of spiritual and intellectual development. Thus develop society's values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live together in harmony. And from the experience of harmony among citizens and of harmony with nature emanates a body of artistic and intellectual achievement. Our culture, then, is about our spirituality as a people. It is an organic expression of the values and beliefs by which we live and which we cultivate as something to be prized. It is also about the god or gods to whom we render cult.

Our Precariat

The vast number of strikes, the crisis in the NHS, the soaring cost of living all indicate a frayed cohesion. We are witnessing the rise of a 'precariat', a huge mass of people made vulnerable by their experience of 'precarity'. Income, employment, migration status, access to health care, social interaction have become life or death issues, leading to chronic insecurity. And it does not help the frame of mind of the precariat when they see extreme, in-your-face displays of wealth everywhere, especially in Westminster.

Our precariat has been increasing in size since at least 2010. They have been living under a political and economic regime whose unifying theme has been Austerity. This has meant that the quality of life of the great majority of this country has deteriorated to, in some instances, a grave extent. Austerity has been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. Millions of families face staggering amounts of domestic debt. Our low wage economy is unsustainable. Even when there is a breadwinner in the household, bills for heating and cost of living in general are too burdensome.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown has written vociferously on the subject of precarity. He has prognosticated a 'winter of destitution' in which millions of children could tumble into poverty. He foresees the food bank as a core element of social welfare and economic survival with charity as its motivation. Last year at least 271,000 persons were homeless in England on any given night. 123,000 of them were children. Our political leadership speaks principally of growing the economy, ignoring the presence of millions who suffer under the present economic model. I am reminded of those who mourn (Mt 5:4). They dream of a new model, a new politics. They ache for God's new day.

This island is a beautiful country with its picturesque landscapes, iconic towns and cities and varied geography. The British are by and large talented, well-educated, tolerant and inclined to let be. But we are in a terrible economic shambles and we are badly governed.

This goes back to the rot that has infected our political culture. Perhaps its most egregious manifestation is what I often call The Big Lie. It would be tempting to name and blame one or two politicians most culpable of domesticating the Lie in Westminster. But if we go back a decade or so we recall the scandal of ‘cash for questions’, ‘cash for contacts’ and MPs’ expenses scandal. The Lie has grown since. Partygate is an atrocious example.

Sadly, our political culture has been corrupted by power and greed. The Lie has been ensconced at the core of our governance. The word ‘ethical’ has been expunged from the Parliamentary code with barely a word of objection raised. Only recently has an ethics advisor been appointed after many months of waiting. Of course, he has no power to prosecute, but he has delivered in the case of Nadhim Zahawi.

Incredibly, the persistent lying has become a wake-up call. The last few years have seen the rise of various movements and organizations insisting on telling their truth. The truth-tellers insist on being listened to and are willing to be disruptive and risk being prosecuted as criminals.

Justice and Truth

In his inaugural address two years ago, President Joe Biden invoked Saint Augustine when he said the ‘a people are a multitude defined by the objects of their love’. What are the common objects of our love? Are they not values and ideals like justice, honesty, integrity, equality, solidarity, generosity, truth, harmony and peace? And could we not add that those who come to our shores, even in small boats, also esteem those values and ideals? I shudder when politicians share their sick-souled dreams of planeloads of refugees being transported to lands where we can easily forget them and abandon them to their fate very often determined by people traffickers.

We shall do well to keep Augustine’s questions before us. What objects of love will bring us into harmony? Can we sustain civic peace that does justice even though there are deep, real differences between us, especially environmental, sex and gender, racial and social. Britain’s imperial past tempts us towards

domination and glory, to punch above our weight. We still hear colonial echoes of phrases like ‘watermelon smiles’ and ‘women looking like letterboxes’. Will we let our disagreements and our unaddressed prejudices sever our bonds of affection?

We long for justice, but justice is intimately related to truth: the truth of our real situation, the truth of virtue and probity, the truth of the human person, the truth of equity and, for some, the truth of God whose voice can still be heard in the sighs and clamour of the poor. That truth has almost vanished. Our political leaders have made that fact abundantly clear. We love the idea of truth and we respect our truth-tellers. But we tend to filter out the harsher truths and hear only those which flatter our false sense of who we are. The more recent political and social movements have raised the issues of truth which leads to justice. Our political leadership has not been receptive and, through legislation, seeks to quell the passion for truth and justice, thus silencing its voices.

Biblical Tradition

The Bible is our foundational text. In it we read of a God who saw and heard and felt the misery and oppression of an enslaved mass of people. God became the god of the history of their long march to freedom and a new land – march not yet culminated. Jesus of Nazareth is a son of that history. He inherited Israel’s prophetic tradition. A prophet is one for whom the concern for God’s holiness and concern for justice for the poor are one and the same concern.

Jesus appears in Nazareth, among his own, and announces good news to the afflicted and poor. He is sensitive to the vision of Isaiah. He saw God doing something new (65:17-25). God will create a new Jerusalem to be joy and his people to be gladness. There will be no more weeping over an infant recently born who dies within days. Joy will be Jesus’ particular gift. He says in John 15 that he told his friends the things he did so that their joy would be complete. Paul caught sight of the vision when he describes the coming reign of God as comprising ‘justice, peace and joy’ (Rom 14:17).



Homelessness protest shuts down Whitehall. kathduncan-equality-civilrights-network.co.uk

Besides being of the prophetic line, Jesus belonged to a legal tradition which had framed a law of Jubilee. The law decreed the liberation of slaves and indentured servants, the forgiveness of debts, the restoration of lands lost by failure to pay creditors and a year's rest for land exhausted by constant cultivation (Lev 25 and Deut 15). This recalibration of society is a challenge to us trapped in the quicksand of an economic model which, for instance, will grant to earners of one million pounds a tax rebatement of £55,000, equivalent to the average yearly pay of two workers.

Final Thoughts

One of the many things I learned from my experience of Peru (1967-1989) and of grappling with Liberation Theology is that the primary aim of politics is the protection of the vulnerable. Our biblical tradition is clear about that. In Psalm 72 we read:

‘The king rescues the needy who call to him,
and the poor who have no one to help...
From oppression and violence he redeems
their lives,
Their blood is precious in his sight’.

A political leadership whose goals are growth and political control is a hollow entity which will crumble to sawdust when confronted with the death and destruction it has wrought. As a people we have been deprived of good upright governance. Sleaze has taken over. The rampant evil is not the outcome of serious maladjustments which lend themselves to tweaking and reform. The evil is cultural and systemic from its head, to its heart and to the narrowest capillary. W. B. Yeats in a prophetic moment wrote ages ago: ‘the centre cannot hold...the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity...’

The historical task of radical change will rely for engagement on those who can think and act systemically, beyond structures for the dispensing of charity or assistance. We need good people who are politically savvy. Only thus might we avoid an apocalyptic calamity. ‘Whom will I send?’ asks Yahweh of Isaiah. It says somewhere in the Book of Wisdom that hope lies in the greatest number of wise people. Where are they?

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