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CURMUDGEON'S CORNER

THE CONSTANCY OF CHANGE

Curmudgeon: anyone who hates hypocrisy and pretence and has the temerity to say so; anyone with the habit of pointing out unpleasant facts in an engaging and humorous manner. This definition was provided by the American writer, Jon Winokur, and with which I agree. The global ranks of curmudgeons, needless to say, are legion and I consider myself worthy of membership.

For 25 years I wrote the Offshore Pilot quarterly, a publication which focused on the offshore financial services industry. What struck me most as I wrote the final issue was the constant recurrence of common themes, and which continues to this day. Except that for me the word "offshore" has returned to its original meaning because today many of the core services can often be found onshore in mainland countries. Only history never changes.

As I reminded members of the International Tax Planning Association in an article which I wrote for them, history tells us we have consistently encountered calm and chaotic periods. Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the mechanised massacre of millions in the First World War (over 17 million) there was a period of exceptional technological advance which brought about material prosperity as well as positive political and social change. The steam ship replaced sail and changed global travel, at the same time projecting imperial power. At the beginning of the 19th century the railway, photograph and telegraph were barely visible over the historical horizon, as Sir Richard J. Evans, an eminent British historian, put it. By the beginning of the First World War, however, we had the motor car, telephone and radio. Our own 21st century has seen a similar technological leap; wars, unfortunately, continue, except that the pace and efficiency of killing has escalated.

RATTLING SKELETONS

Hubris, still common to powerful governments determined to impose their policies and beliefs beyond their borders, have caused untold grief and suffering. The ancient Greeks said that hubris was the folly of a leader who, through unwarranted self-confidence, challenged the gods. Such a scenario means that nationalistic political leaders (on the rise) who experience success will most probably encourage the next generation of leaders to inherit their arrogance and complacency; the myth of invincibility is a strong

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aphrodisiac. Any reader surveying the last two centuries needs no help from me in identifying such leaders. Testament to this folly, as an example, are the large skeletons in both the French (Algeria and Vietnam) and American (Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam) cupboards; but no matter how loud those skeletons rattle, no one in government is listening.

It was the late Silvio Berlusconi, a showman and billionaire bearing traits of Benito Mussolini, who served as prime minister in three Italian governments and shook up his country's politics; by sheer force of personality and a unique brand of populism he won over the electorate. He spoke of a rigged system run by elites where the ordinary person could never win; in other words, government couldn't be trusted. But it turned out that neither could Mr. Berlusconi. What he and some leaders in other countries have since done is to make an already sceptical citizenry even more less trusting of governments, using tactics to distort the truth along the lines of George Orwell's Ministry of Truth, which features in his novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Samuel Johnson is purported to have proclaimed that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. Scoundrels or not, politicians today, of every stripe, frequently play that card to reinforce the message they want to send. Some wish to evoke memories of past victories, and long before the first book was published in the West, radicals in Ancient Greece would talk, as some politicians do today, about a return to a golden age. Nostalgia and nationalism together make an intoxicating cocktail, and recently we have seen this ploy employed by politicians in cultures as diverse as French, Russian and American.

History is littered with failed empires that drowned in delusion. Consider Spain as an example. It was a superpower, enjoying the privileged position of being the centre of the world with an empire stretching east across much of Europe to the Philippines and India and west across the Atlantic to the Americas. But by the end of the 17th century Spain was overstretched and its elite had become deluded; they had lost touch with reality. Hubris once again challenged the gods and failed. We may no longer have empires in the strict sense of the word, but we have countries with similar ambitions; Winston Churchill said that the empires of the future are the empires of the mind, the one domain that Artificial Intelligence, fortunately, can never replicate.

ECHOES OF HISTORY

Travel can broaden the mind but so can reading. The need for doing so could not be more relevant than it is today when truth can be so easily distorted. A thousand years ago the



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old English poem, Solomon and Saturn, of unknown authorship, extols the virtues of books, saying that "he who tastes the skill of books; he will be even wiser...". This remains so in the 21st century. But more importantly, books are an invaluable source of hearing the echoes of history in the present. Winston Churchill referred to attending "the university of books", opening up his mind to new ideas and challenging existing ones. They are the silent messengers who can profoundly affect political and economic discourse and the path that individuals, and even nations, might take by reflecting on past events and their outcomes. They teach as well as warn. Sadly, however, our digital culture does not encourage reading.

It is no coincidence that as late as 2017 it was reported that George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, his perennial novel published almost 80 years ago, was Number 1 on Amazon's bestsellers list. This comes as no surprise. In it we are introduced to the concept of Newspeak, a language "designed to diminish the range of thought". Consider Artificial Intelligence which, as I say, cannot replace the mind and may not be designed to 'diminish the range of thought', but apparently is doing so by what researchers have described as "cognitive offloading" which is a tendency to let AI do our thinking for us by solving simple problems using AI chatbots in the same way that some of us automatically reach for our calculators when a little mental effort would suffice. As important as jogging might be for some health routines, we are too quick to forget the importance of mental jogging that stimulates our brains and avoids both mental laziness and making our minds fertile ground for distorters of the truth.

Shakespeare suggested that we "Meet the time as it seeks us." Some of us have met the time and are busy seeking refuge from the political and economic maelstrom which this century has delivered. But as I say, we have been here before.

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